

The 'Hidden Curriculum': Second Life and the political university?



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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)

“Hiding in Plain Sight”: The ‘Hidden’ Curriculum



- 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 (eg. 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



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