VIRTUAL SITUATED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

AUTHENTIC LEARNING IN A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

© Dr Sandra Jones
Sandra.jones@rmit.edu.au

© Dr Sandra Jones 2008
1. WHAT ARE VIRTUAL SITUATED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS?

Virtual Situated Learning Environments (VSLEs) are VIRTUAL environments (work-places, community-spaces, public or private organisations) created digitally to present real-life learning opportunities for participants.

VSLEs enable participants to be SITUATED in an environment and thus create learning opportunities that are authentic, similar to what is often described as a 'cognitive apprenticeship'.
VSLEs provide a **REAL-WORLD CONTEXT** in which participants engage in **AUTHENTIC** learning activities tasks related to industry and professional practice.

VLSEs provide a Learning context built on **ADULT LEARNING** principles epitomised by the Kolb Learning Cycle. Participants first engage in **concrete experience** (through role-play, simulation, scenario or problem-based challenges), then use **reflection** and **observation** to build **concepts** and **ideas** related to the experience that are then **tested** through further concrete experiences.

**LEARNING CYCLE**

Based on Kolb

© Dr Sandra Jones 2008
VSLEs are designed on a collaborative LEARNER-CENTRED concept in which participants engage in interactions that facilitate the construction of knowledge through reflection and analysis in order to adapt their behaviour to real-life challenges.

Based on Laurillard (1994) Student Centered Model
2. LEARNING ADVANTAGES OF VSLE’s

I) VSLEs provide a **COMMON** context in which participants are immersed in real situations that enable them to find meaning and purpose in their learning:

“I found the whole experience quite engrossing and it enabled me to rapidly immerse myself in the scenario.”

II) VSLEs provide the opportunity to **NORMALISE** the range of experience of participants and thus enable **SHARING** and **NETWORKING** of knowledge and experience:

“Discussion could be run cross culturally from anywhere around the world. I would be interested to be involved in a similar knowledge sharing activity with people whom I don’t know and are from different cultures.”

*Example Delicate Dining Organisational structure providing a common context:*

© Dr Sandra Jones 2008
III) VSLEs provide **SAFE** and **SECURE** learning environments protected from exposure to potential predators engaging in adverse and illegal behaviour\(^1\).

IV) VLSEs present opportunities for participants to engage in, and experiment with, learning activities in controlled conditions that create **SAFE-FAIL**\(^2\) learning environments without fear of adverse consequences.

> "on-line negotiating environment created opportunities to think, review and prepare responses before we had to respond and thus to gain confidence."

V) VSLEs provide participants with **CONSISTENCY** of learning experience:

> "Having the collaborative learning networks made up of a combination of cross-disciplinary participants allowed us to blend and to learn from other people we may not have had the chance to learn from."

> "communicating on-line became addictive and I found myself leaving the website on all day and kept constantly checking responses."

---

\(^1\) As a contrast to some of the ‘Second-Life’ applications in which Avatars can engage in unlawful activity

\(^2\) A Safe-Fail environment is one in which it is ‘safe’ for participants to ‘fail’ as this is recognised as a learning/innovative environment

© Dr Sandra Jones 2008
VI) VSLEs provide opportunities for participants to **experiment** with different responses to the challenges of the increasingly complicated global world

"has shown me the value of using this method on myself and my colleagues to explore and find answers to business problems and opportunities."

VII) VSLEs assist participants to recognise the existence of multiple worldviews (paradigms) and the associated different knowings.

"participants bought with them something of themselves, their tacit knowledge, and together we gained many perspectives instead of the limited number each of us or a group much smaller may be able to gain."

VIII) VSLEs help participants to recognise **explicit** and **tacit** knowledge and the value of **social networks** in sharing knowledge (SECI model):

© Dr Sandra Jones 2008
IX) VSLEs develop graduate attributes into EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS:

a) enabling theory and practice to be combined through PLANNING AND ORGANIZING skills and encouraging INNOVATION:

“The overall course to date has achieved what I hoped to gain and more, in that the practical aspects mixed with the theoretical teaching provided for active learning and most importantly successful application in the workplace.”

“The interactive nature of the course through the various role-plays encourages a deeper type of learning than that obtained through didactic teaching alone”

b) developing GENERIC CAPABILITIES across the spectrum from communication, problem solving, negotiation and conflict resolution
c) developing **EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE** (EQ), both self-management and teamwork

> "increased my self-awareness and challenged my thoughts on a lot of issues. I have gained different perspectives and a heightened awareness of issues"


d) identifying the benefits of engaging in **LIFE-LONG** learning that is not constrained by time, geography, or age.

> "I have found some aspects ... more challenging than others. I have always been very comfortable when it comes to theory. Read it, analyse it, absorb it, compare and contrast it. The course demands a further challenge and commitment to apply the learning. I have found this difficult at times...but I know that sooner or later I will 'get it' and benefit from the experience"


e) Facilitating participant skills in the use of **TECHNOLOGY**;

> "participation had the potential to be quite infectious if time and access were unbounded"


f) enabling participants to explore future skills needs in **INTER-DISCIPLINARY** approaches to business problems opportunities and the development of new cognitive maps of skill requirements.
3. LEARNING ACTIVITIES RELEVANT FOR VSLEs

I) **PRINCIPLES**: VSLEs should be designed with:

a) ill-defined real-life challenges that require participants to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity

> “...each of us began to construct our own reality by assuming active parts....”

b) complex tasks to be investigated over a sustained period of time

> “....the extent of activity on-line over the week was staggering....”

c) different perspectives, using a variety of resources and roles

> “I was able to see the contradictory views of my colleagues and their justification of them. This led me to further understand the ethical codes which they adhered to...”

d) requirement to reflect on beliefs and values

> “...the continuous in-flow of thought-provoking points encouraged more critiques, comments and discussion that led to more critiques and counter critiques.”

e) opportunities to collaborate

> “....sharing between people is a key factor to make knowledge flow and growth.”

f) need to identify competing solutions and diversity of outcomes

> “[the VSLE]..negated positional advantage that can come from venue, stature, theatrical antics, seating arrangements, hierarchical structures and historical scenarios.”

© Dr Sandra Jones 2008
II) **ISSUES** that can form the basis of on-line learning activities cover a broad spectrum from Simple (Known); Complicated (Knowable), Complex (Knowable in retrospect); Chaotic (Unknowable) (Snowden, 2003):

III) On-line Group **LEARNING ACTIVITIES** associated with VSLEs and related **SKILLS** that can be developed include (Template 1) include:

**LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

- Discussion
- Role play
- Simulation
- Problem-based (Scenario-based) activities
- Piloting/testing prototype structures or start-ups

© Dr Sandra Jones 2008
SKILLS:

- Communication
- Problem solving - decision making
- Negotiation and conflict resolution
- Teamwork

IV) PARTICIPATION in LEARNING ACTIVITIES (Template 2)

associated with VSLEs can be:

- Individual, team or community (Community of Practice/Interest - CoP)
- Anonymous or identifiable
- Self selected or appointed

Participations can be designed according to particular:

- behaviours
- personalities
- people
- characters
- situations
- roles
- theoretical concepts

V) ACTIVITIES can be timetabled for short or long periods of engagement

- Across time-zones
- Conveniently integrated with work/travel commitments
- Emergent and responding to issues in the media, real-world changes