

## ***Book reviews***

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### **AUTHENTIC VIRTUAL WORLD EDUCATION: FACILITATING CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT AND CREATIVITY**

*Springer.*

*Gregory, S., & Wood, D. (2018)*

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The introduction starts with an interesting musing on Garter's Hype Cycle (2017), a model where initial interest in a concept is marked by some ambivalence, progressing to a stage of inflated expectations, followed by the trough of disillusionment and, finally, the slope of enlightenment and plateau of productivity. The reference serves to contextualise the field of education and its relationship with technology, and I found myself returning to the model multiple times as I progressed through the book.

Drawn from a diverse range of disciplines, the book makes particular reference to one platform, Second Life, to provide examples of the potential for VR software to achieve certain educational goals. Of course, VR resources are available to certain students in certain privileged contexts so this is not a discussion intended to be inclusive of all learning contexts, and yet, given the events of the last few years, online learning (and hybrid models) are clearly here to stay and so exploration of this topic is probably more pertinent than the authors knew when the book was published in 2018.

Second life has much in common with the kind of multi-player games that have been popular for some time but I have chosen to side step a discussion on gamification and have referred to Second Life as a 'platform' rather than a game, as is ostensibly common practice. In short, it is software that allows the user to choose an avatar and to interact with others; it has been around for almost twenty years; and, to be fair, the quality of its images is objectively impressive.

On the surface, this would seem to offer an abundance of opportunities to create engaging learning experiences for students. However, the scope of the book gleaned from the title is cultural engagement and creativity, and I have tried to limit my discussion to these goals. In one chapter, students were able to visit natural environments in the virtual world to learn more about conservation and, in another, hazardous environments are recreated to give learners virtual experience in disaster response. However, of more interest for the ESL teacher are the units dedicated to intercultural competence in communication and to communicative task-based learning.

The central argument for the use of VR in educational contexts appears to be that a generation raised on virtual reality games cannot or will not find a traditional classroom setting engaging and, therefore, cannot learn there, or some variation on this. However, the book does not address this argument directly. Instead, the book largely takes it for granted that questions such as this are settled and explores ways that the use of VR can be justified to achieve a range of pedagogical goals.

To me, this was exemplified in chapter 7, where students go shopping and visit a doctor in a (virtual) traditional Chinese setting. Again, the assumption that a seemingly conventional communicative activity is intrinsically more engaging than those constructed in language classrooms is treated as self-evident. And perhaps there is some truth to these assumptions as regards certain learner age-groups, but I personally would like to have seen greater focus on how and why the approaches summarised met the requisite pedagogical outcomes.

In chapter 5, the writers posit a number of claims that, roughly summarised, argue in favour of individualisation in education achieved through virtual reality experiences. I personally got the sense that many of the claims made to support this position were unsupportable, but that aside, I was genuinely interested in the potential for this technology to offer students experiences that might not be available in the real world. And yet experience tells me that the claim that VR experiences might replicate real-world linguistic interactions relies on a number of factors that are not necessarily explored. However, I found myself overlooking some of the problematic aspects of this chapter. For example, the assertion that “It is simple to equip existing learning spaces with state-of-the-art technology”, precedes an

acknowledgement that “it is not a simple process to use the technology to improve the learning”, which should go without saying but is a perspective I wanted to read more about.

In chapter 6, and situated within the context of established VR educational technologies (flight simulators and the like), the writers caution that a conceptual framework is needed to provide rigour to feedback provided from performance on VR tasks. Within this context, they assert that the skills development achieved through the authenticity of the tasks themselves eclipses the importance of, for example, the realism achieved through graphic representation. The Taxonomy of Human Skills that they describe is useful when conceptualising how these skills development tasks are devised, used and their usefulness critiqued. Clearly, this is an approach that could and should be expanded to cover linguistic and other learning outcomes and to guide the development of tasks that incorporate VR in the future. I found this chapter to be useful and thought provoking. However, the rigour demonstrated in this chapter highlights the lack thereof in other parts of the book and I have many remaining questions about whether adding a VR aspect to a traditional communicative language activity contributes significantly to pedagogical gains in and of itself. However, to be fair, I can see no evidence of why it might not promote engagement in the attainment of rigorous pedagogical goals within carefully crafted lessons that make use of this technology.

It is at this point that I find myself returning to the discussion of Gartner’s (2017) “Hype Cycle” in the opening chapter and concluding that those who are already enthusiastic about the potential for virtual reality to achieve big gains in student engagement and consequently pedagogical outcomes will likely find a lot to get excited about in this book, with relatively straightforward ways to use the software to give students experiences beyond the fabled chalk and talk but, equally, those either ambivalent or disillusioned about the potential for this software to achieve real pedagogical gains will be left asking questions that are never addressed.

## References

Gartner. (2017). Gartner hype cycle. <http://www.gartner.com/technology/research/>