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"MUD Play": A Transformative Learning Context

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Abstract: This case study describes Multi-user domains (MUDS) as a virtual learning environment for fostering the imaginative and symbolic aspects of transformative learning by relying primarily on the work of Boyd and Freire. MUDs are an increasingly popular but largely unexplored location for adult learning.

Introduction

There is a growing body of knowledge that suggests that integrating technology into the learning process provides a strong impetus for transformative learning (Cox, 1999; Jamieson et. al., 1996). Yet, the available literature on using technology has focused on the cognitive aspect of adult learning including the design of the curriculum and pedagogies used to deliver the content. There is a scarcity of literature that addresses the virtual learning environment in general and the imaginative and symbolic aspects of the learning that fosters transformative learning within these environments. Brookfield (1995) emphasizes that attention needs to be taken on how adults learn about their own emotional selves, in addition to an understanding of adult learning as a socially embedded and socially constructed phenomenon. The purpose of this paper was to explore a unique virtual learning environment, Multi-User Domains (MUDs) as a case example for fostering the imaginative and symbolic aspects of transformative learning. A MUD is a text-based virtual environment. We postulate that MUDs provide a learning environment in which participants create imaginary worlds characterized by collaborative learning, the testing of new assumptions and perspectives within a social context, and the construction and reconstruction of the meaning of their experiences.

Theoretical Framework

We relied on the work of Boyd (1991) and Freire (1970) to examine the imaginative and symbolic aspects of transformative learning to frame our case study. Transformative learning allows adults to test new assumptions and perspectives within a social context and the construction and reconstruction of the meaning of their experiences through the process of individuation (Boyd & Myers, 1988) and conscientization (Freire, 1970). Through transformative learning adults come to a deeper understanding and conjoining of the "Self" (Boyd, 1991). Boyd & Myers (1988) assert that transformative learning is a psychological inner journey, which recognizes the need to include the whole person or the Self. They explain that this journey is a lifelong process in which one seeks to come to understand through reflection the psychic (ego, shadow, persona, collective unconscious, etc.) that make up one's identity. This journey involves the use of the imagination and emotion to make meaning of learning

experiences throughout life and is called individuation. Individuation, or the development of the fully individual person, involves making the unconscious conscious through interactions with one's outer world. The unconscious is the collective unconscious, which is the storehouse for historical and primordial material and directs energy and the soul life of the individual. These interactions with one's outer world often serve to trigger or mediate the dilemma of the individuation process (Boyd, 1991). Sidorkin (1999) describes one such interaction as "dialogue" with others that result in a person's awareness and acceptance of each aspect of their psychic identity. He defines "dialogue" as an "I-Thou" ontological relationship. Sidorkin contends that in "dialogue" we transcend our immediate situatedness and get in touch with what is essential about us as humans, that is the many psychic parts of the self by becoming totally and unconsciously immersed in communication with others. He asserts, "People who enter into dialogue do not experience time and space as we all do in everyday life" but as Virginia Woolf would explain in dialogue we move from entanglement into the "cotton wool" of daily life. The result "involves the discovery of new talents, a sense of empowerment and confidence, a deeper understanding of one's inner self, and a greater sense of self-responsibility" (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 459).

Freire (1970) focused on social transformation via the unveiling or demythologizing of reality by the oppressed through the awakening of their critical consciousness. Freire believed that learners should view each other not as objects but as subjects, who are constantly reflecting and acting on the transformation of their society, so the world could become a more equitable place to live. He also theorized that the self is in a constant process of conscientization, or a constant movement between the action and reflection on the action. Conscientization is fundamentally a social process that transcends individualistic knowing concerns where the self transforms in dialogue and action. "It involves the notion of praxis as the action of moving back and forth between action in the world and reflection on action in a growing depth of understanding" (Scott, 1996, p. 185).

"MUD play" allows a learner to approach their experiences imaginatively and locate and construct deep meaning through mythological motifs, themes and images (Dirkx, 1998). Images, imagination, emotion and symbols are important to make sense of experience and find value and meaning in them (Hillman, 1989). Emotions and images may arise in association with "text" or the subject matter or skill being learned or within relationships with others in the learning environment. MUD environments are helpful in recognizing, naming and understanding the meaning of the images concealed within our deep, often emotional experiences of the text, through "dialogue" (Sidorkin, 1999).

(MUDs) as a Social Context for Transformative Learning

Most technological and adult learning theories focus on the cognitive-development perspective while failing to adequately contribute discussion about the emotional and spiritual dimension are a critical aspect of transformational learning experiences (Taylor, 1998). One such neglected area are MUDs (Sempsey, 1995). MUDs exist on the Internet, are considered 'virtual communities', and are currently used as virtual learning environments for kindergarten through adult students. Interacting with MUDs is referred to as 'playing in the MUD' or "'MUD play'" (Turkle, 1995). In educational MUDs players engage in collaborative learning through various aspects of play such as role-play, casual conversation, and several simultaneous threaded discussions designed to

illicit the creative play. Some educational MUDs are called MOOs (Multi-user object oriented), however, for simplicity purposes this paper refers to all forms of these text-based environments as MUDs.

Within MUDs players communicate synchronously to create multiple imaginary or real characters by assuming the various identities or characters to solve puzzles, and invent pastimes (Figuroa-Sarriera, 1999). Most of the published research on MUDs has focused on the sociological or communication aspects of these learning environments with little attention to the educational opportunities that they present. This paper presents "MUD play" as an adult learning environment in which participants create imaginary worlds characterized by collaborating learning, the testing of new assumptions, and the construction and reconstruction of the meaning of their experiences.

Collaborative learning in MUDs

Group or collaborative learning is one of the most powerful contexts for transformative learning. Group learning provides a social context in which adults can construct and reconstruct the meaning of their experiences through engagement of the imagination and an expression of one's emotions, in a safe, collaborative and creative environment (Dirkx, 1998). Group learning also provides the interactions with one's outer world that facilitates the individuation process. Research suggests that group learning is also a significant component of technologically based instructional environments that foster transformation (Cox, 1999; Russell, 1995; Jamieson et. al., 1996; Sempsey, 1999).

As a virtual learning context, "MUD play" simulates similar group-like environments through which participants interact through imaginative and expressive role-play within a safe and collaborative learning milieu. The key element of 'MUDing' is the creation and projection of a "personae" into a virtual space, which is also a characteristic. MUDders create, or utilize codes to program their own rooms where other participants may visit. These rooms are organized around different themes and imaginary settings. All of the elements and characters within a MUD are shaped through their collaborative interactions with other players even though a single participant may have originally created the object or character. "MUD play" is not a solitary experience. One key aspect about a MUD is that it does not have to be limited to one class, group or institution--educators can establish schedules to meet other teachers, students, or entire classes interested in the same topics or projects. Therefore, learners could be anonymous allowing for safety from the possibility that they will make vulnerable their self-esteem by revealing a lack of subject matter or by offering unpopular judgments or perceptions.

Testing new assumptions and perspectives

The technology offers the tools that make possible the use of the imagination and fantasies in much the same way that different people who view a theater production or film will experience and interpret it differently. Those who are usually shy and introverted in real life have an outlet to explore a more powerful personae, and because they are unencumbered by the material determinates of social values of 'real life', such as appearance, more powerful identities may be explored more fully in this medium (Bromberg, 1996). "MUD play" accomplishes one of the roles of psychotherapist - giving people a safe environment in which to explore their identities (Turkle & Irwin, 1996) or their psychic self.

This exploration of Self is realized through the identities formed as part of the role-playing, as learners are able to understand the psychic that make up one's identity (Boyd and Myers, 1988). In addition, there are those who see their virtual worlds as a way of resisting the conventional organization and significance of social life, in that they are able to construct alternative worlds (Figueroa-Sarriera, 1999). One interviewee in Turkle's study of MUD users says that each time he created a new character he deliberately gave it a quality that he wished he had. Then he experimented with it. For this person playing on the MUDs has enabled a continual process of creation and recreation. Gradually, this person's newly accepted virtual selves emerged into his real life providing a new sense of empowerment over his life.

The construction and reconstruction of meaning

MUDs do not provide a world free of the contradictory and oppressive forces that are manifested in daily life. Freire (1970) believes that adults need to learn to examine the social, political, and economic contradictions, within their world and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. Bromberg (1996) found that almost all of the respondents in his study said that they gained some kind of personal insight and awareness as a result of their interactive participation in virtual worlds that changed the way they responded to their physical, material worlds.

Oftentimes unrecognized oppressive images are embedded within our unconscious but are made conscious in the creation of characters through "MUD play." For example, Nakamura (2000) illustrates how traditional frameworks of race and gender relations are transported to LambdaMOO, a popular social MUD, via the description and presentation of text-based characters. Nakamura contends, "while the textual conditions of self-definition and self-performance would seem to permit players total freedom, within the boundaries of the written word, to describe themselves in any way they choose, this choice is actually an illusion. This is because the choice not to mention race does in fact constitute a choice - in the absence of racial descriptions, all players are assumed to be white" (p. 184). She also raises the issue that to be "unmarked" is to be Caucasian; to be anything else requires an explicit discursive act, one that is often taken by other members of MUD as confrontational.

In her article, Nakamura provides examples of the few characters in LambdaMOO who are marked as Asian. She asserts that all of the Asian characters were presented using the narrow stereotypical identities that are prevalent in the media. The creation of stereotypical identities affords and opportunities for educators to open conversation about racism and its negative effectiveness on others.

Conclusion and Implications

"MUD play" represents a major a tool by which many adults make meaning of the self and the world (Turkle, 1995), and through which transformative learning is potentially fostered. Through "MUD play" learners are deeply and intimately connected in relation with the text and with each other in a deeply intense and collaborative manner. In their study, Mateas and Lewis (1999) assert that one of their learners felt that he was sucked into the environment. This learner felt that he was concentrating so hard while engaging in "MUD play" that he had to pull away from the screen to take a deep breath and relax. Mateas & Lewis also contend that educators have traditionally separated learning and play. However, these authors predict that the line separating learning and play will blur within MUDs so that work and play are no longer mutually exclusive,

but rather play is an integral part of the learning process. Turkle (1995) contends that the lines between real and virtual are already eroded, as people become multiple characters.

As learners seek to identify and comprehend each other and themselves against a framework of difference they are irrevocably drawn into a relationship. Through these relationships the imagination evokes multiple aspects of our lives, such as relationship from distant past and our hopes and fears for the future (Heron, 1992 as cited by Dirkx, 2000), which allows for the co-joining of the Self (Boyd, 1991). Within these environments the learners' interpretation and understandings are mediated not just through ego-based, critical reflection, but they project unconscious and spontaneous fantasies and images onto the situation, which serve to shape the meaning that the learner constructs from the experience Chodrow (1999 as cited by Dirkx, 2000). By approaching adult learning experiences imaginatively rather than merely theoretically, learners can locate and construct through enduring mythological motifs, themes and images, deep meaning, value and quality in the relationship between learning and their own life experiences (Dirkx, 1998).

In "MUD play," individuals are afforded an opportunity to explore unavailable aspects of the self (Cartwright, as cited in Bromberg, 1996). Or, in Turkle's words, adults can construct and reconstruct their identities through "MUD play" that has become a major a tool by which many adults make meaning of the Self and the world (Turkle, 1995). For many, MUDs are not just lighthearted games (Turkle, 1995) or another form of communication. Turkle cautions that understanding the dynamics of virtual learning experiences such as "MUD play" is critical to foresee who might be in danger and explore how best to use them (Turkle & Irwin, 1996).

There are at least three implications of this study for adult learning. First, the review of literature will add to the body of knowledge on the imaginative and symbolic dimensions of technologically-based environments in adult learning settings. Second, the paper helps to inform our understanding of how this virtual learning environment is useful for fostering transformative learning in general and specifically the imaginative and symbolic dimensions. Lastly, the paper will help fill the gap relative to synchronous virtual learning environments for adult learners.

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