Chapter 16
Collaborative Learning in the Virtual English Class:
A Hong Kong Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter demonstrates how Second Life (SL) is used to enhance collaborative language learning on a virtual campus of a Hong Kong university. The case study reports on the learning experience of a number of undergraduate students as they navigated through a virtual task in an existing course: English for Technical and Web-Based Writing. Student avatars assessed each other's work and shared learning experiences and comments via SL-enabled tools such as voting bars and note cards. To determine if this practice was more effective as a learning tool than a traditional classroom or two-dimensional discussion on the Internet, the students' feedback on SL was collected through the university's online survey system (i-Feedback), camera recorded focus group discussion and audio recorded tutor feedback. The findings suggest that different tasks in a virtual learning environment may stimulate

students' interest in their learning process, even though the technical complexities might frustrate them. The possibilities, shortcomings, and technical challenges of cultivating a community of collaborative language learning are also discussed.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University took the lead in Asia to set up a PolyU Virtual Campus in Second Life in 2007. Up to now, 11 out of its 29 departments have set up virtual classrooms or laboratories. The virtual campus provides a three-dimensional environment supporting student activities under four functions: teaching and learning, assessment, design, and resources (Herold, et al., 2008), and has enabled various applications. Over 4,000 students have visited or worked in the virtual library, hotel, hospital, and workshop, etc. The virtual worlds prove to be useful in helping students achieve pre-set educational goals and objectives when the activities in the virtual world are sufficiently contextualized and integrated into the offline course. They can further promote interactions between people online.

SETTING THE STAGE

Society has moved from the Information Age to the Age of Peer Production, and now that composition must include a variety of non-traditional genres to ensure relevancy, English departments are undergoing even greater impetus to change. In response to this, peer-reviewed pedagogies are subject to immediate revision, collaboration, and even deletion; they challenge traditional assumptions about authorship, authority, collaboration, and power (Moxley, 2008). As a result, the virtual learning environment proves to be an effective medium in facilitating the emergence of "a learner-centered discourse community" (Darhower, 2002). The nature of virtual environments is generative, allowing self-navigation and interaction with the environment and other virtual residents, as well as creating objects. In the context of a language classroom, user and builder-embedded tools in a virtual setting like Second Life allow for three-dimensional visualization, instant creation, retrieval of specific learning products, and multimodal representations of images and texts allowing students to "benefit from interaction, because the written nature of the discussion allows greater opportunity to attend to and reflect on the form and content of the communication" (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). As a form of social media, Second Life (as well as blogs and wikis) may address learning in the form of interaction and connections since collaboration and social construction of knowledge are key components of the dynamics seen in social media. It has the potential

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