



The Inter-Life Project: Inter-Cultural Spaces for Young People to Creatively Embrace Life Changes and Transition

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Contribution

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The aim of the Inter-Life Project was to investigate the use of virtual worlds in skills development for young people to enhance their management of life transitions.

This paper reports findings of a three-year investigation into 'virtual world' use in inter-cultural citizenship education. Virtual worlds are '...persistent, avatar-based social spaces that provide players or participants with the ability to engage in long-term, coordinated conjoined action'. They provide the possibility of realistic and sustained 'immersive' interactive environments that transcend the formal curriculum. They allow new forms of interaction and engagement that have already been glimpsed through online gaming, and go beyond these to open up a wide array of new learning opportunities that seemed unfeasible until recently.

The communications that can occur in virtual worlds mean that user-controlled avatars can work together in 'realistic' social activities. However, there are very few reports in the literature of the realization of this potential in citizenship and inter-cultural education. In this paper we focus on the development of an integrated inter-cultural 'context', in order to investigate how young people can use this creatively to navigate key life transitions.

We are using an Activity Theory (AT) perspective in this work because it offers a real possibility of systematically integrating the key components of learning in virtual worlds: tool development and mediation; internalisation of social knowledge, and

transformations of the structures of human activity. Third generation AT recognises the challenges of understanding dialogue, the perspectives of participants, and the complexity of activity systems, as those engaged in joint projects develop their goals. The use of this perspective represents an attempt to 're-theorise' transition within a broader context than the family.

How does Activity Theory map on to the key elements of the project? AT is concerned with 'objects' and the activities that are driven by them. Objects can be concerns, foci of attention, or motivation to achieve a goal. Such objects - what Engeström has called 'benign' runaway objects - yield intermediate products, and are visible, and cumulative. They allow participants to return time and again, and engage in feedback with one another. AT provides a coherent theoretical framework that connects the 'aims' of our young people, co-constructed through negotiation with the research team, with the spaces we are calling 'Virtual Communities' in Inter-Life. The 'boundaries' in these spaces are between the school 'activity system' and the home 'activity system'. The unit of analysis is beyond either of these activity systems. It is this boundary space between them in which the young people are attempting to create artefacts (films, photographs, and discussions in the virtual community) that explore their concerns and address their sense of justice.

The research questions arise from a need to understand how individuals and groups can develop in virtual communities supported by a virtual world. They include:

1. Authenticity, Identity and the Context: How do participants experience the context of Inter-Life?
2. How do Inter-Life experiences contribute to identity formation and self image?
3. Development of skills and resources (cultural; experiential; systems/economic): What skills and resources to manage transitions are developed through individual and group engagement in Inter-Life?

Method

The Inter-Life Project methodology is based upon pioneering work of Lally and associates. This work attempted to develop theoretical perspectives that would be sufficiently powerful to account for the key elements of online learning and teaching in higher education. Activity Theory was identified as a promising candidate (based upon an approach developed by Halverson (2002), and multi-method analytical techniques, including content analysis, social network analysis, and critical event recall were, for the first time, applied together to the analysis of text-based communication interactions, cognitive and meta-cognitive activities, and social network patterns of learning and teaching, in online environments (De Laat, M., Lally, V., Lipponen, L., & Simons, R. J., 2007a, 2007b; De Laat, M., Lally, V., & Lipponen, L. (2006). In this paper this approach to content analysis of real-time text-based interactions, revealing the many voices of activity, is combined with reflective interviews exploring the development of identity among participants as it emerges through the creative and research activities. The coding schema (see Appendix), developed from AT and the research questions, was used by three researchers to code utterances from ILI2 workshops. The unit of analysis was the entire utterance.

Expected Outcomes

The Inter-Life project created an 'inter-cultural space', conceptualised using Activity Theory, as beyond the boundaries of both the home and school activity systems. It also created 'transition tools' to facilitate emotional, social and cognitive activity and support for young people using this space. An embryonic Virtual Social Research Laboratory (see the Inter-Life video at <http://www.tlrp.org/tel/>) was built 'around' the space to assist with data-gathering. We worked with two communities of young people, in different cultural contexts, to use the space to explore issues of concern in their lives, and develop life skills that could be employed by them in future life transitions. Our preliminary findings indicate that the project did support both creativity (photography, photomontage, film-making and sharing of emotional experiences) and 'research' conceptualised and undertaken by young people, while 'scaffolding' valuable skills development for transition. The work also provides preliminary evidence of how creativity can be used to build community cohesion, and that this can form the basis for work in both understanding loss, and sharing and articulating the challenges of life changes. There is also evidence that the skills and understandings acquired 'map' onto the 'real world' experiences of young people.

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