

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN
QUEENSLAND

Affordances of Virtual Worlds for
Professional Development
conducted using Action Learning

A Dissertation submitted by

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Abstract

In times of rapid change, lifelong learning is essential. Teachers are no exception to this. Organized professional development has been a traditional pathway for teachers to gain access to new knowledge and skills. Regrettably a lot of value of professional development is not realized when learning is not put into practice. Pfeffer and Sutton refer to this as the 'knowing-doing gap' (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999). There has been a shift in emphasis from being the recipient of professional development organized by others to the need for lifelong learners to be responsible for their own professional learning. One approach that addresses the knowing-doing gap whilst simultaneously developing skills for professional learning is Reg Revans' strategy called Action Learning in which learners apply what they are learning to real workplace challenges during the learning process. Using Action Learning in an online mode could increase access to this successful strategy for eliminating the knowing-doing gap.

Transactional distance theory suggests that traditional distance learning methods may not effectively support the type of dialogue typical during the social reflection process that happens in the Learning Set during Action Learning. Virtual Worlds are an emerging technology that provides a highly immersive, online learning environment. This study identified the social and technical affordances of a 3D virtual world, Second Life®, for conducting Action Learning. Bannan-Ritland's Integrative Learning Design Framework (Bannan-Ritland, 2003), a participatory Design Based Research methodology, was used to design and implement two iterations of a three month Action Learning Program in a purpose built environment in the 3D virtual world of Second Life®,. A total of thirty-two participants successfully completed the program using the custom made 3D environment.

The study identified the social and technical affordances of the 3D virtual world to provide a learning environment suitable for Action Learning. High levels of satisfaction with the Action Learning Programs and high retention rates indicated that Action Learning could be conducted successfully in Second Life®, High social presence measured on two scales indicated that transactional distance was low for the dialogue element vital for effective Learning Set Meetings. The study identified that the three key barriers to participation in virtual worlds based Action Learning were technical challenges created by access requirements and an unfamiliar interface and busy lives that compete for time to attend any kind of professional development.

Certification of Dissertation

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

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Marbles Tokyo

Poinky Malaprop
Biran Gould
Cynibal Corleone
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