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How serious are duty of care risks in virtual reality?

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Abstract
Concerned by the debate surrounding multi-user virtual environments, Sarah Howard sets out to determine how serious are the risks versus the rewards.

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There is a lot of speculation about how teachers can use multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) such as Second Life in the classroom. Many sources will tell teachers that MUVEs can offer students a rich and engaging learning experience, and that these mediums can provide learning opportunities not available in the classroom. One example of the possibilities was presented in the Winter 2008 EQ in ‘The Third Reality’: that students could learn French in Paris from native speakers in Second Life. Opportunities such as this are exciting, but using MUVEs in the classroom can be risky. Often when new ways to use MUVEs in the classroom emerge, issues related to duty of care are often mentioned. Proponents of MUVEs in the classroom will dismiss these risks in light of possible teaching benefits, or they will argue that ways to manage student safety are available. These arguments beg the questions: How serious are the risks threatening duty of care? Is the use of MUVEs in teaching worth risking students’ safety?

In Australia, ‘duty of care’ is individually defined in each state. In NSW, the Department of Education and Training defines duty of care as, ‘reasonable steps taken by staff to protect students from risks that are reasonably foreseeable’. Further, teachers are expected to take ‘precautions to avoid or minimise risk’. The South Australia Department of Education’s policy, *Educating for the 21st Century*, states that, ‘quality education requires that students learn in a secure environment in a way which challenges them to achieve their personal best,’ this includes duty of care. Both of these statements identify the need for security and protection in the learning environment. Unfortunately, virtual reality environments, like Second Life, can seem quite dangerous to those unfamiliar with them. Everyone has heard horror stories about someone being approached online, through a chat room or in a virtual environment, by a person making sexually explicit or racist comments. These events seem uncontrollable and random, but like avoiding a bad neighbourhood in a city, if you simply don’t go there then you won’t put yourself at risk. Considering teachers’ responsibility to students under duty of care, using MUVEs with known risks can present a significant ethical conflict. This conflict forces teachers to consider if the dangers associated with MUVEs outweigh the possible learning benefits, or vice versa.

To discuss if MUVEs are worth the possible risks, we have to understand what teachers worry about when thinking about using these tools with students. In a recent study at the University of Sydney, teachers from a number of primary and secondary schools in Dubbo, New South Wales, were asked to explore the use of MUVEs in their teaching, specifically Second Life. Thirty-five teachers, from primary and secondary school, were involved in the project. Of the 35 teachers, almost all of them explored Second Life, and similar environments such as Whyville and Poptopia. Whyville and Poptopia are both online MUVEs similar to Second Life, but they have been specifically designed as educational tools for primary and middle years students. Both environments state that they provide ‘safe’ places for students to communicate. Out of the 35 teachers, only two used MUVEs in their teaching. When the project was over, the teachers were asked to discuss their experiences using MUVEs.

The general consensus was that the dangers in Second Life were too great and that it was not educationally specific. They felt that Whyville was better, but
some of the teachers felt it was not engaging enough to hold students' attention. The teachers agreed that Poptropica was safe, but that it was only educationally appropriate for younger students. Regarding their concerns when using MUVEs, they made the following comments:

I was thinking, this might work... but, I'm very glad it fell over... we would have been in trouble. A lot of our parents would have thought it was completely inappropriate.

A lot of the MUVEs that were there did not have an educational focus, so it would need to be really closely aligned. There were educational things within Whyville, but kids were getting on there and they don't care about the educational things. They just want the social side of it. You aren't going to be able to get rid of the smut and the cyber bullying and all that kind of stuff because kids always get around it.

The chat is quite complicated, and if kids don't understand they could be giving their personal information away... it was not appropriate to what we were doing... we explored a bit, but decided that it was not helping with Science.

I had someone ask me a question [in Second Life]. nothing rude so that was okay. I never actually witnessed some of the other stuff the other groups had said. When they were telling me about it, it made me hesitant to use it, so we just didn't follow that line [in the project]... I was reluctant to use it.

Teachers' comments show that they were interested in trying MUVEs, and they were open to exploring the teaching and learning possibilities available through these tools. They were willing to consider MUVEs in the classroom, but in the end, they did not feel the educational benefits of MUVEs were worth the safety risks. They also felt the kids were not interested in the educational side of MUVEs, nor that MUVE content aligned with their curriculum.

Even though teachers felt that the MUVEs explored in the study were not necessarily useful in their teaching, they did not discount using this type of tool in the classroom. Their interest in virtual learning environments came from their belief that students found these types of tools exciting and engaging. In response to this excitement, the teachers were interested in using MUVEs in the future. They felt that a virtual environment specifically designed for teaching and learning would solve many of their problems with existing virtual environments. They wanted to see a closed environment MUVE that would allow control for the duty of care risks, such as cyber bullying, sharing of information, unwanted approaches from strangers, and other dangers. The fact that the teachers, even with the risks associated with MUVEs, are still excited to use this kind of tool in teaching is promising. The teachers see the value of this kind of learning experience, specifically how engaged students are when using these kinds of tools. Therefore, regardless of the dangers, teachers might associate with virtual environments like Second Life, they felt that some structure and a bit of control would answer many of their concerns regarding duty of care. If these issues were managed, the teachers felt they would be keen to use MUVEs in the future. This small study provides food for thought for all educational jurisdictions regarding the place of MUVEs in the education revolution.

Web references
- www.epa.edu.au/site/thethirdreality.html
- www.poptropica.com/
- www.whyville.net/store/lp

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