

Can the Virtual Really Impact the Real?

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'...human beings are active agents who play decisive roles in determining the dynamics of social life and in shaping individual activities.'

(Sfard and Prusak, 2005 p15)

Abstract

The aim of the Inter-Life Project was to investigate the use of virtual worlds to support transition skills development for young people to enhance their management of important life transitions. In particular, we have been investigating the role of the 'Inter-Life' virtual worlds in supporting the development of life transition skills in young people, some of whom were in the care of local authorities, and others in more widely distributed communities (Connelly and Chakrabarti, 2008). The Inter-Life project created an embryonic Virtual Social Research Laboratory in order to study how young people can use a virtual world creatively, working together as a research community to develop skills that will help them navigate their key life transitions (see the Inter-Life video at <http://www.tlrp.org/tel/>). The project focused on how participants acted and develop in Inter-Life, while engaged in co-designed creative and research activities. It also examined how the skills and understandings acquired 'map' onto their 'real world' experience. The project environments (based upon the commercial platform 'Second Life') incorporated 'in-world' data gathering tools (not the same as the 'transition tools' created for the participants' use) that support content analysis. Such data, collected in an unobtrusive manner, supported the analysis of complex activities in the virtual world (Sclater and Lally, 2009; Lally and Sclater 2010), supported by Activity Theory. The skills acquired, and the development of identities as young people engage in shared activities, are being reported and analysed. The discussion concludes by asserting the need for much more investigation of the potential of augmented 3D digital technologies to assist young people in the social, emotional, and political challenges of transition in their lives.

Virtual Communities and Transition

All young people (YP) have to face and negotiate complex life transitions, in their personal, educational, and political lives. Transitions can involve emotional, cognitive and social change and development, from coping with new expectations and requirements of educational and work placements, to learning how to participate in and create open, and democratic activities. During transitions young people have to cope with confusion, disenchantment, disorientation, alienation, sometimes resistance, and even bullying. These can be both personal and systemic. YPs need to develop a wide range of skills in order to understand and manage these complex processes. We are all challenged by transitions - they are a cultural and political life experiences. Not all of this experience, however, results in positive change. We will argue in this discussion that many of the contexts with which young people are now faced are so complex that the cognitive and emotional burden requires additional resources and support. In this discussion we will examine the use of a virtual social environment (Inter-Life Island (ILI) 2) to provide different cultural groups of young people with the opportunity to participate in 'Virtual Communities' for action.

The original research questions of the Inter-Life Project arose from a need to understand how individuals and groups can work and develop in virtual communities

when supported by a virtual world. In addition, Activity Theory has helped us to shape the focus of these questions around tools resources, goals and personal agency in a complex world. The synthesis of these two influences also shaped the coding schema used for content analysis. The questions are:

1. Authenticity, Identity and the Context: How do participants experience the context of Inter-Life?
2. How does this change during their activities in the Inter-Life workshops?
3. How do the opportunities to 'personalise' their involvement interact with these experiences, to effect engagement?
4. How do Inter-Life experiences contribute to identity formation and self-image?
5. 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 scenarios and 'Tools of Transition'?
6. Transfer from the Context: How do skills and resources acquired in Inter-Life transfer into real- life contexts?
7. How are risk, conflict and goal-setting handled in the virtual world and how does virtual behaviour map to real behaviour?
8. Are individual and group personas consistent across the real and virtual worlds?

Central to the Inter-Life Project, and to our investigation of the value of the virtual communities we worked with, is the development of skills, and emotional and cognitive resources that YPs may need to support themselves during critical transition experiences in the 'real world'. The ILI-2 'boundary space', a developing space 'in tension' between two activity systems (home and school), provided challenges through the opportunities it presented to act in more 'open' ways than was (often) possible in the established spaces of home and school. This led to conflicts and dialogue about how to act individually and collectively, about building groups, conceptualising and goal setting for joint projects. It also led to the supported development of strategies to address these conflicts. In the workshops featured here we can also see evidence of the exploration of emotional issues and the development of motivation to explore these issues. The YPs participated in a range of research and reflective activities, gaining of personal insight into emotion, developing of a wide range of problem solving skills. They planned and executed creative activities (with support) that expressed a need, issue, or concern, an interest or a personal like. In these communities there is clear evidence of 'mapping' by YPs of experiences encountered in the virtual community into the 'real world' activity systems of home and school. There are also clear indications, supported by the comments made in interviews, and during ILI-2 conversations, that aspects of identity are developing across 'real' and 'virtual' worlds. For example, one young person spoke of how his sense of responsibility towards others had been encouraged by the film-making activities in ILI-2. He also commented that similar increases in his sense of responsibility had been emerging in his preparation strategies for examinations at school. We were careful in the interview not to imply that these were directly connected, but observed that they were occurring in both contexts during the time period of the Inter-Life workshops. In discussion we plan to share more extended research analyses that will stimulate further exploration of how young people can use virtual worlds to assist in their own life projects and work – both individually and collectively. In a 'real world' where the active agency of young people has few opportunities to be exploratory and creative in the service of their own agendas, 'virtual worlds' may have promise that is belied by their origins in online gaming communities. Can the 'Virtual Really Impact the Real?'; this question is, we believe, central to the challenges facing TEL in this time

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of crisis. Our evidence from the Inter-Life Project gives us some evidence for ways forward. But in this time of instability, how do we move this forward?