The Euroversity Good Practice Framework (EGPF) and its application to minority languages and elder learners

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Abstract. The Euroversity Network project (2011-2014) has built a Good Practice Framework (GPF) that functions as a heuristic for course and activity designers wishing to develop courses and other materials for use in a range of virtual worlds. This framework has been tested with a number of courses during the running of the project and the aim is that it will be useful for new designers as a starting point for their own ideas development. The GPF is still open for adjustment and negotiation and this paper shows how two new case studies that were not the direct focus of the project, minority languages and elder learners, help to expose some of the framework's weaknesses, but also many of its strengths. These case studies illustrate that a tool like the GPF can provide an effective mediating function for a variety of courses and other activity in virtual worlds.

Keywords: course development, good practice framework, virtual worlds, minority languages, teaching older learners.

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1. Introduction

The Euroversity Network project (2011-2014) has aspirations to bring together practitioners of any discipline to develop and run educational courses and activities in virtual spaces, e.g. Open Sim, Second Life, Minecraft, etc. (Molka-Danielsen, Mundy, Hadjitassou, & Stefanelli, 2012). The project, however, does not exclude the use of non-3D tools like desktop video conferencing, or more conventional Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). The expectation is that these tools will be used in combination to support each other; exploiting their particular affordances (Conole & Dyke, 2004). At the core of the project is an exploration of the process of course design and development. This network project builds on the outcomes of previous European language projects like NIFLAR and AVALON and reaches forward to other ones like CAMELOT and TILA.

In the initial stages, the Euroversity Network project used case studies from the earlier projects to build a draft GPF for course design in virtual worlds; this draft framework was then tested with the development of new courses which were then also trialled. The draft framework was finally adapted and updated following the evaluation received from running these new courses. Further case studies were then based on these newly tried courses. The case studies and the framework can be found on the Euroversity wiki[7].

1.1. Evaluation and feedback

The evaluation and feedback were based on data collected from running a number of courses developed taking the GPF as a reference across a range of disciplines, including languages, economics, sciences, anthropology and game design. Feedback was collected via questionnaires that were distributed both to the course instructors and the students. Interviews were also conducted with a number of instructors. A full analysis of the data is ongoing.

Following on from this initial trial period, we now offer two additional areas that have considered the use of the framework, since its initial drafting and revision. These are (1) minority languages and (2) the recognition of the affordances and constraints that virtual worlds offer for the teaching of such languages. The second area of application is that of age and disability. This initial paper will focus on a brief summary of the explorations of these course designers.

7. http://euroversity.pbworks.com/w/page/52279279/Euroversity

2. Two case studies

2.1. Indigenous and minority languages in virtual 3D learning spaces

Endangered indigenous languages, such as North Sámi, and minority languages such as Basque, are potential beneficiaries of online teaching (Outakoski, 2014). This is due to the fact that the teaching of these languages often involves smaller student groups, who can be widely distributed, low speaker density communities, and language stigma of various kinds. However, the presence of lesser-spoken language communities and their practitioners in virtual worlds is negligible.

In the context of Euroversity, an exploratory study was carried out in order to find out whether (and how) teachers of Basque do use virtual environments, particularly 3D virtual worlds, in their teaching and what their perceptions are about using virtual environments in education. A questionnaire was sent to Basque schools, Basque institutions, European universities where Basque is being taught, and Basque cultural institutions around the world. In the end, 38 teachers of Basque completed the survey. The results show that most teachers (85%) were not familiar with 3D virtual worlds at all; only two teachers reported to sometimes use Second Life in their teaching but they offered no further information about what they did and how they used Second Life. As for the use of other virtual environments, 36% of the teachers reported to use Moodle (very) frequently in their courses, and 30% use Facebook (very) frequently; however, the most popular digital application was YouTube: 41.7% of teachers reported to use it. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure teachers' views on the relevance of integrating virtual environments in education. As can be seen in Table 1, teachers were positive about the integration of virtual environments in their teaching and would like to know more about the pedagogical affordances these virtual environments offer to enrich the teaching of Basque. The GPF together with (virtual) training sessions might be a very good start for these teachers to develop their pedagogical skills, yet the fact that the GPF is only available in English might constitute a big problem for most of them.

While the Euroversity GPF (EGPF) is of potential value in course design for indigenous and minority languages, one immediate barrier is the choice of English as the single common language of the framework. This is an infrastructural obstacle in the same way as would be the access to modern computers with updated graphic cards, fast Internet connection and adequate support (both pedagogical and technical). These problems cease to be an issue if human and financial resources are invested both in a multilingual framework and to local or regional support of

the educational programs that require the use of virtual worlds in education. If the infrastructural problems are overcome, then the framework itself will be the engine for developing new pedagogical models and solutions for teaching and learning in virtual environments.

Table 1. Teachers of Basque (*N*=36) about the relevance of teaching in virtual worlds. 5 point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree / 5: strongly agree)

Items	Mean	SD
Teaching in virtual worlds is a hot topic.	4	0.8
I am interested and would like to know more about teaching in virtual worlds.	4.2	0.7
I think teaching in virtual worlds can enhance teaching different aspects of Basque.	4.1	0.8
I would like more information about the educational possibilities of the integration of virtual worlds in language teaching.	4.2	0.8
I would like to collaborate with others in developing a curriculum for the teaching of Basque in virtual worlds.	3.4	1.1
It is important to reach students who cannot attend regular classes. In this sense virtual worlds may facilitate access to education.	4.3	0.7
Virtual environments for teaching seem interesting but I think that integration is difficult because of the technical aspect.	3.3	1.2

If we now consider the Sámi and the Basque cases in particular, it seems unlikely that the infrastructural obstacles would be the only reason why these groups are so imperceptible in virtual educational environments in general. And indeed, in both cases some of the problems besides infrastructure have to do with users' lack of time (work overload), adequate technical skills or knowledge of the different 3D teaching environments, or with the rigidity of the teaching programs (course design and curriculum). Such structural challenges ask more from the educational system and are sometimes harder to tackle than the infrastructural challenges.

Indigenous contexts are also often bound to a certain 'place' (Kuokkanen, 2009, p. 95; McCarty, Nicholas, & Wyman, 2012), such as traditions, ideologies, identities and locations that determine where one belongs. Language and traditional knowledge are also often seen as collective heritage that are held sacred and are in need of protection. When we view the potential that the new, versatile and open virtual learning spaces offer to learners and teachers against the perception of accepted knowledge transfer within an indigenous community, then it seems that

the openness and novelty of the learning space, although being its best assets, are also at the same time some of the main reasons why indigenous communities might remain reluctant to establish educational presence in virtual environments.

In the Basque case, virtual educational environments might rather be seen as offering yet another "expanded dimensio[n] for the creation and re-creation of ethnicity and carr[y] the potential to unite virtually what is impossible to unite physically" (Totoricaguena, 2003, p. 177). And although the educational sector and practitioners are still only learning about the potential of virtual learning spaces, the "community is expanding into virtual reality" (Totoricaguena, 2003, p. 178). For example, the Basque Cultural Institute has plans of creating a culture centre, Artean (EKE-ICB), in Second Life. It is therefore rather the structural than the epistemological reasons that are behind the invisibility of Basque educators and learners in virtual environments.

We find that the obstacles experienced by users of computer assisted learning models such as infrastructure or lack of information can, to some extent, be overcome and the EGPF has been helpful here. On the other hand, obstacles experienced by, for instance, an indigenous learning community may involve so many compounding factors independent from the educational context that providing a course design or examples of good practice is not enough to attract the community to the virtual learning environment.

2.2. Designing a social communicative space for learning for the elderly in virtual worlds

This case study explores the opportunities and challenges of designing a virtual social communicative space for (language) learning for the target group of elderly learners. Although in general, society identifies "elderly" as age 65 and older, there is a great range of abilities and (physical and cognitive) limitations within this age group (Merriam, 2001) that would make categorisation by age alone meaningless. Hence, to arrive at useful recommendations to make VLEs more accessible for elderly learners, the factors need to be identified that distinguish sub-groups in this population segment by types of impairments.

On the elderly use of ICT in general (PC, Internet, mobile devices), the authors report research showing that it has increased considerably over the last six years. The motivation for the use of virtual technologies for the elderly appears to be as diverse as for any group in society, as some of the findings show: reduction of loneliness (Sawyerr & Pinkwart, 2011), situated learning and gaining experiences

in a safe place (Falconer, 2014), and compensation of limited mobility in the physical world (Eliot, Rost, & Singh, 2013).

To define design considerations particularly for the elderly population segment, data were collected through an interview with A. Krueger, founder of Virtual Ability Inc. and the Virtual Ability Island (VA) in Second Life was explored. The authors undertook two tours on VA. In one guided tour, Krueger (2013) pointed out specific (features of) builds, the related application of universal design principles, as suggested by Extension, America's Research-based Learning Network (2013), and the theory of andragogy. The second tour, of a more exploratory nature, led by Professor Waller, an expert in the field of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), was also recorded.

Relating the analysis of these experiences and observations to the Euroversity GPF, the authors present a number of questions that should be asked and answered by module designers to define considerations for a Target Group (TG) of elderly population. The GPF-related topics include aims/objectives, technical issues and support, interaction, risks and world related technical issues and post module evaluation.

Drawing from the suggested answers to these questions, several abilities and limitations factors are identified that can influence the preferred use of an interface (the interaction with the Second Life browser in this case). For example, for impaired vision ability, the availability of recorded sound clips and snap-to signboards that fill the screen are suggested.

3. Conclusions

This paper has shown that the Good Practice Framework has significant values for the design and development of various kinds of courses and activities in virtual worlds. The case studies discussed here show that there are still issues with the framework when it moves into new realms, but that in both cases there are positive attributes that make the EGPF of value to a broad community of materials developers. While the Euroversity Network project itself did not focus specifically on language learning, it can be seen that there are definite reasons to make use of it for the design of language courses and other related activities.

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