An Informal Community of Practice:
The Case of the DEHub Virtual Worlds Working Group

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ABSTRACT

The DEHub Virtual Worlds Working Group has an informal membership of nearly 200 members with an interest in education and virtual worlds within the Australian and New Zealand context. Members come from a variety of academic disciplines and may be teaching or research academics, Research Higher Degree candidates, project managers, virtual world builders and developers. The group acts as an informal Community of Practice, facilitating learning and the transfer of skills through social contact, opportunities to collaborate on projects and publications, and through the sharing of knowledge and experience. This poster provides a snapshot of the activity of this highly active group.

DEHub VWWG

The Australian and New Zealand Virtual Worlds Working Group (VWWG) began in November 2009 as a small group of 10 academics from the DEHub Consortium of the University of New England, Charles Sturt University, University of Southern Queensland and University of Central Queensland. At that first meeting, it was decided to open up membership beyond the DEHub consortium as there was considerable expertise in virtual worlds and education outside of that group of institutions. The group now has a membership of 190 from 55 Australian and New Zealand institutions. From February 2010, the group has met monthly in Second Life at Australis 4 Learning – an island jointly owned by the University of New England, the lead project member of the DEHub, and two other members of the VWWG (Gregory, 2011). The membership of the VWWG has a common interest in using virtual worlds for teaching and learning, though individual's own roles in institutions vary. The majority of the members have roles as teaching academics but there are also research academics, Research Higher Degree students, and virtual world builders and developers. Even within those groupings, there is considerable variation both in the level of experience in dealing with virtual worlds and the teaching disciplines.

Encke was the result of a collaboration between DEHub VWWG members.

As a Community of Practice

Since its inception, the VWWG has acted as an informal Community of Practice. Étienne Wenger defined a community of practice as "a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between them" (Wenger, 2001, p. 1). Wenger's theory acknowledges that adults learn through everyday social practices rather than in environments intentionally designed to support learning. Communities of practice differ from other communities in three significant ways:

1. They generally focus on a domain of shared interest;
2. Members interact and learn together by participating in joint activities and discussions, helping each other, and sharing information; and,
3. Members develop a shared collection of experiences, stories, best practices and solutions to problems. Communities of Practice exist only as long as participation has value to their members (Gray, 2004, pp. 22-23).

Collaboration

Members of the VWWG began collaborating with each other on a number of projects and publications soon after the group's inception. The first was collaboration between the University of New England and Charles Sturt University with a scoping study undertaking a systematic review and environmental analysis of the use of 3D immersive virtual worlds in Australian Universities (Dalgarno, Lee, Carlson, Gregory, & Tynan, 2010, 2011). In November 2010, five institutions from the VWWG were awarded an ALTC (Australian Learning and Teaching Council) grant called VirtualPREX researching virtual worlds for professional experience by pre-service teachers through self, peer and academic assessment, both formative and summative (Gregory, 2011). In 2010, 2011 and 2012 members of the VWWG wrote joint papers for the annual ascilite conference where nearly all members contributed. Members of the VWWG also participate in presenting at other's institutions, joint presentations at symposiums and papers at conferences. They have also joined together to conduct conferences, workshops and sharing of space in the virtual world (Gregory, 2011). The most recent collaborative project that the group has undertaken is the production of a VWWG book. Extended abstracts were sought from authors worldwide to contribute to the book titled "Virtual Worlds in Online and Distance Education" which will be published in late 2012. This call for papers received 94 contributions, demonstrating the interest and wide expertise of the group. All members who responded to the survey indicated that this collaborative aspect of membership was well-appreciated.

Conclusion

The Australian and New Zealand Virtual Worlds Working Group acts as a Community of Practice for those interested in education in virtual worlds. It has demonstrated how international collaboration can take place. The group currently meets inworld (in Second Life) once per month to discuss current and future collaboration and how to assist each other in achieving their individual, institutional and project goals.

References

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