Learning in a Parallel Universe…REALLY

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Innovations in learning:
Expanding Accessibility to Institutes, Colleges and Polytechnics

The Road Behind Us

Nearly every institute, college and university that has experienced on-line education will have reports and feedback on the positives and difficulties of going on-line. One of the most problematic areas is that of student retention. Since the beginning of on-line courses student drop-out rates have been a significant indicator that something was not working for the students/participants. It is not my purpose to site research materials on this subject in this paper. My focus is on the use of role-play, games and simulations in metaphorical environments to heighten student interactivity and retention for on-line courses.

Scenario 1:
The course has begun, the students had some teething problems enrolling on-line but now they are engaged. The subject, at this stage, is irrelevant and is typical of on-line courses in the mid 1990's in that the course material is paper based and has merely, but painstakingly been scanned and imported into the on-line site for students to work from. After 20 minutes of reading-scrolling-reading the students’ enthusiasm is collectively waning, exponentially. After 1 week many have stopped logging into the course.

Scenario 2:
The class has begun. Experience has taught us that some interaction will retain the student numbers. The class has been running for 3 weeks and most of the participants are engaging in the on-line chats and forums that are available through their course site. Some feedback has come through that the system bogs down during the chat room activities and sometimes crashes completely. For some remote students the difficulty with learning in isolation compounds with the technological shortfalls of the courses’ IT systems, a server reliability problem, and the students’ begin to dropout feeling frustrated and for some, no longer confident that they can learn on-line.

All of the research into on-line education identifies that it is very different from conventional face-to-face learning. These scenarios reflect my experience and the experience of others I have studied with in a number of on-line courses over the past decade. My interests are to engage on-line education programs that work for the participants. Hence;
Learning in a Parallel Universe…….REALLY.

People
The greatest breakthrough in modern education, in my opinion, has been the ability to identify each individual’s preferred learning style. There are many similar concepts for styles of learners. This diversity of leaning styles should be accounted for in the set-up of the simulation.

Carl Jung explored the differences in the way people perceive and process information. I quote Jung’s four categories.

1. Feelers
   Feeling tells us the value of what is.

2. Thinkers
   Thinking enables us to recognize the meaning of what is.

3. Sensors
   Sensation establishes what is.

4. Intuitors
   Intuition points to the possibilities of what might be.

(Jung, 1976, p. 160).

Pulling the participant in

Adults learn and are engaged in the same manner as children. Imagination, intrigue and play are the keys to active learning environments. This is no different for on-line learning where you require the student to be motivated and proactive in the learning process. The premise behind learning is that it takes place most effectively when the dendrites are firing at the tip of the brain cells. Agile thinking and active involvement produces this reaction to the dendrites. The person feels stimulated and freely continues in the process at hand.

Fablusi

Albert Ip and Roni Linser developed the Fablusi role-play software primarily as a tool to act out social-political scenarios from which the students would gain experiential insights into real-world situations. The software enables the educator to generate a parallel world for the learning to take place in. Role-plays and scenarios in metaphoric learning environments or simulated worlds. The range of situations is limited only by your imagination. The skill lies in developing a simulated environment that is believable for the participants.

The rules provide a safe working/learning environment free from physical embarrassment, fear, reprisals, gender expectations and so on.
The participants respond most effectively when;

- The Imagination must be engaged
- The simulated world must be credible in keeping with the scenario
- It is clear that it is a game and a safe environment
- Participants are encouraged to extend themselves, beyond themselves (exploring their selected character)
- Participants are empowered through ownership of characters
- Research and participation is challenging
- The game has a beginning, middle and end, all defined
- Counselling, monitoring and debriefing are clearly defined
- Interaction and support are actively sought
- Learning is enriched at the debriefing

The structure of the worlds or games should be kept focussed with regards to the subject and results being sought. There is no need to become overly elaborate.

At AVETRA 2001, Stewart Hase and Chris Kenyon reminded us of Knowles’ great change in education models moving from Pedagogy, the teaching of children, to Andragogy the adult self-determining model.

Hase then spoke of Heutegogy moving beyond Andragogy, ‘….the concept of truly self-determined learning, called Heutegogy, builds on humanistic theory…….’ (Hase and Kenyon, 2001)

The idea of heutegogy seems to come from heuristics, learning through discovery. I may be corrected on this. Fablusi is certainly a tool that presents learning through discovery. Fashion house is a stylised role-play for a specific situation but can demonstrate the flexibility of the Fablusi software.

**Fashion House**
A fashion industry communications module training prototype:

*‘Money, Sex, Intrigue, Power……you get it all’*

A fashion industry communications module training prototype. Fashion house was designed to provide a realistic world-view and interactive training for fashion students’ communications module in an on-line environment. Module outcomes are mapped and embedded in the simulation, resources are hyperlinked to the logon page and participants are briefed in how to use Fablusi and how to participate in the role-play. Confidence in the support structures and mechanisms is outlined and levels of commitment are discussed.

The participants now become characters. In some circumstances 2 or 3 participants in cooperation may play a single character. Team building and
interactivity are reinforced by the need to form business alliances in order to win in this simulation. The characters will singularly, cooperatively or underhandedly achieve stardom in a bid to becoming a magazine cover model, or a member of the fashion studio/team that photographs and publishes the cover. Most participants will have predetermined ideas on how the fashion world operates and some will not be aware of the business end of fashion reality. The character research and subsequent role-playing provides the gamut of experience in pitfalls, naivety, business acumen, successes, etc. in a real world situation for the participants. It is a good opportunity for the participants to be exposed to the trials of the fashion world before they converge into that industry.

In the prototype of Fashion House the participants were amazed at the actual work that goes on behind the scenes in fashion industry publications. The characters were not aware of the real identity of any other character and all had to relate inside the simulation. Emails and chat rooms provided the communications network and all are housed inside the simulation. The idea here is that you create a safe haven for people to try out life skills without the hesitancy or damage that may occur in the real world. The repercussions of decisions and actions inside the simulation have the same consequences as the real world but become learning experiences for all the participants.

**Participant retention**
Challenge, intrigue and imagination draw the participants deeper into the on-line simulation. In initial trials for on-line simulations I found the lack of visual credibility a problem. When logging into a site I would be greeted with a series of buttons labelled chat, messages, email, meeting room etc. When designing Fashion House each room or facility was supported by an image of the location. The participants could see the buildings, offices and rooms they were occupying as simulations. The general meeting venue was a café and the façade sprinkled with tables, chairs and umbrellas was very credible. This visual support worked so well that at one stage a large meeting was held in a simulated bar and as the dialogue took to business the background dialogue outlined the drinks and activities of the participants. Staging is a valuable tool for these simulations and should be actively sought from the participants.

Each participant has a vested interest in their character and how that character performs in the role-play. Because the participants created the public image of their character they feel a sense of ownership and become responsible or irresponsible as their needs befit the roles they play. The game of interaction as an alter ego encourages the participants to go deeper and try to further their goals. Throughout the simulation the moderator must track the performance of each participant and be available for feedback. Systems for psychological/emotional support must also be in place and clearly identified to all participants from the beginning of the role-play should they feel the need to
access them. Throughout the simulation role-play all the participants are using sophisticated technologies as background tools and leave reservations about new technologies behind them. The game and role-play becomes the focus. Achievement becomes the drive. Learning on-line becomes the tool it should always have been.

The simulation has strict guidelines as a means to maintain commitment and performance. Each participant is given 3 weeks to research and develop their character profile and then must post it onto the public profile board in the simulation. The game runs for 3 weeks during which time all the activities must be fulfilled, that is, chats, threaded discussions, emails, logons, etc and then concludes with the debriefing.

The debriefing is the activity in which the greatest part of the learning will take place. The debriefing also enables the participants to dis-engage from their characters, a must if you are to return to normal life. During the debriefing the participants recall strategies and activities and the diversity of performances leading to the outcomes. These outcomes are valuable life-long learning experiences. In addition to the role-play, the research information shared between the participants provides an enriched understanding of the real world, fashion world.

**Conclusion**

In order to retain student numbers the participants must feel acknowledged, challenged, stimulated, enriched by the experience, supported, and primarily, that the experience is relevant to their lives and goals. If the participants have fun along the way you will be more likely to have to drag them away from the role-play learning experience rather than chase them up to take part or lose them initially. Learning through self-discovery is the essence of heutegogy and exploring causes and effects in a simulated world allows each participant to discover both old and new things about the real world and themselves. The participants drive the course of the role-play. Each time the simulation is played a different course will lead to different outcomes.

On-line learning using metaphoric environments will be rewarding if the credibility of the simulation and role-play the participants are given is in keeping with the learning scenario. When the research tools, the goals, the environments etc are credible, not necessarily believable, the participants are willing to engage into the game of learning. We should do our best to provide compelling learning situations not merely activities to fulfil competency standards.

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References
