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Agency in new learning spaces: Students' experiences of empowerment and disempowerment in virtual worlds (0151)

Virtual worlds are computer technologies that create graphically-rendered, 3D spaces in which multiple users can interact, create content and collaborate synchronously. They have variously been described as persistent networks of people facilitated by computers (Bell, 2008) and "…places of human culture realized by computer programs through the internet" (Boellstorff, 2010; 126). In academia, interest in virtual worlds has been a key area of educational technology development in the last two to three years. Published research has grown exponentially since 2008 (see Hew and Cheung, 2010) and almost all UK universities (in addition to numerous international institutions) have a presence in one or more virtual worlds (Kirriemuir, 2009). The use of virtual worlds in UK Higher Education (HE) is an excellent case study of new learning spaces which can generate significant conjecture, empirical research, and pedagogic practice in a relatively short period of time. Studying virtual worlds can help us to understand the potentials and perils of new learning spaces in which academics have posited positive futures. In this paper I present a qualitative exploration of students' perspectives on virtual worlds. Within the paper I will focus on data that explores how discourses of empowerment and agency are realised or unrealised in learning situations with virtual worlds.

Early forays into the educational use of virtual worlds in the UK were marked by optimism over empowerment and greater agency for learners, and the potential to open up new spaces of knowledge production (e.g. de Freitas and Neumann, 2009; Savin-Baden, 2008). Early published research primarily reported on single-module case studies of virtual worlds use (e.g. Daniels Lee, 2009; Edirisingha et al. 2009; Good, Howland, and Thackray, 2008). Subsequent literature has broadly concerned itself primarily with devising appropriate pedagogic approaches (e.g. Girvan and Savage, 2010; Thomassen and Rive, 2010) and investigating specific constructs related to virtual worlds use such as 'presence' (e.g. Traphagan et al. 2010). We now have significantly more detailed data available to explore the degree to which initial visions of the virtual world as an educational technology have been realised in practice. Despite this, there has been little reflection upon the ways in which these early approaches were congruent or incongruent, productive or unproductive, with research data. In essence, we have posited a positive future for HE and are yet to revisit whether this future has - or can be - realised.

In this paper I will begin the process of reflection by drawing together several narratives of empowerment and disempowerment from students learning within the virtual world *Second Life* (Linden Research Inc., 2011). I will discuss how students' perception of agency can be both increased and diminished by engagements through a virtual world, and how such perceptions can be accompanied by narratives of empowerment, disjuncture, potential or loss. Some of the most influential factors in these experiences will be charted, such as the interrelation of expectations,

perceptions of pedagogy, history/biography, and formative experiences within the virtual world itself. The data discussed will be drawn from a qualitative study of students' perspectives on virtual worlds as learning technologies based on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This data was collected in 2010 through observation, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with students at four UK universities. Participating students spanned a broad age range, full and part-time modes of study, and campus and distance learning. The study is situated within a three-year, multi-strand exploration of virtual worlds in UK HE funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

I will argue that there is good cause to believe that students' engagements with new learning spaces such as virtual worlds are textured and complex. Although academics initially characterised virtual worlds as spaces for empowerment and agency (e.g. de Freitas and Neumann, 2009), students' experiences include persuasive narratives of both empowerment and disempowerment. We therefore must be cognisant of the myriad factors that influence such narratives, both within and outside of pedagogic control. Technologies such as virtual worlds give only capacity or potential; in what ways this is realised in practice is highly fluid. The intention of this paper is thus to recall that new learning spaces are rarely experienced in a unitary way, and that visions of positive futures – whilst powerful drivers of practice – require constant revision to maintain resonance with experiences in the field.

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