The ‘Hidden Curriculum’: Second Life and the political university?

GEMMA TOMBS, PHD STUDENT
LEARNING INNOVATION APPLIED RESEARCH GROUP
tombsg@coventry.ac.uk
Overview

“Although virtual worlds usage is rarely outlined in the written curriculum, their congruence with values emergent from the ‘hidden curriculum’ of innovation offers them a unique place in the higher education curriculum”

- Virtual worlds as educational tools
- Virtual worlds as unclaimed pedagogical and curricular spaces...
- ... and their engagement with the hidden curriculum
Virtual worlds as educational tools

- Increasing use of virtual worlds in higher education

- Three main ways in which Second Life is being used:
  - Social tool for distance learning courses (eg. Edirisingha, 2009, University of Leicester)
  - Building/programming for computing courses (eg. Cargill-Kipar, 2009, Heriot-Watt University)
  - Role-playing, experiential and problem-based learning for other disciplines, particularly in health-related courses (eg. PREVIEW Project, Coventry University & St. Georges’ University)

- Predominantly used for short-term modules or as a supplementary tool in multi-modal courses
Unclaimed Pedagogical Spaces...

- IVW use is not embedded into the written curriculum at present

- Ongoing discourse on the ways in which we might embed IVWs into the curriculum
  - Predominance of short-term rather than ongoing projects
  - Propensity towards some disciplines over others
  - Consideration that perhaps new or redesigned learning theories are required for IVW learning

“Virtual worlds are unclaimed spaces as far as education is concerned - educators have not yet established norms of how to support learning within them” (Twining, 2009)
Subjective, plural, ever-changing and dependent on a multiplicity of personal values, such as political leanings and paradigmatic perspectives (Gair & Mullins, 2007)

“*The values and norms that get embedded into the way that we structure our courses, the way that we structure our curriculum, the way that we structure the organization*”

Terms such as ‘innovation’ and ‘enterprise’ are predominant in university mission statements, governmental reports and strategies such as HEFCE 2009 strategy
Virtual Worlds in the Hidden Curriculum?

- Virtual worlds are often perceived as ‘innovative solutions’, both by educational practitioners and by the media.

“The creation of realistic environments where an avatar can wander and interact at will is innovative” (Salmon, 2009)

“The PREVIEW project is an innovative response to address the difficulties of distributed collaborative problem-based learning and also to take advantage of the new opportunities afforded by 3-dimensional multi-user virtual environments” (PREVIEW project final report, 2009)

“Virtual worlds ... as innovative educational environments” (Cheal, 2009)
Conclusion

- Description of virtual worlds as innovative solutions to pedagogical problems is ever-increasing
  - Funding by budgets aimed at innovative technologies (e.g. JISC Users and Innovation),
  - Research into virtual world learning by groups such as Learning Innovation
  - Media portrayals of virtual world learning

- Congruence of these technologies with values emergent from the ‘hidden’ curriculum of innovation offers them a place within the higher education curriculum
  - Remains to be seen in what ways this engagement is and will continue to manifest
My PhD: Pedagogical Design of Learning in IVWs

- Exploring the use of immersive virtual worlds in higher education as part of a Leverhulme-funded project (alongside Matt Mawer & Nicole Steils)

- Broadly contextualised PAR methodology

- Main research question addresses the surrounding socio-political context of immersive virtual world use:
  - Integration with the wider module/degree course
  - Portrayal in module information and surrounding documentation
  - The ways in which the general ethos of the university, and individual departmental cultures, impacts upon the use of immersive virtual worlds
  - The ways in which immersive virtual world use is impacted by national and European policy developments
References


