Chapter 1
Using Virtual Worlds for Learning

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ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds for adults (e.g. Second Life), youth (e.g. Habbo) and children (e.g. Whyville) have a great potential for learning and teaching practices for enriching wider public and engendering collective experience and collaboration. Informal learning environments such as virtual worlds offer people various intellectual and sensory activities or »peak« experiences, according to Gogala. Virtual worlds promote social interaction and offer visitors an opportunity for various interactive activities which can sometimes not be realized in real life corporate learning and training which is one of the major concerns for large companies. Adults can explore and learn in a different way and from a different perspective. Virtual worlds represent a new medium that allows people to connect in new virtual ways and offer new challenges in the corporate educational field.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging technologies such as virtual worlds, serious games, wikis and social networking sites have been heralded as technologies that are powerful enough to transform learning and teaching. When we think of learning, school comes to mind first. However, many people, especially the disadvantaged, do not achieve their full potential through traditional educational approaches for a variety of reasons. A lot of valuable learning also takes place outside school, often facilitated by digital technologies, for example, through online games. Mobile technologies and internet can provide access to rich digital media content and facilitate communication with others both local and remote to provide powerful learning experiences that go well beyond the traditional classroom.

Due to new technologies new approaches to learning become possible, diversifying the range of learning experiences available, and thereby engaging with people who have not achieved their

full potential with more traditional approaches. Many new approaches to learning and teaching are facilitated by new technologies. In addition to the real world, online world contains a whole range of virtual worlds in which we can live our second (virtual) life. Although virtual worlds for adults, youth and children differ according to their content, they offer an opportunity to learn in a virtual learning environment and have great potential for learning activities.

Virtual worlds are persistent virtual environments in which people experience others as being there with them - and where they can interact with them. How does education keep up with virtual worlds and leisure trends? Virtual worlds are attracting interest from different organizations and companies as platforms for learning. Also known as immersive environments, these systems can provide significant advantages over other learning strategies. Virtual worlds are also creating opportunities for activities, which can not be realized in real life corporate education. Above all, adults can explore things and learn in a different way and from a different perspective. On this basis the paper focuses on some of the possibilities and opportunities posed by adapting virtual worlds for educational use in corporations. It is important to create an environment which would enable people to construct their knowledge on their own or through interaction with peers, objects, learning games, simulations and other activities.

THE CONCEPT OF EXPERIENTIAL PEDAGOGY

When designing corporate learning activities in virtual learning environments we have to take into account some of the following theorists of learning: Dewey (1963) and his concept of experiential learning, Piaget's (1990) theory of construction of knowledge, Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning as a constant cyclic process and Gardner's (1991) theory of multiple intelligences. Moreover, we should also consider Vygotsky's (1978) theory which emphasizes the social component of learning, Gogala's (2005) idea of experiential pedagogy and the flow concept proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (2002).

A recent pedagogic concept which is important for designing interactive learning environments is the idea of experiential pedagogy proposed by Slovene pedagogue Stanko Gogala (2005). He claims that a successful development of someone's personality requires experience - emotional exchange, a feeling that in a suitable situation enables us to become aware of the problem and work to benefit from its dismissal. However, in order to do this, we have to design encouraging environments and assure diverse experiences, considering interests of adults or children involved and offering possibility of choice in which adults or children become involved in interactions with different objects, materials, peers... An adult or a child is encouraged to get involved in a certain exciting activity that drags him into a circle of intense experiencing and unconventional establishment of social relations. The main factor of the experiential pedagogy is the intense situation in which a person experiences an exciting event and engages in relationships with other persons and creates a more cohesive social connection and forms of person's active collaboration. And according to his/her own interests, needs, learning style helps to construct active learning environment, including different activities and social relations.

»To experience something« in the full sense of the word is not the same as »to have an experience of« something. Gogala therefore distinguishes superficial experience and peak experience. Psychology talks about superficial experiences that we call ideas, images, thoughts, emotions, and strivings. Richness of superficial experiences is enormous. The concept of peak experience, however, implies deeper mental actions as e.g. deep astonishment, experience of beautiful or

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