



University
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Introduction

There is current discourse about critical use of technologies for learning and the need for Higher Education to be “future ready” in times of economic challenge (Facer & Sandford, 2010). Higher Education has been influenced by wider access policies but concern remains about student retention and completion. The importance of formal and informal networks to successful transition to university has also been reported. The role of innovative technologies, including virtual worlds, as tools to support collaborative learning networks is now being investigated in alignment with the social constructivist theory of learning (Bronack et al, 2006).

Inter-life is an immersive 3- dimensional virtual world based on the Second Life™ platform with integrated automated data collection tools and private spaces for critical reflection (Lally et al, 2009; Magill et al, 2009). Inter-Life aims to provide safe virtual world spaces for young people to explore and develop life transition skills (Devlin et al, 2011).

Aim

To evaluate the effectiveness of Inter-Life as a creative technology to support initial peer bonding, socialisation and community formation amongst a new cohort of undergraduate students embarking on the Bachelor of Technological Education (B Tech Ed) Degree at the University of Glasgow.

Methods

The present study was based around two main events:
 1) A student mentors’ workshop where 2nd- 4th year B Tech Ed students were introduced to the aims of Inter-Life as a social learning tool.
 2) This was followed a few months later by the formal induction of 36 new B Tech Ed students.



Figure 1: Screenshot of the Profile Hall in the Gallery Building

As part of the induction day, students and mentors participated in a creative profiling activity about “self” and uploaded slides in the Inter-Life ‘virtual’ profile hall for viewing and sharing amongst peers. The slides covered their previous learning experiences and their interests and aspirations for university and the future (Sfard & Prusak 2005).



Figure 2: Representative student profile slide

Methods

This was followed by a virtual reflection on the induction activity that was logged by the students in their private reflective spaces or “Skyboxes” (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Inside view of a private Skybox with other boxes visible in the distance

All data was imported into NVivo 8 and analysed in an inductive, iterative manner using a social constructivist analytical lens and triangulation conducted in order to answer the research question.

Table 1: Datasets used for analysis

Datasets	Number
2nd-4th year Mentors’ Focus Group	n=7
E-questionnaire to new students	n=36
Inter-Life interactive profile boards	n=20
Inter-Life reflective journal entries	n=23
Post “in-world” Focus Group	n=4



Figure 4: Screenshot of the student group “in-world” beside the Teleporter.

Results

Mentors’ workshop

Results showed that the student mentors recognised the potential of Inter-Life as a novel tool for learning and interaction within and between year groups. For example, one of the mentors clearly understood the difference between ‘Gaming’ and virtual worlds:

I play The Sims a lot at home... [.....]Jeh, and I wanted to see how similar it was to that ...in that it is other people who are controlling their own characters and to see how they interact with you rather than just the computer getting what you want it to do. 4th year student (Mentors’ Focus Group)

Induction event

The e-questionnaire data showed the class was composed of 19 (53%) males and 17 (47%) females, and the majority (n=24: 67%) of the class were under 20 years old. However, the majority of the class (n=31: 86%) had never worked with virtual world platforms before.

The majority of the class (≥ 18 years old) successfully completed the profiling activity. Analysis of the profile boards revealed the following main themes:

- Desire to learn and develop their skills further
- Enjoyment and interest in their subject
- Desire to influence their future career

Results

- Desire to work with and help young people
- Desire to meet new (like-minded) people

The students used a highly *personalised* and creative combination of images and text when preparing their slides, for example:

I want to influence the future of Design and Technology Education.... Jupiter Crannock (Mentor)

To achieve my goal in this career

Neptune Lemondrop (New student)

The students then “Rezzed” their own private Skybox (Figures 3 & 4) and completed their critical reflection. The journal entries showed the majority of the new cohort found the induction event innovative, interesting and stimulating. The ‘virtual’ journal entries provided evidence of reflection about “self” and identity as explored through the profile slides:

The contents boards were a good way to convey the type of person I am. I chose the Dolphin picture to show that I am friendly and helpful. All of the content I chose for my profile boards relate to me at present. They show what I am interested in...what matters to me...my intentions for this course and a few facts about my life at present. This was a good way for others to see what I am like. It also gave me the opportunity to glance at other people’s interests and facts.

Reflective Learning Log (Neptune Erin)

The exercise is very helpful in meeting people and I will no doubt meet people in the real world too. I have found this particular exercise enjoyable as I am more comfortable at a computer than talking to big groups of new people.

Reflective Learning Log (Neptune Foxdale)

The students varied in terms of their proficiency in virtual world skills required to function, navigate and communicate effectively. Some students also expressed a preference for a more blended approach to induction in the future, namely an element of face-to-face activity as well as working within the “Inter-Life” virtual world.

Conclusions

The present study has demonstrated the potential of Inter-Life for supporting group interaction and socialisation as well as individual critical reflection on learning using novel virtual world technologies. However, it is also in keeping with current literature in the field (Helsper and Eynon 2010) which challenges the concept of young people as ‘digital natives’ in formal learning settings.

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