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Journal Item

How to cite:

Peachey, Anna and Herman, Clem (2011). Presence for professional development: students in the virtual world. *Learning Technology*, 13(4) pp. 11–14.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.ieeetclt.org/issues/october2011/IEEE-LT-Oct11.pdf>

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Presence for Professional Development: Students in the Virtual World

Introduction

This report describes virtual world activities for groups of students studying a course designed to support professional development especially following career breaks. The activity uses the virtual platform to augment the social aspect of belonging to a study cohort, exploiting the sense of presence and constructivist affordances of the 3-D environment.

Background

T161: Return to Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) is a ten-week level one module at The Open University (OU) currently in its final presentation. The majority of the students are female, graduates and qualified professionals wishing to return to work after taking a career break. As well as concerns relating to presentation of skillsets, many have experienced a sense of isolation and lack the current contacts and networks needed to get back into employment. The module is embedded in the OU's Moodle VLE and students work online in a single cohort, using web-based activities with a strong emphasis on collaboration through asynchronous forums. Students place significant value in the forum discussions and follow up evaluations have shown that a shared sense of 'being in the same boat' is particularly important for participants (Herman, 2011)

The OU has been using Second Life™ (SL) since 2006 and has a consistent social community here (Peachey, 2010), where the standout affordance is the facility to meet with others, in real time, in a shared space that provides a strong sense of physical presence. Resonance with the socially constructivist nature of the T161 forum discussions was noted, leading to a hypothesis that a virtual world would provide a richer environment for mediating this aspect of T161. It was suggested that students meet synchronously in SL for informal course discussion with the support of the module forum moderator. During the module visiting experts join the forum to answer questions posted by students. It was proposed that this asynchronous activity could also be supplemented by hosting a live chat with the experts in Second Life.

Activity

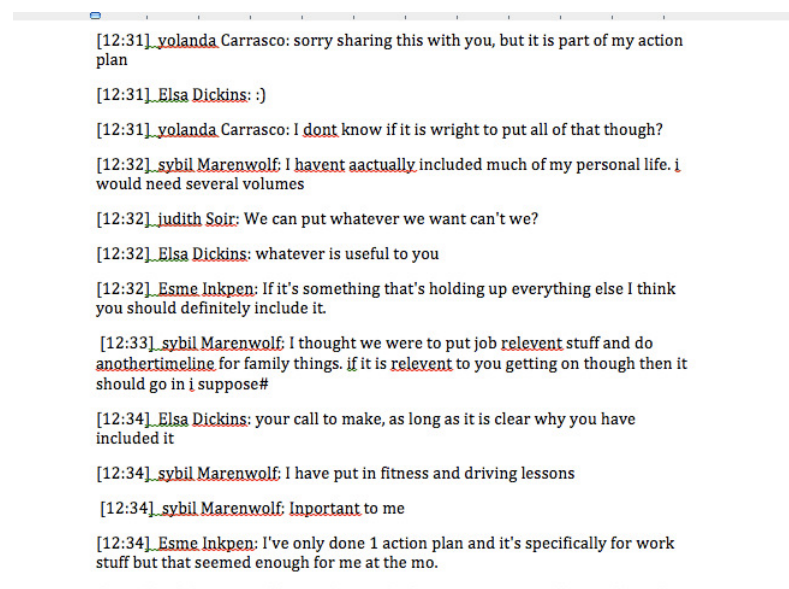
The first inworld activity was proposed for the April 2010 presentation of approximately 30 students. A message was posted to the discussion forum during the second week of the module offering an informal meeting in SL. The message stressed that this was not mandatory and that the course team recognized that not all students would either want or be able to access this environment. Brief registration instructions were provided and sources of technical support were signposted. Responses in the forum reflected intrigue and a sense of adventure with some caution about technical skills and ability. The first meeting saw ten students inworld and, after some initial chat about their avatars and the environment, students stayed for over an hour discussing

their experiences on the module and wider issues relating to their study and personal situations. Feedback in the forum was positive, again with some reference to the adventure and pioneering nature of the activity. Several further meetings took place over the ten-week presentation, during which time 2/3 of the students participated at least once. The visiting experts session was particularly successful, with half the cohort present to talk with three of the four experts.

Research

All students who participated in the SL events reflected positively on their experiences in the module forum, and many used SL for a later reunion. This experience suggested that SL has a sense of presence that enhances the social connections between students on T161, and it was proposed to offer the same opportunity to students in the next cohort with the structure to explore this hypothesis and to formally evaluate what SL brings to their T161 experience. With research permission from the university the asynchronous discussions around SL from forum transcripts, as well as the synchronous chat discussions from live SL activity could be captured and analysed, triangulated with a final online questionnaire.

In October 2010 the next T161 cohort began and students were offered the opportunity to meet in SL. The cohort was smaller (25 students) and only 8 participated inworld, which may be attributed to the consent paperwork generated by research permission. However chatlogs of informal meetings plus the visiting expert session and forum discussions were captured and provided data for analysis, along with two responses to the post-module survey.



[12:31] [yolanda Carrasco](#): sorry sharing this with you, but it is part of my action plan

[12:31] [Elsa Dickins](#): :)

[12:31] [yolanda Carrasco](#): I dont know if it is wright to put all of that though?

[12:32] [sybil Marenwolf](#): I havent aactually included much of my personal life. i would need several volumes

[12:32] [judith Soir](#): We can put whatever we want can't we?

[12:32] [Elsa Dickins](#): whatever is useful to you

[12:32] [Esme Inkpen](#): If it's something that's holding up everything else I think you should definitely include it.

[12:33] [sybil Marenwolf](#): I thought we were to put job relevent stuff and do another timeline for family things. if it is relevent to you getting on though then it should go in i suppose#

[12:34] [Elsa Dickins](#): your call to make, as long as it is clear why you have included it

[12:34] [sybil Marenwolf](#): I have put in fitness and driving lessons

[12:34] [sybil Marenwolf](#): lnportant to me

[12:34] [Esme Inkpen](#): I've only done 1 action plan and it's specifically for work stuff but that seemed enough for me at the mo.

Figure: Chatlog Excerpt

Discussion and Conclusions

Full analysis and triangulation of data is not yet complete, but some generalisations may be drawn from experience across both cohorts and supported by data generated in the second.

All students reported positively on their experience, despite some minor technical glitches that they were inclined to forgive, with one respondent commenting, "I enjoyed the synchronous interaction - it brings the course to life". Students were generally more comfortable using text, suggesting a preference for more control over their conversation (particularly after one student was deeply embarrassed about leaving her microphone open whilst berating her son) and maintaining a level of separation. All students selected human avatars reflecting their physical gender, referencing the argument that presence is supported when the avatar resembles its user (Murray and Sixsmith 1999). Some students noted the potential to join the wider OU community in SL: "I particularly liked being asked by a newer arrival at the entrance how to change clothes and [we] made friends."

The results of this small study indicate that the sense of presence and constructivist affordances of a virtual world can be used to provide a richer environment than an asynchronous forum for augmenting the social aspect of belonging to a study cohort.

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