

Using a Classification of Psychological Experience in Social-Networking Sites as a Virtual Learning Environment

Joseph Onibokun, School of Social Sciences and Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK

Paul van Schaik, School of Social Sciences and Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK

ABSTRACT

With over 800 million users worldwide, the global importance of Facebook as a social-networking platform is beyond doubt. This popularity, particularly among university-students, has encouraged research to explore ways in which social networking can be adapted into virtual learning environments. In particular, this study uses the think-aloud technique to explore university-students' use of and interaction with Facebook. Twenty-six Teesside University students who were also Facebook users took part in a think-aloud study. Seven major categories of experience emerged during the coding and categorisation process of the think-aloud data. Further analysis revealed that six fundamental psychological needs were each related to particular themes of user-experience. Overall, the results demonstrate that psychological needs are particular qualities of students' experience that are important in online social networking. Future research should investigate psychological needs in the context of virtual learning environments and ways in which these needs can be best supported for learning.

Keywords: *Facebook, Immersive Virtual Environment, Learning, Psychological Needs, Social Networking, University Students, User Experience, Virtual Learning Environment*

INTRODUCTION

The term “virtual world” is used to describe a computer application in which multiple users can participate by interacting with the environment and with each other using an online interface (Shore & Zhou, 2009). In a virtual world, users are usually represented as avatars within a graphical environment that can range in complexity from two-dimensional images

to fully immersive three-dimensional environments. At present, virtual worlds are currently being used as educational spaces and continue to grow in popularity on university campuses and businesses around the world. Likewise, access to different versions of virtual worlds on the Web has been predicted to become common in education, in the coming years (Educause, 2007, as cited in Hansen, 2008). Already, there is a clear trend in higher education toward distributed learning, with rapid changes from

DOI: 10.4018/jvple.2012100103

physical learning environments to virtual learning environments (Piccoli et al., 2001).

Furthermore, there is increasing similarity between online communities such as virtual learning environments and common collaboration environments, such as Facebook, as places where students and scholars work, collaborate, share, and plan (Mitchell & Watstein, 2007). Whilst in the past virtual worlds have been criticised for lacking invention and information, they now incorporate social-networking technologies such as chat plus a rich hypertext to overcome these limits. By exploring virtual learning environments and social networking, researchers can select the best aspects of each approach and gain an understanding of the types of interaction that are relevant for particular learning objectives. Thus, designers and educators will be able to select the best learning strategy without excluding one technology or another and develop a better understanding of how learning activities and interactions can be better structured and represented in relation to each other (Dillenbourg et al., 2002).

Although many authors are expounding the educational and research potential of virtual worlds, educational research involving the use and effectiveness of these innovative technologies in relation to social networking is still in its infancy (Hansen, 2008). In the following sections, we explore virtual learning environments and social-networking sites, and compare popular sites, Second Life and Facebook, in terms of functionality and potential for collaboration.

VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Virtual learning environments are defined as open systems that allow their users to interact with each other through synchronous or asynchronous electronic communication (Piccoli et al., 2001). Typically, a virtual learning environment is designed to facilitate teachers in the management of educational courses for their students and is characterised by a shared

social space, a graphical user interface, real-time interaction, user-generated content, persistence, and active support for in-world social groups (Mitchell & Watstein, 2007; Book, 2004, as cited in Hayes, 2006). According to Dillenbourg et al. (2002), virtual learning environments can be identified by the following features.

- A designed information space.
- A social space where education interactions occur.
- A virtual space which can be represented in forms of text to three-dimensional immersive worlds.
- Students not only being active, but also as actors who co-construct the virtual space.
- The potential integration of heterogeneous technologies and multiple pedagogical approaches.

The use of virtual learning environments has been shown to facilitate reflection and the communication between online learners, which can lead toward better building of communities of practice (Boulos et al., 2007). For example, reflective processes can be supported through the use of synchronous interaction or asynchronous discussion boards, and within visual range of all other contributors, providing users with a sense of closeness and engagement that can provide an experience matching that of a telephone-conference call (Boulos et al., 2007).

Furthermore, what is specific to virtual environments compared to any other type of information space is that they are populated (Dieberger, 1999). Users are inside the information space and see a representation of themselves and/or others in the space. As soon as students see who else is interested by particular information, the space becomes inherently social. According to Nurmela (1999, as cited in Dillenbourg, 2002), the notion of social space opens interesting possibilities such as the mergence between social networking and virtual learning environments. This is a promising avenue for research that is yet to be properly explored.

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