



EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

The Realities of Researching Learning Transitions in Challenging Settings

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Contribution

The Realities of Researching Learning Transitions in Challenging Settings

This paper presents findings from a recent research project to illustrate how the Internet can be used to create and sustain a virtual research community of young people, and how this can support their creative endeavours in challenging settings.

This paper is based upon research undertaken for the Inter-Life project between 2008 and 2012. The ESRC/EPSRC-funded Inter-Life Project (TLRP/TEL Phase; 2008-2011; see <http://www.tlrp.org/tel/>; Sclater & Lally, 2009) focused on the development of an integrated inter-cultural 'context' in a 3D platform (Second Life™), in order to investigate how young people can use it creatively - individually, and collectively - to assist in understanding and navigating their key life transitions, sometimes in challenging settings. The central aim of Inter-Life was to create a community space or 'youth centre' in a modern and engaging online environment, where young people could (within the ethical frame of the project and by negotiation with the team) pursue their own research agendas. The team chose to work in a 'virtual world'. Virtual worlds are avatar-based, and networked, social spaces. Avatars in this context are animated graphic representations of participants that they can move around in the virtual world under their own control. They are often in human form, but can be animals, birds, or other entities. They can be modified and customised by participants at will.

Young people's use and understanding of the Internet is still under-researched. In a very extensive review of media literacy, Buckingham et. al. (Buckingham, Banaji, Carr, Cranmer, & Willett, 2005) concluded that there is still a significant paucity of research about how young people evaluate, interpret, and respond to the Internet. Social class and economic status are well identified as limiters to their access to the Internet, more than to other media such as radio or television. However, less is known about other potential barriers to use, including the role of individual subjectivities and motivations.

The Inter-Life Project needed to develop a theoretical framework that would be powerful enough to help us understand and analyse the activities of the young people with whom we worked. Activity Theory was identified as a promising candidate, using an approach to theory selection developed by Halverson (2002). Activity Theory (AT) focuses on the constituent influences on activity, and places the participants and their goals centrally in 'systems of activity'. These systems include the tools used by young people, their motivations and goals, ideas and values, the community context, and the artifacts that they create. Within this general framework, we focused on creative practices as tools to support reflection on social justice issues, the use of virtual worlds as a community context and the development of young people's voices through creative practices as goals. The young people with whom we worked co-opted the tools and community setting for their own use, and began to articulate their own goals during the workshops. The research question was: how do young people work creatively to develop their own agency and subjectivities in a virtual research community and apply this agency in challenging real world settings?

Method

The ILI2 virtual world was created using the virtual world provider Second Life™. The Inter-Life research team created a working space that looked like an island in a tropical sea. The team placed a deck/stage in the centre of the island, and a little vegetation. Subsequent development of the island was undertaken by groups of young people who participated in workshops. They customised the space to suit their needs and purposes. The Trinidad Virtual Research Community (TVRC) featured in this paper consisted of young people (16+) from a fee-paying school in Trinidad. The community was coordinated by a teacher at the school, who also participated in the workshops. This group of young people was living with their own families, and had excellent connectivity and resources at home. They participated in the workshops after school, but from their own homes. The early workshops were planned by the team in order to support agenda building, discussion about ways of working. What emerged from these dialogues occurred in two phases. In the first, the young people used photography to document their lives and living spaces, issues and concerns. These were shared on interactive boards, and formed the basis of many discussions about issues and concerns. In the second phase the young people developed digital videos on issues including bullying and recreation in Trinidad. In this paper a form of content analysis was applied to samples of the real-time, text-based interactions of participants (see De Laat, Lally, Lipponen, & Simons, 2007 for details). The results of this analysis were combined with extracts from the dialogue itself. The coding schema, developed from AT and project research questions, was used by three researchers to code utterances from ILI2 workshops. The unit of analysis was the entire utterance, and this was coded using only one schema category per utterance. If multiple codes are applied to a single utterance, in order to capture layers of meaning – or possible multiple meanings – the coding results quickly become very unwieldy to analyse and represent. This coding process required coder training. Two coders would code the same workshop, and then participate in a 'coding conversation' to examine differences in coding values. A third coder moderated these conversations. All participants were volunteers who worked on the project during their own time. They are referred to by fictitious avatar names. Extensive ethical scrutiny of the project was undertaken before commencement.

Expected Outcomes

Young people's use and understanding of the Internet is still poorly understood. The development of critical understanding by young people through new forms of interaction, as well as issues of expression, control, creativity, and the development of voice, are areas where such research could be valuable. The potential for creative expression by young people using the Internet is under-researched. The use of virtual worlds in such work is almost entirely novel. The subjectivities of young people are an important element of understanding youth in the process of transition. Understanding these subjectivities within a wider framework than the family may be enhanced through the use and development of Activity Theory. We used it to focus on activity in young people's creative learning spaces, and their interactions and motivations as they engaged in their own research activity. It points towards the use and understanding of tools to mediate personal and collective goals during activity. We used a wide range of creative practices as tools such as photography and filmmaking. The young people used these for their own research investigations. Photography was used creatively to share and understand the world and cultural settings in which the young people were living. The virtual world offered many creative possibilities and stimuli. Learning the scripting language allowed them to manipulate the virtual world environment and appearance, giving them a sense of control. Power to change their avatar's appearance was very engaging, generating much collaborative activity and interaction. The virtual world environment also stimulated a wide range of playful behaviours. In conclusion, virtual worlds may offer very considerable opportunities for adult researchers to work alongside young people as participants in their own research and each other's agendas. The use of virtual worlds and creative practices with young people is, we contest, a powerful combination in this work.

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