

Computer Writing and Research Lab

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*Neutralizing Identity: Exploring Language And Gender In A Virtual World**

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Abstract: Students in classrooms always carry with them markers of identity that embody social distinctions—dialect, skin color, clothes, gendered features—that compel them to make judgments about the identities of others (as well as their own). The use of Second Life (SL) as a virtual classroom is envisioned as a space where students can examine topics of gender and language identity. SL fosters an environment where real-life markers of identity are mitigated and potentially neutralized, allowing students to focus on issues of language and gender without being influenced by variables such as dialect, clothes, skin color, and other physical features. Although SL is generally an unpredictable environment, unanticipated scenarios create the opportunity for students to share and compare widely divergent experiences, which contribute to a pool of information useful for research projects.

Introduction

The use of Second Life (SL) as a virtual classroom is envisioned as space where students can examine topics of gender and language identity. Exploration within SL allows students to interact with each other and individuals in the virtual world. SL is a virtual universe where users can build alternate online identities (avatars) in a world that in many ways replicates the social hierarchies of capitalist society. In creating these identities, users reinvent themselves through their avatars, which are much like characters in role player video games. Users can develop every physical aspect of their avatars by choosing from an almost limitless array of physical features (including those of animals), clothing, and props.

The fact that students can define the physical manifestations of their own identities effectively serves the purposes of language and gender-based assignments. Depending on the objectives of the assignments, instructors may allow students to create their own avatars, or they may provide certain criteria, such as specifying that students create androgynous avatars or that they must be clothed. Although avatars in SL display racial and gender features, thus not entirely neutralizing markers of identity, these physical properties are not immutable

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characteristics but rhetorical choices that can be analyzed in classroom discussions and reflected on in writing assignments.

Another appealing aspect of SL is that chats (consisting of social interactions through instant messaging) with other avatars can be saved. Therefore, students have written transcripts of their interactions, which provide rich data sources for class discussion and writing assignments based on SL in-class activities.

Challenges

The benefits of using SL in the classroom far outweigh the drawbacks, but there are a number of challenges to using this program in the classroom. First of all, that there is no way to gauge the number and quality of interactions that students will have at any given time. There are a number of ways that this problem can be overcome. One is to assign specific tasks that students need to accomplish, including conducting interviews in which students gather information about avatars, observe their communication strategies, and practice overcoming communication barriers. Although SL is generally an unpredictable environment, this constant state of flux actually creates the opportunity for students to share and compare widely divergent experiences, which should contribute to a pool of information that can be tapped for research projects.

A second challenge is that, frankly, SL can be a den of vice: a huge number of “islands” cater to fetish-oriented individuals. This potentially objectionable content may prove problematic for negotiating topics of gender and identity, especially when other characters proposition students sexually in the virtual world. A goal of using SL in the classroom is to provide a reasonably controlled environment where students can explore issues relating to identity. Although a completely safe environment may be impossible to achieve in SL, the scenarios can be controlled to some extent. One way to do this is to limit the sites, or “islands,” that the students can explore. For example, we have identified several “islands” as useful and relatively free of fetish-based distractions for the purposes of identity exploration. These include the following:

- Eldamar (Island), home of Tolkien Education Center (a PG island, so pretty safe)
- Sundance Film Channel
- Sony BMG Music Entertainment: which has a room for each artist with streaming audio of the artist’s music
- Resistance Homes: prefab home sales for second life properties
- Ballers City: not necessarily PG, but a place where sports-minded people will find peers with similar interests and where avatars can play basketball.

The challenge of finding a relatively controlled environment for the purposes of discussing social identities, however, has the added benefit of providing excellent fodder for class discussion.

Language Identity

Exploration within SL can be used to facilitate discussion about language identity in a number of ways. One appealing and educational aspect of SL is its international scope. Within a single

visit to this virtual world, users can potentially communicate with speakers from India, Germany, Sweden, California and Argentina (just to name a few). Users come from all backgrounds and are eager to interact. Especially appealing is that communication takes place with avatars that have their own unique visual identities; therefore, preconceived notions about language based on physical appearance are taken out of the equation. Students can ask language-related questions, conduct informal interviews about language and ideologies, and generate classroom discussion and research projects.

With respect to engaging in language related inquiry, a number of investigative projects may be assigned. These assignments require students to conduct online research and subsequently prepare brief reports to share with the class. The following two assignments could prove particularly useful for these purposes.

Project 1: Language “Scavenger Hunt”

One such project is to conduct a language “scavenger hunt” in which students initiate conversation with avatars to find 5 languages. While participating in the “scavenger hunt” students record how many languages are spoken by individual speakers and conduct brief interviews. The first goal of this assignment is two-fold. One is to learn about speakers’ beliefs concerning their own language use. A second goal is to evaluate how speakers communicate those beliefs and what their attitudes about language, multilingualism, and identity are. Students will write brief reports summarizing their findings to share with the class.

Project 2: Evaluating Assumptions

A second, more advanced project requires students to evaluate the assumptions that are made by speakers and how those assumptions are communicated. They might consider what linguistic cues prompt assumptions about language. Students are also expected to consider the assumptions they themselves make in their own interactions with classmates and other users of SL by evaluating what avatars say and how they say it. For example, students might explain to avatars they encounter that they are participating in a class project and then evaluate the strangers’ judgments and responses, trying to determine each speaker’s age, gender, cultural background, first language, and any other marker of identity. Students would also consider the perceptions of the stranger about the students’ own markers of identity by paying close attention to the linguistic cues that reveal those perceptions. Another example might involve gauging responses to the simple statement “I am from Texas,” which tends to markedly color interactions with international SL users. The questions that students ask may be generated during in-class brainstorming sessions.

Sample Project Plan

Day 1: Brainstorm conversation prompts with students in class. Introduce student to SL, create avatars, and have them familiarize themselves with the SL environment. Students should not describe their avatars to each other. Students may be required to continue exploring outside of the class.

Day 2: In a designated area, have students interact with classmates and practice soliciting responses and noting assumptions. Students are looking to identify markers of identity through linguistic cues. One fun activity might be to have students try to identify each other.

Possible writing assignment: Students may be required to write a one or two page report chronicling their online activity.

Day 3: Discuss findings in class.

Day 4: Students are assigned different locations in SL to explore. Their goal is to generate conversations based on the prompts brainstormed on Day 1 and practiced on Day 2 and once again evaluate linguistic cues and perceptions of subjects they encounter.

Possible writing assignment: Students may write a three to four page report including some comparative analysis of encounters with classmates and other SL users and describe the trends they observe.

Day 5: Discuss findings in class.

Possible formal writing assignment: Findings may form the basis of an essay, and in that case students may be asked to do more exploring in SL on their own time.

Gender Identity

Along similar lines, SL can be used to explore various kinds of gender identities. Hyper-gendered and hyper-sexualized identities are prevalent in SL, which is in itself a starting point for discussion about gender and society. With this in mind, all students are required to create androgynous avatars, which are likely to provoke interesting reactions and exchanges with other characters. The papers that students produce in the course of this assignment will build on these interactions to describe gender differences and draw conclusions about prevailing attitudes relating to gender. As in the language identity assignment, students will be required to examine their own preconceived notions about gender, as well as those of others in SL.

Ways in which class discussions about gender and SL could be fostered include the following:

- Initiating dialogues about other avatars' appearance (and noting responses).
- Reporting observations about how others construct gender identities.
- Keeping tallies of androgynous or hyper-gendered avatars.

Obviously, gender is a primary concern for all users in SL, which is evident in how they reinvent themselves as avatars. Just as most of us fail to consider our own socialized conceptions of gender, characters in this virtual world represent a series of conscious decisions by users pertaining to gender. Social norms, however, still apply, as evidenced by the relatively conventional gender roles that users tend to assume. This suggests that, as in the real world, the formation of gender identity is a constant negotiation between conformity and individual expression.

In the classroom, this assignment affords students the opportunity to temporarily nullify their gender identities in SL. Approaching online interactions from a gender-neutral stance allows them the freedom to interrogate social norms in a way that real public life rarely permits. In addition, they will observe how seldom SL users actually take advantage of this environment's potential for a radical identity reinvention.

Conclusion

Students in classrooms always carry with them markers of identity that embody social distinctions—dialect, skin color, clothes, gendered features—that compel them to make judgments about the identities of others (as well as their own). Appearance and speech restrict their interactions and impede a thorough consideration of identity. SL is a powerful tool that with a clear set of pedagogical directives can potentially remove this filter of identity.

Furthermore, by allowing users to remake themselves, it provides a unique platform for exploring topics of identity, specifically with respect to language and gender. Thus, SL fosters an environment where real-life markers of identity are mitigated and potentially neutralized, allowing students to focus on issues of language and gender without the restrictions imposed by dialect, clothes, skin color, and other physical features. The SL projects that we envision exploit SL's (usually untapped) capacity for breaking down socially contrived barriers and stripping away the lenses through which students view themselves and others.