Chapter 8.1

The New Company Water Cooler:
Use of 3D Virtual Immersive Worlds to Promote Networking and Professional Learning in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Employees gathered around the water cooler – the image is now a corporate cliché. This type of informal networking allows members of an organization to build – or break – personal and professional relationships in ways not possible in more formal settings or business situations. As companies become larger and more geographically dispersed, these types of opportunities and relationships are increasingly more difficult to create and maintain. Organizations must investigate new means of communications and technology. Three-dimensional (3D) immersive worlds offer a range of possibilities for accomplishing this goal. In this chapter, the authors will highlight their eight year experience using 3D virtual immersive worlds in graduate programs at Appalachian State University. Their experience based on feedback, observation, and survey results suggests that 3D virtual worlds developed for education support deep learning and can help learners make meaning and feel part of a learning community. The chapter will consider ways in which corporate organizations can draw upon the experience of higher education in the design, creation and utilization of virtual worlds to create opportunity for both purposeful and serendipitous interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Employees gathered around the water cooler – the image is now a corporate cliché. Here, discussions range from baseball to babies to work itself. This type of informal networking allows members of an organization to build – or break -- personal and professional relationships, discuss strategies and plans and to exchange ideas in ways not possible in more formal settings business situations or email. Organizations have traditionally responded to the need for more informal interaction in a number of ways – trust falls and team sports come easily to mind.

As companies become larger and more geographically dispersed and as sections of organizations become more isolated, these types of opportunities for exchanges are increasingly more difficult to create and maintain. Organizations must investigate new means of communications and technology. Three-dimensional (3D) virtual immersive worlds and Web 2.0 tools offer a range of possibilities for accomplishing this goal.

In our own university department we have several graduate preparation programs in education. These separate program areas may represent different sections or departments within an organization in the corporate world. Each program has its own faculty, students and job orientation. For instance, we have one program that develops school management personnel. Another program develops instructional technology specialists, while others provide training for librarians and for higher education instructors and administrators. Each program, though housed within the same organizational structure tends to be isolated in its own silo. While each is tasked with developing experts for specific roles in education, students are afforded few opportunities to work with others who are studying different roles. Thus, they leave their formal training with a deep understanding of their particular role and have to learn ways to work with other roles within the confines of the school environment. This isolation of roles may contribute to the role conflicts that we see occurring in various educational institutions where managers do not really understand the added value that various others bring to the table. We need to create formal and informal learning environments that break down these educational silos while students are in graduate school so that they will enter the workplace with the knowledge and skills necessary to quickly bring relevant and meaningful collaborations to solve the problems quickly and efficiently. 3D immersive worlds and Web 2.0 have provided us the technologies needed to implement these concepts. We have had, like many organizations, some specific successes, and continuing to expand these notions in authentic ways remains our current challenge.

In this chapter, we will highlight our eight-year experience using 3D virtual immersive worlds in graduate education programs at Appalachian State University. In the AET Zone, based on an Active Worlds platform and supplemented by Web 2.0 tools such as VoIP, threaded discussions, wikis, blogs, and podcast technologies, students and faculty work together to create a learning community of practice that includes programs in instructional technology, library science, school administration, higher education and educational leadership. Our experience, based on feedback, observation, and survey results and other research suggests that 3D virtual worlds developed for education support deep learning and can help learners make meaning and feel part of a learning communities that transcends the traditional single classroom experience.

Ways in which corporate organizations can draw upon the experience of higher education in the design, creation and utilization of virtual worlds to create opportunity for both purposeful and serendipitous interaction will be explored in this chapter.

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