Buckling down: Initiating an EFL reading circle in a casual online learning group

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Forum

*Despite increasing interest in online virtual worlds as possible sites for language teaching and learning, there is little information on education in existing non-profit **EFL** communities. This paper introduces Cypris Chat, a casual online **EFL** learning group in Second Life (**SL**). It follows several Cypris members as they attend a special, more traditional reading circle class online, and observes how they adapt to their new roles in that class. Through research journals, field notes, video recording and interviews with all participants, the author provides a constructivist perspective on how different participants interpreted and reacted to this shift in roles and class structure and examines course feedback. Results suggest presumptions that participants in casual, social, self-directed online communities somehow lack academic self-discipline are ill-founded. They also illustrate the benefits of qualitative methodology in studies of virtual world communities.*

Alternative education in virtual worlds

The gradual spread of affordable Internet access worldwide has opened up a multitude of new venues for second language learners. Although certification of language ability remains the domain of accredited, profit-based institutions, learners wishing to improve their language independent of institutional recognition are now privy to free language learning websites, streaming radio and video and authentic interaction with native speakers through both synchronous and asynchronous chat and webcams (Felix and Askew, 1996). Since the early 2000s, autonomous learners have also

had access to "massively multiplayer online role-playing games" (**MMORPG**s) like World of Warcraft (Ballou, 2009) as well as "multi-user virtual environments" (**MUVE**s) like Second Life which capitalize on the 3D graphical environments of online games, but replace game-play with social networking tools and the ability to create unique "in-world" (virtual) content (Peachey, et al., 2010); this is analogous to the way that text-based online games, "multi-user domains/dungeons" (**MUD**s), developed into more open-ended, customizable and education-friendly chat-oriented worlds (**MOO**s) in the early 90s (Bartle 2003). It is relatively indisputable that virtual worlds have become a significant part of our technological infrastructure (Kingsley & Wankel, 2009).

However, despite the notion that the Internet is, at the very least, leading us into a world where "thirty desk-based kids with all eyes up front on the teacher will not be the model of schooling and learning" (Luke, 2000, p. 81), online language education in general, and language education in virtual worlds in particular has been mainly appropriated as a supplementary resource to traditional university classes or as an entrepreneurial opportunity to bring the private language school online (Erard, 2007). Moreover, despite initial enthusiasm by educators and entrepreneurs, the use of virtual world learning has as yet to meet with much mainstream approval or financial success.

Granted, universities across the world, including Stanford and Harvard Law School, have created virtual campuses within Linden Labs' Second Life (**SL**) virtual world, the most flexible and inexpensive **MUVE** platform currently available (Kingsley & Wankel, 2009); in the **UK**, there is currently only one higher education institution that does not have an online presence in **SL** (Kirriemuir, 2009). However, despite this massive exodus, virtual university campuses remain largely empty and there is, as Peachey, et al state, "little academic foundation underpinning the design of learning experiences" (p. xxxvi), and a paucity of research on what is actually taking place in these classes. Likewise, private language schools, spurred by initial media reports of the real life (**RL**) money to be made in **SL** (Bennett, 2007), struggle to remain profitable; despite pricing reasonable in comparison with **RL** classes, tuition for language classes in **SL** seems overwhelming compared to the micro-payments used to purchase other **SL** virtual goods and services.

There have been attempts to create alternate educational paradigms in Second Life. The ambitious Schome Park Project of the Open University, for example, was driven by a radical dissatisfaction with current educational models, and a conscious desire to experiment with the Second Life platform (Peachey, et al, 2010; Twining & Footring, 2010; Gillen, 2010). This project, aimed at 13–17 year olds and utilizing a closed *island* in **SL**'s Teen Grid, was dedicated to "enhancing learning, motivation and lifelong learning," and acted as a research laboratory for development of "a new form of educational system designed to overcome the problems associated with current education systems in order to meet the needs of society and individuals in the 21st Century" (Sheehy, et al, 2009). The Schome project demonstrated the benefits of masking individual identity, in that use of an avatar could diminish signifiers of power, status and age (Twining & Footring, 2010, p. 73). However, as a closed experiment under university auspices, it stands more as an exercise in what is possible in the future in real life (**RL**) than a self-sustaining model of education in **SL**.

Cypris Chat: An informal EFL community

The current research focuses on Cypris Chat, a casual language learning community in Second Life. As of 2011, Cypris, sans university sponsorship or student tuition, has become

arguably the most popular English language learning community in Second Life. Classes at all levels are routinely full, and there are volunteer staff and learner-driven events scheduled five days a week. Although research on learner motivation at Cypris is still underway, interviews and field notes of interactions so far suggest that the social, casual nature of Cypris classes and between-class chat and activities are contributing factors to Cypris' popularity, as well as voluntary attendance and the ability for learners to run their own study groups.

A brief explanation of typical classes at Cypris is warranted here. All activities (and indeed even casual interactions) at Cypris take place using headset-based voice chat. Though volunteer instructors have been free to propose any sort of activity or class they like, Cypris officers voted to standardize lessons to some extent in 2009. Lessons are weekly, 2 hour sessions, usually held at the Chat Ring in the Cypris Village *sim,* or virtual neighborhood, in Second Life (Figure 1). There is usually a warm-up activity of some sort, a theme, grammatical or pragmatic point introduced, small group work and, often, a guided travel activity to another SL location in the last half-hour. Lessons are not coordinated between teachers, and content is not assumed to be cumulative. Attendance is not mandatory and classes are not streamed by proficiency (although teachers often inform students beforehand regarding the difficulty level of upcoming classes – beginner, intermediate or advanced). Homework is rarely assigned, as learners vary from week to week. The format has more in common with RL community-based learning networks like the Boston and Seattle Free Schools than with other SL schools like Languagelab (Holt, 1976; Seattle Free School, 2011), and *Professor,*[1] the owner and head instructor of Cypris, continually asserts that it is not a school.

Figure 1. The Cypris Chat Ring

A reading circle in Cypris

How then would students attracted to Cypris for its casual learning atmosphere perform in a more traditional classroom atmosphere? In early 2010, *Professor,* himself a university instructor in Japan in RL, developed an online reading and discussion course as a reward for participation in the group (as measured by a scoring system he had developed with the SL-Moodle bridge application SLOODLE (SLOODLE, n.d.). He had been interested in piloting use of a new textbook in SL, Oxford's Bookworms Club Bronze: Stories for Reading Circle (Furr 2007) in recognition of the efforts of longtime member *Himiko,* who had tried, but failed to generate interest in a reading circle two years previous. This collection of short, graded short stories is designed for groups of six learners who each take responsibility for a unique role in class discussion:

1. Discussion Leader – Asks basic warm up questions and keeps the conversation moving during lulls.
2. Summarizer – Summarizes the story.
3. Connector – Makes connections to the learners' real lives.
4. Word Master – Chooses five words that are important to the story.
5. Passage Person – Chooses three passages to discuss that are important to the story.
6. Culture Collector – Discusses and compares any examples of culture in the stories and draws parallels with the learners' own cultures (Furr, 2007).

There was enthusiastic competition amongst the most motivated of Cypris members to be named one of the six class participants.

Research questions

Having been involved in fieldwork at Cypris since its inception in 2008, I had several questions regarding the class. Just how would a reading circle function in Second Life? Would students, many of who had earlier indicated negative experiences and poor performance in their RL classes, have the discipline to adapt to a more traditional, formal class requiring regular attendance, homework and the purchase of a physical textbook? Would there be student resistance in the face of the instructor's comparatively authoritarian new role, especially from confident students older than the instructor? Or would their position as *Professor's* most motivated and conscientious students (as evidenced by their SLOODLE rewards scores) ameliorate a smooth transition?

I was also interested in overall feedback from the learners and the instructor. Would all participants be satisfied with the class? What suggestions would they offer for improvement? Would they want to take similar "university-style" courses at Cypris in the future? In their minds, did it provide opportunities for learning that the typical Cypris lesson did not? These questions were the impetus for this research project, with an aim towards providing insight into the community as a whole; this in turn might shed further light on the appeal and utility of Cypris as a future alternative model for cost-free education.

Method

Theoretical framework

Qualitative inquiry in virtual worlds is valuable in that it may trigger insights that survey research might overlook; through participant observation, for example, the researcher not only observes but experiences the environment, which may trigger more insights than other methods (Bainbridge, 2010). This study is part of a larger ethnography, framed by social constructivist theories as articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1994) and Hatch (2002); conclusions are drawn through the interaction between researcher and participant perspectives. This is appropriate for the research focus, in this case, a synthesis of the disparate perspectives on the course that individuals from vastly different backgrounds would bring. This follows in the footsteps of Boellstorff (2008) and Pearce (2009a; 2009b) who have found an ethnographic approach ideal for studying communities and subcultures in virtual worlds. Despite the aforementioned questions related to class design, adaptation to new roles, and learner and teacher feedback, I followed a primarily interpretive framework for data analysis (Hatch, 2002), utilizing ongoing data analysis and learner histories to shape inquiries rather than simply confirm or deny presuppositions.

Participants

The study involved seven main participants, *Professor,* the instructor, and six students (Table 1). Oral consent from all participants was acquired the first day of class, stipulating that only first SL names would be used, and afterwards written consent was obtained via email in February 2011. I have interacted with all the participants, both in-world, through the exterior Cypris Ning website (now defunct) and Facebook; I have also met with three participants in person. Although concerns with identity fraud in online studies do exist (especially in virtual environments like SL well-known for role-playing), participant background information was verified to the extent possible.

Table 1: Learner biodata

SL Name	Gender	Age	Country of residence
Professor	Male	40s	Japan
Cacy	Female	40s	Japan
Mystie	Female	40s	Japan
Himiko	Female	30s	Japan
Christine	Female	20s	China
Ann	Male	20s	South Korea
Vamp	Male	20s	Australia

Vamp was the only native speaker in the group; he explained that he had wanted to practice his reading ("Honestly, I don't read books. I don't get into books"). *Lora* (Poland), who had enough participation points to attend, was initially interested in observing but only attended the first lesson; she later reported that her self-perceived English level was insufficient for the demands of the class. *Kazy* (Japan), *Cacy*'s RL niece, also observed one class, but did not participate.

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Six different data sources were used in this study: field notes from observations, videos (taken with the motion-capture software **FRAPS**), researcher journal entries and past observations and participant interviews (Table 2). Classes took place in early 2010; all eight weekly sessions were observed (one introductory class and seven proper lessons), and five out of eight classes were recorded on video. Semi-structured interviews (also using **FRAPS**) were necessarily brief, 20 minute chats in my virtual office in Cypris; all participants were interviewed in the week between the penultimate and final classes. Follow up emails and brief interviews were conducted with two participants as well. Multiple, qualitative sources were used to ensure a rich, complex understanding of participant feedback.

Table 2: Data sources

Data	Duration of collection	Focus
Reading class field notes	All eight reading circle classes	Question formulation
FRAPS Videos	Five classes	Question formulation
Researcher journal entries	Ethnographic notes since 2008	Participant background
Participant interviews	20-30 minute post-class interviews	Participant impressions

Data was analyzed in three stages. First, field notes and **FRAPS** recordings were reviewed, and additional notes taken. All interview data was then transcribed and coded for commonalities, in this case focusing on differences between the reading circle and their usual classes at Cypris. Finally, follow up questions and interviews in **SL** and through email were conducted when clarification was required.

Role of the researcher

Before continuing, it is important to clarify my own role in the group. I am a charter member of Cypris and a senior instructor in the group. Since Cypris' inception, I have routinely made my position as researcher clear both inside and out of my classes; my role as researcher (and since 2010, ethnographer) is also spelled out clearly in my Second Life profile. Researchers and observers are a regular part of daily life at Cypris, and learners quickly become aware that the free lessons they are receiving are often piloting runs for **RL** classes or part of a tutor's research project.

Although classroom exchanges occasionally referenced my presence as observer, and I made some comments in text chat, minimal intrusion into class discussion during the observations was the rule, and I took a purposefully disengaged position in the classroom. After observing video from the first class, I decided that my avatar's presence, though silent, was still unnecessarily distracting; from the second full class, I assumed a small butterfly avatar and hovered in a far corner of the virtual learning space in order to make my presence as innocuous as possible.

Results & discussion

A reading circle in Second Life

My initial research concern was mainly a question of description: how would a reading circle class in a virtual world function? As each class followed the same basic routine, an account of the first class proves an exemplar. After logging into Second Life, I proceeded to the **SLOODLE** rewards building in the Cypris sim. After changing my group tag (which displays group affiliation in text above my avatar's head) to one specially created for this class, I was able to enter the **SLOODLE** building. Once inside, an **ATM**-like device acted like a punch-card machine, taking attendance. I and the learners then clicked on a small green circle in the floor, and our avatars were instantly teleported to an enclosed space high above Cypris Village.

The space contained a *holodeck,* which, when clicked, would *rez* (materialize) the reading room we would use. Once we entered the room, we were greeted with a vaguely Victorian style drawing room with a desk and several couches arranged in a circle. The Discussion Leader for that class, *Mystie* sat at the desk, *Professor* stood off to her left, I stood to one side of the room near a virtual fireplace and the learners sat on the couches (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Reading Circle Room

The first 15 minutes were spent by *Professor* discussing the homework. Homework assignments were from the textbook and were to be submitted to a Moodle website. The first day there were no serious difficulties related to homework (though later problems in format, confusion about folders and problems accessing the exterior site later became minor issues). After this discussion was over, each learner prepared to present their role and keep discussion active during their presentation for exactly 10 minutes. A large timer loomed

over the fireplace to remind everyone of how much time they had left. *Mystie* began as Discussion Leader.

Mystie's handling of the Discussion Leader role here later became representative of her attempts to negotiate and clarify roles in the class. The syllabus as explained by *Professor* always had the Discussion Leader present first. *Mystie,* however, did not at first feel this made sense; she reasoned the Summarizer should lead things off, because, she thought, learners would be able to better discuss the story if it was fresh in their minds. Accordingly, after only a minute, *Mystie* attempted to push the conversation over to the Summarizer for that class, *Vamp.* Immediately, *Professor* interrupted with, "Whoah, whoah, whoah…you still have 9 minutes…" *Mystie* protested that she hadn't fully understand the instructions, but later she confided in the interview:

> Well because of the discussion leader's role was kind of hard to understand by the way the book…or the *Professor* explained because it sounds like you start off the discussion, questions about the story, but then next comes the summarizer to remind you of the story, I thought it's like, you know, the other way around. You should be reminded of the story first? Then we can start discussing about it. So I still feel very strange about it.

Mystie would later go on to try to confirm how much of their presentation could be read and how much should be extemporized; this incurred the annoyance of *Professor* when she posted a request for clarification in an inappropriate public forum on the Ning website.

After *Mystie* asked some general questions about the story, "The Horse of Death", it was *Vamp*'s turn to summarize. The story is about a sick boy who becomes obsessed with riding a sinister hobby horse in a toy store across the street from his home. In the end, he sneaks out, rides the horse, and dies on it. *Christine,* as Connector discussed measles, the illness the boy has, and a discussion of childhood illnesses begins. *Himiko,* as Word Master, gave us her five words that she had chosen, though she neglected to explain how they were important to the story, eventually running out of things to say.

Ann, as the Passage Person, chose passages that yielded discussion, but had not prepared discussion questions as per *Professor*'s instructions. Luckily, he brought up an interesting point about the boy's grandmother that led to a continuation of discussion. Finally, *Cacy* as Culture Collector brought up the tradition of giving gifts for New Year's in the story, so conversation shifted to guesses about where the story took place.

After each member had 10 minutes to present and lead the discussion, *Professor* returned and gave feedback to each member. This first day, feedback was vague and positive, but as the classes progressed, he would become considerably more critical. He also made daily reference to grades without giving specific scores, to remind them the class was being evaluated holistically; overall class grades (A, B, C, D, F scale) were eventually handed out after the final class on the Moodle site.

Professor's Second Life reading circle utilized work both in **SL** and **RL**, combining a text-book, exterior website and discussions in Second Life. As Second Life note cards are too small and inflexible for extended reading and writing activities, integration of an **RL** text and Moodle provided ways that *Professor* could circumvent current **SL** software limitations. Purchase of a text, though a ¥1,122 expense (the first such educational expense these student had ever incurred at Cypris), did strengthen pressure to participate; learners who paid felt they had invested themselves seriously in the class. Use of the Moodle site for written homework allowed learners to submit their homework in a variety of different formats;

Christine once even handwrote her assignment, photographed it with her smartphone and sent it as a jpeg file.

Formality: Differing learner perspectives

My second concern related to how participants in a casual learning community would cope with a more formal learning environment. In this case, learner cooperation with class demands was high. All participants were able to purchase the text online, save *Christine,* who was not able to order it in China; *Vamp* provided PDF files of the stories for her. Attendance was perfect from all participants, although *Cacy* had audio problems during one class and was unable to fully participate. All students, with the exception of *Himiko* (who did not finish one assignment), completed all of their daily homework. With the exception of initial resistance from *Mystie* regarding class roles, learners performed as per all instructions from *Professor.*

During interviews, all the learners agreed that the reading circle was a more formal class than they were used to, but most looked at this formality as a positive aspect of the course. Yet the characteristics I had assumed made it more formal (mandatory attendance, homework, a textbook, grades) did not necessarily reflect the learners' notions, and nearly everyone seemed to have a different conception of what was meant by "formal" (this illustrates the benefits of doing qualitative interviews; survey research in this case could have led to misleading conclusions).

Mystie offered the one negative interpretation of formality, one related to a more stressful learning environment. "At the beginning, yes, everyone was tense and didn't know what to do," she said. "And…although we haven't paid any actual money or anything…to join the class…everyone was so nervous…" The feeling of tension was demonstrated by *Ann* at the beginning, when, after a strict word of advice from *Professor,* there was an uncomfortable silence, and he suddenly blurted out the word, "Tense." This was formality as contrast to the low-stress classes around the chat ring.

Himiko, on the other hand, looked at formality from a different perspective. "Because reading circle is my duty, I feel," she said. "I should attend every week. So I come by all means." To *Himiko* formality reflected not only mandatory attendance but mandatory participation. The group depended on her to be prepared to perform her role and help should other members need assistance. This may reflect *Himiko*'s situation in the fourth class, where she tried to disguise that she had not in fact done the reading. This was not only embarrassing for her, but it forced the other members to 'pull up the slack' and complete what she hadn't.

Vamp saw formality as writing, and the feeling of accomplishment that accompanies it. It is something Cypris lessons rarely involve, and it brought back memories of his days at high school:

> It's not something I'm used to doing. It's been a long time since I've had to do something like this…It took me a long time to write down a summary of the book. And I managed it, you know when I was finished I was like, 'Ah wow, done it'.

Similarly, *Mystie* commented on this feeling of accomplishment, saying that "Free lessons at the chat ring (are) a very good way (from) a different…perspective… but (this) organized lesson is different and I think it's important, too…that you feel like you are doing

something." This feeling of accomplishment is related to both being graded and having to complete written assignments.

Ann saw formality as a set routine. When asked about formality, he responded, "I think it is good (for a) beginner...because if...all of the schedule is free, I can't follow the conversation because I don't know what should I say." *Ann* sees formality as in-class scaffolding, something that is occasionally missing from chat ring lessons.

Finally, *Christine* sees formality as increased learner autonomy:

> The normal Cypris lesson is maybe more casual. And the reading circle one may be more formal. And more spaces for the learners to discover.

When pressed later about this in e-mail correspondence, she explained that she thinks that less teacher involvement allows the learners to think about the stories for themselves. This was an unusual interpretation of "formality", one in line with Mercer's aforementioned Vygotskian take on "exploratory talk" (Mercer 1995; Maloch 2002) in which the role of the teacher is seen as an advisor, leading students into adulthood (or at least adult discourse patterns) through minimal intervention. To *Christine,* letting the students explore the text on their own was taking the training wheels off of education and allowing them to interact in ways similar to native speakers.

In summary, questions about class formality yielded a variety of different interpretations of the term. Some saw it as increased tension, an obligation to attend, the inclusion of written work, the following of a set in-class routine, increased learner autonomy and a feeling that brings a sense of accomplishment. With the exception of the accompanying tension attendant with the nature of the class, however, all discussions were framed in the context of the positive, motivating aspects of formality.

Learner and instructor evaluations

Although *Cacy* had hoped for more discussion time and *Vamp* had expected to have more in-class readings, learner evaluations of the course were otherwise entirely positive. Besides the increase of "formality", several learners were impressed by both the reading circle format itself as well as its inclusion at Cypris:

> I just recognize this world is amazing – how they can make this kind of special class in (a) virtual world like this? —*Ann*

> I never have had classes like this in real life or, or in (a) virtual world. —*Cacy*

> It's interesting, because it's not like you're in real life in a classroom facing a real teacher. And actually the reading circle. Um, I never...experienced a class like that. —*Christine*

During the last two classes, *Ann* began (somewhat comically) bemoaning the fact that the course was coming to an end. *Mystie* was already discussing the possibility of another class using the next level (Silver) text, and *Professor* was encouraging them to start their own reading circle in the meantime. "Of course I would like to take it again; the course is very good for Cypris," said *Cacy*. "There are many people who want to join the reading circle, I think."

In the end, *Mystie* took his advice and started her own version of the reading circle in a secluded garden in Cypris, which now meets every Wednesday. Short text files are used

instead of the textbook, but otherwise the format is similar. The format has become so popular that *Ann,* and another Cypris learner, *Leee* (China), have instigated similar weekly activities. *Professor* taught the same course with different students later in 2010. All participants have remained active members of Cypris.

Instructor evaluation on the course was equally positive, but for different reasons. On the one hand, *Professor* downplayed the unique aspects of the course:

> The actual reading class is – it's just a regular reading class – it's a reading discussion. It's what we do in real life. So it's nothing out of the ordinary. We sit in a room, we talk about the stories.

He admitted that enthusiasm in the class had waned halfway through because the stories had become less engaging in the second half of the book; because of that, he gave the class an "8.5 out of 10". For him, the "revolutionary" aspect of the class was its implementation as part of his **SLOODLE** rewards system, which he credits with providing needed student motivation to take this formal class seriously:

> I believe that what we've done in the last eight weeks is going to prove that virtual worlds are a definite possibility for education. There's just no doubt about it in my mind whatsoever. We've done it. That's it.

By all accounts, the class was successful; however interviews show that participants had differing ideas as to why, ideas based on their needs and (by inference) what they find lacking in the more casual lessons around the Cypris Chat Ring.

Sidenote: Use of hyperlinks

One notable feature that I had not witnessed frequently in previous classes was the use of hyperlinks to ameliorate responses or explanations. The use of hyperlinks to provide up-to-date, authentic information for online learning has been well documented (Warschauer, 1997; Deguchi, 1995; Rosen, 1995), but most studies have so far focused on the end product of collaborations. Wang & Hsu (2009) go further, indicating that with hyperlinks in **SL**, "each learner has the freedom to discover information relevant to his or her interests and to explore knowledge from the web" (p. 78). The assumption here, though, is still that teachers provide the links to choose from.

The learners from the Cypris reading circle class, however, demonstrate a phenomenon I have observed occasionally with group members both in and out of class, the sharing of hyperlinks both for entertainment and for clarification. In the second class, for example, "The Little Hunters at the Lake", a young boy borrows his father's rifle and shoots a crane by mistake. Some of the learners had never seen a crane, but *Christine* quickly used a search engine in another window, found a picture of a crane and then shared the link with everyone in text chat. The learners were autonomous and web-savvy enough to be able to share examples and information with each other directly without an appeal to the instructor.

Limitations of the study and methodological concerns

There are several caveats and concerns related to this project. As part of a larger ethnographic project, this research is subject to the same caveats regarding generalization necessary in interpreting all qualitative research; as Cypris Chat is a relatively unique online

community, the focus is more on adequate description of the events and participants in context, the particularity (Greene & Garacelli, 1997), and readers are allowed to draw their own conclusions. As for possible problems with the interview data, some participants may have been reluctant to open up with criticisms of the reading circle or Cypris in general because of my long time association with the group. Alternately, some may have suspected that publication of this study in some form another was inevitable, and it was important to promote the group they were involved with in a positive light. Finally, the twenty minute interviews were regrettably brief, which inevitably led to more structured questions and less space for emergent concerns to arise than was preferable in a study with a constructivist paradigm and an interpretative analytical framework. However, continued access to participants has allowed for follow-up contact with participants by e-mail and in SL when clarification was deemed necessary.

Conclusion

The popularity of this class suggests that among the most motivated students at Cypris there is strong learner interest in a side-curriculum of structured, university-style classes. Though all participants had previously reported dissatisfaction with their own RL grades and classes, the pressure of required attendance, participation and (written) homework responsibilities along with the attendant feeling of accomplishment appealed to these advanced learners. Illich (1970) writes about this phenomenon in a prelude to his discussion of casual learner networks:

> …the fact that a great deal of learning even now seems to happen casually and as a by-product of some other activity defined as work or leisure does not mean that planned learning does not benefit from planned instruction and that both do not stand in need of improvement. The strongly motivated student who is faced with the task of acquiring a new and complex skill may benefit greatly from the discipline now associated with the old-fashioned schoolmaster who taught reading. (p. 13).

"Autonomous", "self-directed" and "motivated" do not necessarily imply unwillingness to submit to demanding, intensive study, even in an essentially radical educational organization like Cypris Chat (Holt, 1976, p. 22). The learners in this case, the most motivated at Cypris, were more than willing to undergo a formal study regimen that others in the group may not have had the patience for or interest in, while still appreciating the informal nature of the group as a whole. It is only through further longitudinal study that we will be able to determine whether this class represents a shift towards a more traditional, structured teacher-driven side-curriculum at Cypris. Perhaps these more regimented classes will only appeal to the most motivated learners at Cypris, and will remain only as rewards for participation.

This study also illustrates the dangers of assuming an understanding of the predilections of open, unstreamed language learning communities, especially in online virtual worlds. One cannot assume that a general preference for a social, informal learning environment like Cypris and a desire for a more regimented curriculum are mutually exclusive (at least among motivated learners); even an assumption of agreement regarding the definition of a "formal curriculum" was, in this case, contentious and multifaceted. Serious, self-directed learners are these days finding cost-free ways to practice and learn second languages online, and it is imprudent to assume that those that have found ways to both learn and socialize

in a deceptively fanciful graphical environment like Second Life are any less capable of academic self-discipline than those attending RL language courses.

Finally, this project provides additional evidence that qualitative methods are well-suited for research in online worlds. Researcher-participant rapport based on my role as an embedded ethnographer in the group was vital for obtaining permission for observation and for individual interviews. Without detailed field notes and video of observations, intriguing side phenomena like in-class hyperlink sharing would not have been witnessed. Finally, unexpected definitions of formality gleaned from interviews provided insights into why participants seemed refreshed by a less open, less casual course of study. In an anonymous, multi-cultural learning environment like Second Life, participant-observed long-term dedication to the community, careful observation and open-ended interviews are valuable tools in assisting the researcher overcome issues of trust, ambiguous identity and bias.

Notes

1. All participants are referred to by their Second Life avatar names in italics.

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