Chapter 12
Pedagogical Evolution in the Teaching of Reference Services Enabled by the Use of 3D Immersive Virtual World Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares the development and implementation of a redesigned Information Sources and Services course and presents a case study that examines the impact of that course on student learning. The revised course applies Presence Pedagogy incorporating epistemic framing through extended role-play and the use of experienced mentors in a three-dimensional immersive virtual environment. Also examined are: changes in students' comfort level while playing the role of reference librarian, their technology skills and confidence, similarities and dissimilarities between the game role and an imagined real-life role, students' comfort level with the presence of a mentor, and their incorporating mentor suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

A patron walks into the library and looks around to get her bearings. She finds the reference desk and observes a reference librarian helping another patron locate information. The new patron, also in need of information, walks over to the reference desk to seek assistance. This scenario repeatedly plays out daily in libraries around the world. In this situation, though, the scenario is taking place in a three-dimensional immersive virtual environment, and the reference librarian and patron are graduate students enrolled in the MLS program at Appalachian State University (ASU). Standing nearby is a university distance-learning librarian who serves as a mentor.

When asked to reflect on their course in reference services, many librarians remark that it resembled a scavenger hunt. As students, they were provided with a list of questions that required using specific types of reference sources. Many of these sources were obscure or available only in the library of the university in which they were enrolled. Some librarians may also recall in-class sessions in which they participated in a role-play of the reference interview. Although these instructional approaches were adequate for that time, changes in both the library and university environments make them unsatisfactory today. For example, the Internet has rapidly transformed both access to and availability of reference sources. 'Virtual reference' is now commonplace, and students enrolled in library science programs may never set foot on their university's campus! How can library science educators design instruction that will allow students to effectively provide reference services when they become librarians? LIS faculty and Belk Library distance education librarians at ASU asked that question as they began the process of redesigning the *Information Sources and Services* course.

The objective of this chapter is to share the development and implementation of the rede-signed *Information Sources and Services* course and present a case study that examines the impact of the course on student learning. An overview of the pedagogical framework underpinning the course redesign in a 3D immersive virtual environment (including a review of the literature) is presented first, followed by an explanation of the changes made over time to the instructional strategies used in the course. A description of the analysis of student reflections and a discussion of the results is shared next. We conclude with the successes of this revision and highlight areas for future research.

BACKGROUND

The Masters of Library Science Program at Appalachian State University is housed within the Leadership and Educational Studies department of the Reich College of Education (RCOE). The accredited program prepares students for careers in both school and public libraries. RCOE subscribes to a social constructivist framework (Vygotsky, 1978) and has the following core beliefs:

- Learning occurs through participation in a Community of Practice (COP).
- Knowledge is socially constructed and learning is social within the COP.
- Learners proceed through stages of development from Novice to Expert under the guidance of more experienced and knowledgeable mentors, and among like-minded peers in the COP.
- An identifiable knowledge base that is both general and specific to various specialties emerges from focused activity within the COP.
- All educators develop a set of dispositions that reflect attitudes, beliefs, and values common to the COP (RCOE/ASU, 2005).

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