

## THE ROLE OF PLACE IN CREATING A LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) are commonly built on a framework that combines two key elements: computer technology and education. The majority of VLEs tend to fall into one of two categories: management learning or learner-centred. Management learning systems are widely used in higher and further education institutes and many are commercially produced and available ready to use "out of the box", such as WebCT (Milligan, 1999). Simpson stated that these systems may empower academics technically. 'But making resources available electronically does not constitute learning for the student, nor does it empower the academic pedagogically' (Simpson, 2000).

In this paper we highlight the role of place in creating a learning experience in a VLE and its relevance to current learning theories. We present a design model for guiding the development of learner-centred VLEs that shows how place and design can combine with learning theories and technology. This model is based on constructivist views of learning and supports the four key processes fundamental to a constructivist learning environment: context, construction, collaboration and conversation (Duffy and Cunningham, 1996. Jonassen, 1994).

The development of place as the core of a VLE can influence the development of learning materials and student collaboration to form a more focused learning experience. Traditional learning has focussed on the distribution of learning materials such as texts and course notes, the presentation of lectures, followed by assignments and examinations. While many of these approaches have been transferred to virtual environments, the development of places for learning is not as well developed. Examples of places as learning environments are: Diversity University, Tappedin, and Virtual Campus. Many of these environments focus on the development of rooms and tools for communicating while learning. They do not yet facilitate the learner-centred approach that allows the learner to construct external representations of their knowledge. In this paper, we draw on our experience in developing a virtual campus (Maher, 1999) and virtual design studios (Maher, Simoff, and Cicognani, 2000) to demonstrate how place and design can be the basis for VLEs.

### References

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