

VirtualQuests: Dialogic Language Learning with 3D Virtual Worlds

Howard Vickers
Avatar Languages

Abstract. The incorporation of 3D virtual worlds into WebQuests offers a more exploratory approach to language learning, where the learner engages in social, immersive and creative activities as part of the quest's research. This model for experiential learning leads the teacher to play a facilitator role and to focus more on responding to students' needs, rather than preemptively teaching. Dogme language teaching, with its focus on dialogic learning and emergent pedagogy, offers guidance in drawing on virtual world experiences for WebQuest-based language classes.

Keywords. 3D, dialogic learning, Dogme language teaching, LanguageQuest, Second Life, virtual worlds, VirtualQuest.

1. Introduction

The WebQuest model offers an inquiry based learning approach where much of the research takes place online (Dodge 1997). As such, WebQuests are a task-based method where learners are guided through the use of the web to discover and explore a topic. LanguageQuests adopt this model to more specifically reflect the needs of language learners. This article explores how the LanguageQuest model can be further adapted to take advantage of the exploratory and experiential learning opportunities available in virtual worlds.

The incorporation of 3D virtual worlds into inquiry based learning models changes the nature of the learning experiences and necessitates a less structured style of teaching than normally used with task-based or quest-based learning activities. Dialogic approaches to language teaching, such as Dogme, are especially relevant for helping teachers to draw upon virtual world experiences for the language learning opportunities that emerge.

2. Just add 3D

Virtual worlds are immersive and social environments where learners can visit relevant locations online and meet with others for real-time (voice or text) conversations. Virtual worlds therefore add a very different quality to online research; whereas the 2D web is rich in (text, audio, image and video-based) content, the 3D web adds a sense of location and real-time social interaction.

Virtual worlds such as Second Life have themed areas, which are frequented by many visitors. Locations may be replicas of real life places (London's Chelsea, Moscow's Red Square, Barcelona's Plaza Real and central Paris, to name a few), areas with specific themes (space museum, shopping malls, political campaigns) or areas with a fantasy or imaginary design. A visit to Moscow's Red Square, for example, allows learners to experience moving around the Kremlin, St Basil's Cathedral and the GUM department store, in a way not possible even with panoramic photos, let alone simple 2D images. Visiting Red Square in Second Life is also a social experience because it is frequented by Russians and so offers opportunities to meet and talk with them. The combination of conversations with a specific population (eg Russians) in a relevant context (eg Red Square) allows for learning situated in an immersive and social context.

These virtual world explorations can also be documented by the student as part of the

quest's output: the text-based conversations can be copied, the voice and movement can be recorded as video, and screen-shots can be taken to gain static images. Research therefore changes from the consumption of text, audio and video, to include the actual production and sharing of this media.

3. VirtualQuests and learning experiences

The incorporation of 3D virtual worlds not only adds another dimension to the quest, but also changes the nature of the learning experience. Virtual worlds allow for a much more experiential learning process, where the specific outcomes are less well predicted before the activities and where the learners themselves shape, and indeed determine, the activities through which they learn. Virtual worlds offer three main types of learning experience: social experiences, immersive experiences and creative activities. Meeting others in a 3D virtual world is clearly a social experience where the learner interacts with others to discuss or jointly explore their surroundings.

3D virtual worlds also offer an immersiveness that is more easily and flexibly achieved than is possible in the physical world. Learners can visit replicas of real places in Second Life or become immersed in a fantasy world – again, perhaps in Second Life or in a game-like world such as Entropia. These immersive experiences can be reflected upon by the student and discussed with others (either while immersed or later in a conventional classroom situation).

Second Life allows considerable scope to modify one's (avatar's) appearance and the virtual environment. As such, students can explore and research through the creation of virtual objects, such as clothing, buildings or landscapes. Virtual worlds also allow students the freedom to explore their own identities and to take on new ones. Immersion can therefore be much more than the immersion in a new context, but also the adoption of different roles for oneself and representations of oneself within the new context. Virtual worlds offer exploration opportunities both internal and external to the learner, which in turn offer conversation and language learning opportunities.

4. Simulations and the pedagogical foundations of VirtualQuests

In many ways VirtualQuests are similar to simulations and share similar pedagogical foundations. Simulations are problem driven activities within a realistic setting (Hyland 1993) and have two key characteristics: participants have functional roles (eg survivor, judge or politician) and they are given a problem to solve in their role (Jones 1995). Simulation is, then, at first glance the same as role play. Yet, significant differences include the lack of scripted characters for the players (everyone plays themselves) and the focus is on communicative output rather than the practice of specific forms. Simulations benefit language learners because they improve both fluency and the integration of skills through “whole-task practice” (Littlewood 1981 cited in Hyland 1993); they also increase active participation in a low risk situation (Hyland 1993), where students are under less pressure to achieve accuracy.

VirtualQuests differ from simulations because both the set-up and control of the process lie very much with the student. VirtualQuests therefore offer the student greater autonomy in the design stage, the research activities, and the final output. However, VirtualQuests and simulations share a similar focus on communicative performance (in preference to a focus on form) and they both offer low stress contexts for language use. Indeed both simulations and VirtualQuests offer a realism that is difficult to obtain in a conventional classroom; in the case

of simulations, they have been so engaging that the "feeling of representivity fades" for the participants in what for them has become a new reality (Crookall & Oxford 1990 cited in Davis 1996).

5. Autonomy, relevance and motivation

VirtualQuests offer the learner considerable autonomy throughout the quest, from the initial planning to the project outputs; learners are thus able to choose the topic, the research approach and the nature of the project outputs. Keller's motivation model considers four qualities that lead to increased motivation: the student's interest in the topic and activities; the relevance to the student's life; the expectation of success and the satisfaction in the outcome (Keller cited in Liuolienė & Metiūnienė 2006). The autonomous nature of VirtualQuests takes the student closer to meeting these conditions, because the students are able to make choices to ensure that they are interested in the subject matter and the process and to make sure that the quest is relevant to their lives; their control over the project also ensures that it is of an appropriate level so that they can take satisfaction in its successful completion.

Simulations have been found to increase participation because the format lowers the risk of making mistakes through providing a safe environment (where communication is prioritized over accuracy). VirtualQuests also offer low-anxiety situations, where students may carry out research within a virtual world without peer or teacher assessment in the moment. Likewise the reality of virtual world interactions may foster the increased engagement apparent in simulations, which is due to the sense of reality students feel; although virtual worlds present learners with an environment that is essentially fictitious (even if a replica of a real-life location), the social interactions with other users of the virtual world are real.

6. Emergent pedagogies, dialogic learning and Dogme

Social interactions in virtual worlds clearly offer learners informal routes to socially constructed learning. However these virtual world experiences can also be drawn upon in more formal class-based learning and Dogme language teaching offers some guidance in this. Dogme language teaching is a communicative approach that encourages the teacher to focus on conversational communication among learners rather than using published teaching materials as the lesson's content (Thornbury 2000). The approach considers that learning opportunities naturally arise in conversations according to the needs and interests of the students. As such, the teacher responds (to the learners' needs) rather than preemptively teaching according to a set syllabus (Meddings & Thornbury 2009). Dogme draws upon dialogic learning through its centering of the lesson and its content in the conversation between students and with the teacher. Indeed, Dogme considers teaching itself as a conversation in similar terms to Sharp and Gallimore, who see teaching as conversing and conversing as teaching (Meddings & Thornbury 2009). Conversations create space and content for language learning opportunities to emerge according to the immediate needs of the learners. As such, Dogme teaching does not seek to plan in advance which particular skills, lexis or grammar are to be taught; instead these areas of teaching are 'uncovered' through the conversation. Since the conversation is the content for the classes, there is limited need for external materials (especially in the form of textbooks) to be brought into the lesson. Dogme places considerable emphasis on the relevance of lesson content to students' lives in order to promote greater motivation for language learning. The central role of the students' own voices within the lessons keeps the conversation relevant to their needs and wishes; from the topic of

conversation, to the nature of the language (vocabulary, structures, situational phrases) being learned.

7. Dogme and VirtualQuests

Dogme language teaching therefore offers teachers guidance on how to incorporate virtual world experiences into the language learning process. As conversation is the learning medium (rather than externally produced materials or textbooks), it provides a structure for drawing upon learners' experiences, impressions and opinions to generate language learning opportunities. Dogme is particularly relevant for language learning with web 2.0 tools. Web 2.0 technologies (such as blogs, wikis, Wikipedia, Google Wave, twitter and of course virtual worlds) firmly place the user at the center of the online experience. As such web 2.0 learners are able to participate in discussions online, connect with others worldwide and create (rather than just consume) public information. Precisely because Dogme focuses on student created content, the combination of conversation and relevant content as the medium for learning and the student's specific and immediate needs, it is very well suited to 2.0 language learning. Language learning with virtual worlds, such as when used in a VirtualQuest, are a more immediate and experiential extension of learning with other web 2.0 applications.

8. VirtualQuests vis-à-vis LanguageQuests

VirtualQuests and LanguageQuests are certainly not mutually exclusive approaches to the WebQuest model in language education. Indeed, a VirtualQuest quest is most likely merely an aspect of a broader LanguageQuest project. However, the addition of 3D virtual worlds into the research mix, considerably changes the nature of research being carried out. Likewise the teaching style changes to accommodate the different range of language learning activities. The table below sets out how the aims, design and outputs of a VirtualQuest and LanguageQuest can be quite different. This in turn has implications for the teacher's role as discussed below. However, both LanguageQuests and VirtualQuests share a communicative, student-focused and, above all, student-defined approach to language learning.

Table 1. Comparison of web-based course, LanguageQuest and VirtualQuest.

	Web-based Course	LanguageQuest	VirtualQuest
Overview	Online course	WebQuest adapted to suit needs of language learners	Exploratory WebQuest incorporating 3D virtual worlds
Objectives	Learning / practising language items (e.g. past tense) or functions (introducing oneself) in mind.	Create a product (report, video, play, exhibition, holiday plan).	Create content for future learning and promote conversation for language emergence opportunities.
Task types	Closed tasks with limited solutions.	Open tasks with variety of feasible and acceptable solutions.	Student-defined tasks whose solutions are seen as opportunities for further learning.

Results	Correct / Incorrect.	Products are evaluated on the basis of criteria: various results are acceptable.	Products are not necessarily evaluated, but reflected upon by the student with the teacher's guidance.
Resources	All resources provided by designer.	Initial resources provided as starting points.	Resources can be suggested by teacher; student explores environments and discovers resources.
Activities	Tasks often designed for specifically provided materials.	Task control mostly through the product specifications.	Little control of tasks; tasks lead to the project output, which can become content for future lessons.

Adapted from Koenraad & Westhoff, 2003

9. Extending the learning phases and the changing role of the teacher

Dogme language teaching extends the language learning phases of a LanguageQuest, because students are encouraged to create the content (in effect the materials) for subsequent lessons: the LanguageQuest output (project work by the student in the form of text, video and/or audio), can be continued in a Dogme lesson as the starting point for future lessons. The Dogme dialogic approach draws on the quest outcomes to explore the language skill issues that have arisen. In this sense, the quest product is merely an intermediary product, or just part of the lesson process.

Dogme can increase the student's participation in their own learning, because they are involved with the quest planning and preparation. Since virtual worlds are exploratory experiences, it is the student who decides where to go and who to speak with. The planning phase of the quest is therefore another communicative learning opportunity for the learner.

10. Learning phases of LanguageQuests and VirtualQuests

The learning phase in a Dogme approach is also different in nature, because Dogme draws on emergent pedagogies, where the learner's inherent learning capacities are activated so that language skills will emerge (internally) rather than be acquired (externally). As such, language learning affordances, or opportunities, arise from the 'conversation' or lesson content; this is quite different from the teacher preemptively teaching an aspect of language (lexis, grammar, etc), as is conventionally the case. The teacher's role becomes more focused on facilitating these learning opportunities through responding to the student's communicative needs throughout the lesson (Meddings & Thornbury 2009). In terms of focusing on form, the teacher will continue to draw the student's attention to linguistic elements, but only as they arise incidentally in lessons (Long 1991 cited in Meddings & Thornbury 2009).

Table 2. Comparison of learning phases in both a LanguageQuest and a VirtualQuest.

LanguageQuest	VirtualQuest
Conception (educator)	Conception (educator)
Quest design (educator)	Quest planning process (learner)
Preliminary quest planning (learner)	
Research and production (learner)	Research and production (learner)
Product evaluation (educator)	Product as content for subsequent lessons (learner)
Reflection (learner)	Reflection and dialogue for emergence (learner)

11. Flexible approaches to virtual worlds

The VirtualQuest has thus far been presented as a component in a logically sequenced project, whereby the student plans activities (including virtual world based research) with a specific output (eg a report or presentation) in mind. However, informal virtual world experiences also lend themselves to incorporation in other ways. Virtual world activities that were not intended as research can subsequently be reflected upon and included in a quest-like project.

Pierre Moussy, a student at Avatar Languages, drew upon his previous interactions in Second Life when preparing for a conference presentation, in which he discussed his experience using the 3D virtual world for informal language practice. In this case his virtual world experiences were included in the presentation project only retrospectively. Furthermore the output of his work was a presentation given within Second Life at the annual SLanguages 2009 conference on virtual world language learning. His presentation is available at <http://www.slanguages.net/archive.php>.

This article presents the use of virtual worlds at the research phase of a project with a clear WebQuest format (design, research, and output). However, as the above example shows, virtual worlds offer opportunities for informal learning and practice that can be included at other phases, including the final presentation within a virtual world itself.

12. Conclusions

VirtualQuests offer opportunities to draw upon the communicative and motivational benefits of simulations, within the context of a LanguageQuest project. VirtualQuests naturally focus on dialogic learning through the creation of a low-risk, yet realistic, environment for communicative language work. There is also considerable flexibility in terms of when and how the virtual world experiences are incorporated into a quest project. However, these same opportunities also require certain responsibilities on the part of both the student and the teacher: greater learner autonomy inevitably leads to increased responsibility for one's own learning; that similarly requires the teacher to enable a more autonomous learning process. In this way, the role of the teacher becomes increasingly that of facilitating a reflective and exploratory conversation, which leads to language learning opportunities. Dogme's focus on the role of conversation as content and its foundations in emergent pedagogies, places it well to offer teachers some guidance in this.

References

- Davis, R. S. 1996. "Simulations: A Tool for Testing 'Virtual Reality' in the Language Classroom". *JALT '95: Curriculum and Evaluation*. Tokyo: Japan Association for Language Teaching. <http://www.esl-lab.com/research/simul.htm>
- Dodge, B. 1997. *Some Thoughts About WebQuests*.
http://webquest.sdsu.edu/about_webquests.html
- Hyland, K. 1993. "Language Learning Simulations: A Practical Guide". *English Teaching Forum* 31 (4). <http://eca.state.gov/forum/vols/vol31/no4/p16.htm>
- Jones, K. 1995. *Simulations: a Handbook for Teachers and Trainers*. London: Kogan Page.
- Koenraad, A. and G. Westhoff. 2003. "Can you tell a LanguageQuest when you see one? Design criteria for TalenQuests." *EUROCALL 2003*. Limerick, Ireland.
<http://www.koenraad.info/publications>
- Liuliene, A. and R. Metiūnienė. 2006. "Second Language Learning Motivation" *Santalka. Filologija. Edukologija* 14 (2).
http://www.vgtu.lt/upload/filosof_zurn/a_liuliene_metiuniene_filologija_nr2.pdf
- Meddings, L. and S. Thornbury. 2009. *Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching*, London: Delta
- Thornbury, S. 2000. "A Dogma for EFL". *IATEFL Issues* 153 (2).
<http://www.thornburyscott.com/assets/dogma.pdf>
- Vickers, H. 2009. "Dogme 2.0: What 'Teaching 2.0' Can Learn from Dogme ELT". *Avatar Languages Blog*. <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/blog/dogme-elt-web20-dogme20>.