

Utilizing Virtual and Personal Learning Environments for Optimal Learning

Krista Terry
Appalachian State University, USA

Amy Cheney
Appalachian State University, USA

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Chapter 10

Identity, Citizenship, and Moral Constructs from the Virtual Self

Stewart Martin
University of Hull, UK

ABSTRACT

Many young people now access digital networks that include individuals very unlike them who promote different cultural, religious and ethical value systems and behaviour. Such value systems can create conflicts of expectation for young people seeking to resolve their relationship to a national citizenship in a pluralistic society, especially if they are experiencing adolescent uncertainties or a growing awareness of social inequalities. The emergence of trans-national political structures and their differing value systems, together with the rise of international tensions, have increased uncertainty about the nature of identity and entitlement to a national citizenship. This paper describes the ongoing Citizens project study of identity development in young people, using real-world scenarios to discover the values that underpin their engagement with this wider range of religious and cultural value systems and to explore personal identity, political issues and citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the common experience of previous generations, many young people in our increasingly interconnected digital world now use or belong to networks where they are continually confronted with individuals who are very unlike them in being not of the same ethnicity, culture, community, kin or tribe. Such experiences present a

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range of authentic but different cultural, religious and ethical value systems offering an integrated and often persuasive set of expectations that also seek to encourage their adoption. Exposure to such pluralistic attributes can create conflicts of expectation for young people when attempting to clarify their relationship to a national citizenship in a pluralistic society, especially if they are experiencing adolescent uncertainties or a growing awareness of social inequalities.

However, such circumstances also offer an opportunity for young people to reframe their sense of association with a geographical and cultural space from a wider palette than was historically available. This raises questions of whether there may emerge a new form of globalised culture alongside existing ones that owes its origin and articulation to the virtual space of digital telecommunication. Does such a ‘technologically processed’ sense of identity create a new relationship and sense of identity between the individual and the community or is this simply a false and ephemeral notion that does not resonate with lived behaviour in the physical world? Or is it that identity is not and never can be a completed expression of the self at any stage in life and is always a continual process of modification and adaptation and that individuals will always tend to use whatever means exist in their social setting to conceive of and express relationships with others. In the latter case identity expression via digital media may be merely one element within a general process of relating to others for those individuals with access to a particular cultural communication artefact, confirming the self as “a fluid abstraction, reified through the individual’s association with a reality that may be equally flexible.” (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 304).

Especially during the onset of puberty and adulthood, identity is an always-evolving cycle of presentation, defence, comparison and adjustment in the face of realities that are expressed in political, cultural and social contexts (Erikson, 1950). Online social network sites therefore provide individuals with another stage on which to construct, edit and display to chosen (or sometimes unchosen) others a selective and edited portfolio of images, sounds and text that (re)present them within the social sphere. Many young people project and enable multiple aspects of their social life through such mobile, flexible technologies, which by their nature often blur the boundaries between the public and the private. By these means the individual may sever the connections between interaction and place and establish new relationships with a multiplication of spaces occupied by many individuals across a range of audiences. It is not unusual to find parents, academics and the media asking what kinds of individual these new digital affordances create or to find them expressing concern about individuals becoming withdrawn from ‘normal’ society as a consequence. The *Citizens* project has to date found that most young people manage their digital social network alongside that in the physical world without difficulty and that their

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online presence does not commonly produce unwanted or problematic outcomes for them, although exposure to social fragmentation and exclusion tend to decrease political involvement and civic participation (see Hedke & Zimenkova, 2012).

Young people are able to use increasingly highly defined, immersive and multi-media rich virtual spaces to interact with a wide range of environments, contexts and other individuals, both physical and virtual. Prior work has shown how such environments can facilitate the exploration of cultural and personal values for their virtual citizens (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Bisailon, 1989; Bers & Urrea, 2000; Martin & Vallance, 2008; Martin, 2013) and some studies have concentrated explicitly on the value of multi-user environments and collaborative virtual discussion spaces (e.g. Bruckman, 1998) to show that constructionist approaches maximise the learning, content production and creative expression produced by individuals in such learning communities. In contrast to such experiences of young people online, schools are not generally able to provide access to a comparably rich resource of material and conceptual tools to support the development of workable identity prototypes and roles (Erikson, 1950; Independent, 2006). Citizenship has traditionally been conceived as a relationship between the state and the individual in which the latter gained rights and the legal status as a member of society and the former gained the benefits of the duties and obligations discharged by individual citizens. However the development of digital environments poses something of a challenge to the historical role of education in socialising emerging adults into the contemporary world, as relationships between individuals and their developing social identity are no longer mediated by traditional anchors in their immediate nation, culture, religion or family and are increasingly able to be challenged and pluralised. The ‘awakening’ of non-exclusive national or cultural identities would require “active triggering through public identity discourses, civic education campaigns or the like” (Hurrelmann, 2015, p. 32).

The *Citizens* project (<http://tinyurl.com/ch9xk5s>) is designed to facilitate public identity discourses and uses an immersive virtual artefact and methodology in educational settings to help young people in their exploration and development of cultural and citizenship identity. The project builds on the notion of ‘active citizenship’ but from the individual upwards, in contrast to the European Union’s centralised and top-down approach to the educational formation of citizenship which signals the increasing governmentalisation of the state (Feinberg & McDonough, 2003; Foucault, 2007; Olson, 2012). Within the project young people explore their own identity and create relationships with others in a safe environment that, whilst virtual, represents real-world contexts and deals with issues of relevance to them in the physical world. This paper sets out the educational and political contexts within

which traditional socialisation processes operate but which are being increasingly challenged by the growth of social and immersive digital media, globalisation and the transforming political dynamics in many countries. Findings from the north east of England are presented and some implications for the use of immersive virtual worlds for identity and citizenship exploration are suggested.

DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Like the rest of Europe, but on a smaller geopolitical scale, the UK is a pluralistic society with a community of citizens who may not possess a strong sense of solidarity towards other members (Grimm, 1995; Offe, 2003; Scharpf, 1997). The most important objectives of democracy include the effective participation of all citizens in decision-making and the holding to account of those in positions of power. Whilst it is recognised that achieving this is problematical in the European Union (Hurrelmann, 2015), it may also be difficult within individual nation states such as the UK, where the demands of democracy for an effective, engaged citizenry have been difficult to meet. In order to fully engage with democratic citizenship, individuals need to be informed, politically literate and also able to negotiate different cultural, religious and political constituencies. As is found in the present study however, some citizens have strong affiliations with transnational communities and these are not always in harmony with a European or national sense of belonging. However, there is no single collectivity that seems to constitute ‘a citizen’ in UK or European democracy (Hurrelmann, 2015) and individuals may switch between several identities, none of which may exclude a commitment to other cultural communities at different times. If they are not to be disadvantaged, citizens exercising democratic engagement within pluralistic societies must therefore possess and be able and willing to navigate multiple identities as appropriate.

Over the past few years anxieties have risen sharply in the UK and many other countries about the level of public discontent and disengagement with political and civic life, as evidenced by falling turnout at national and local elections in several democracies, or by rising cynicism and lack of trust in politicians and a perceived increase in the alienation and marginalisation of some groups. Particular anxiety has been expressed by governments and the media around the world and especially in the UK about this ‘cultural deficit’, which is seen as the radicalisation of some young people and the association of this with the growth of cultural and religious fundamentalism (Home Office, 2004; Home Office, 2006; Cabinet Office, 2013; Guardian, 2014; Independent, 2014; Telegraph, 2014). Such concerns have been given greater credence by international events, especially where these are perceived

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to be associated with political instabilities and terrorism and by rising levels of threat to neighbouring states from military developments and political instabilities in some parts of the world.

Against this technological and political backdrop and in response to such perceived threats, many countries have adopted what have proved to be largely unsuccessful approaches to citizenship education that emphasize content, information recall and didactic instructional teaching (Martin & Feng, 2006; Goldsmith, 2008; Chief Inspector of Schools, 2008; Olson, 2012). In many democracies where citizenship education occurs it has prioritised the acquisition by individuals of skills in public deliberation – of an ability to engage critically with the views of others and to offer arguments within a framework of discourse that respects the rights and responsibilities of all participants as a necessary precursor to a democratic and just society. However, for such a society to flourish it also needs citizens to feel that they not only have rights and responsibilities towards others and themselves - and that they understand and care about what these are - but that they are also able to live their own lives freely without disrespecting the freedoms of others (Waghid & Smeyers, 2014).

The *Citizens* Project uses an immersive virtual world to facilitate an alternative and more effective pedagogy to more traditional approaches and is one that prioritises empowerment and ‘performativity’ (Braidotti, 1994; Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007) to explore the kinds of community that young people wish to bring about (The Equalities Review, 2007). This approach emphasises the articulation of citizenship by citizens and de-emphasises the study of academic content, the institutions of government, ‘the rule of law’ (Ofsted, 2006) and the performance of citizenship as compliance with societal or political dogma or obligations (Lawy & Biesta, 2006; Olson, 2012). The approach of *Citizens* is also more in sympathy with post-structuralist approaches that explore discourses around citizenship identity through the lived experience of young people (Foucault, 1972, 2007). A more active conception of citizenry is desirable on purely utilitarian grounds also because, as Sir Bernard Crick noted, “at the worst, disengagement can lead to acts of delinquent rebellion against a social order that young people feel powerless to influence.” (Quoted in Ofsted, 2006: p. 5).

The educational responses of many governments to the kinds of political concerns outlined above owe their origins to the perceived fragmentation of and threat to their traditional political and national identity (Deakin et al., 2005), the growth of religious fundamentalism, the increasing radicalisation of some groups and a general political disengagement from the state. In the UK in particular, the growth of citizenship education “has stemmed, in part, from angst about the low levels of voter participation by young citizens in the 18-24 age bracket, in particular.” (MacFarlane, 2005: 298). Acute anxieties also surround the behaviour of some claiming

Muslim legitimacy that have been exacerbated by the international terrorism and extremist events perpetrated by this minority (McGhee, 2005; MORI, 2007), raising the question of the extent to which culture and religion should constrain or determine our moral compass (BBC, 2011; Independent, 2014; Guardian, 2014; Telegraph, 2014). For some relatively recent immigrant groups there is little, if any, history of the cultivation of democratic discourse and little attention paid to political literacy and critical thinking within their country of origin and this has been noted as problematic especially within the Arab and Muslim world (Waghid & Smeyers, 2014). Their lack of citizenship education programmes is felt to have made such countries vulnerable to the prevalence of non-democratic and corrupt political systems and to have led to a curtailment of the freedom of belief and speech. Educational systems in such countries are often unwilling to encourage the social values that flourish in democratic societies and it seems likely that individuals who migrate from them will be ill-equipped with the experience and skills that are necessary to allow full political engagement to be possible.

Even in countries with more well-established traditions of democratic public discourse, the configuration of citizenship identity has been increasingly contested (Manning & Roy, 2010). In the face of young people's increasing awareness of a range of different cultural, religious or moral perspectives each claiming authenticity and seeking their allegiance, there is need of a broader consultative, critical and participatory approach that seeks to reveal how citizenship identities may be evolving over time in line with increasing globalisation, political instabilities and changes in demographics, migration and political consensus. Young people in most European countries have an understanding of basic democratic values (<http://www.iea.nl>; Schultz et al., 2008, 2010a, 2010b) but as they get older, they seem to trust news media more than government institutions and have less positive feelings about their countries (Kerr et al., 2010). When asked what makes a good citizen young people have for some time tended to identify the most important features to be obeying the law, voting and following political issues and by age 14 have already been strongly affected by their cultural, historical and educational context (Amadeo et al., 2002).

In their efforts to discharge their responsibilities for citizenship education, teachers in many countries have tended to emphasise a didactic approach to pedagogy with an associated emphasis on content over process and on a transmissive format over one that is more strongly founded on collaborative learning and student empowerment. There has tended to be a relatively modest degree of participatory democracy within many educational institutions, despite arguments that this is an essential pre-requisite for effective citizenship education and personal development (Kohlberg, 1985; Torney-Purta et al., 1999, 2001; Amadeo et al., 2002) and for many professional educators there exists an unresolved tension between their professional autonomy, research-led pedagogy and their increasing accountability to external audit systems

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(Martin, 2010). In many countries in Europe achievement in citizenship education tends to be associated with prescribed curricula and predetermined, fixed collections of knowledge, skills and understanding that are relatively uninformed by the problems or identified concerns and needs of students.

THE PROJECT

Despite the long-standing presence of Personal, Social and Health Education in schools in the UK and its equivalent elsewhere, there has been little debate about what content, tools, pedagogy, or assessment methods are most appropriate for facilitating and assessing personal development, including the development of identity and of a sense of individual citizenship. The *Citizens* Project uses an interventionist, three-dimensional immersive online environment to study how citizenship education can adopt new approaches to explore relevant issues. The project's use of an immersive virtual environment to study citizenship draws on the work of Turkle and Erikson on identity formation and the tensions between the individual's need for social integration into family, culture and society (identification) and the search for boundaries between the self and others (differentiation) (Erikson, 1950, 1968; Turkle, 1995). The project also makes use of 'virtual autotopography' (Gonzalez, 1995; Bers, 2001) to represent identity through participants' use of symbolically significant objects and actions, which does not pre-define or idealise any construct of citizenship. Participants' virtual dwellings are used to study individual representations of self (differentiation) (Figure 1). Their involvement with the built environment (e.g. virtual civic spaces, artefacts or 'temples' representing religious traditions or cultural/group interests) is used to map their integration into the virtual society and culture (identification). The attachment of values and stories to these artefacts and reflections upon them by participants and on their experiences and on introduced 'scenarios' provides data for studying the tensions between differentiation and identification and emerging perspectives on citizenship. Such immersive virtual environments are known to facilitate the study of values (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Bisailon, 1989; Bers & Urrea, 2000); and constructionist methodologies have been shown to be effective in maximising learning and individual creative expression (e.g. Bruckman, 1998).

The Citizenship Project also employs 'virtual autotopography' (Gonzalez, 1995; Bers, 2001) to articulate identity through the selection of symbolically significant objects. Participant avatars and their dwellings re-present the self (differentiation) and the manner of their interaction with the virtual constructed space, its objects and introduced 'scenarios' maps integration into the virtual society and culture (identification). The values, stories and reflections attached to these artefacts provide

Figure 1.



data about the tensions between differentiation and identification and how these inform emerging perspectives on citizenship. Tensions are surfaced between needs for social integration (identification) and desires for individuality (differentiation) (Erikson, 1950, 1968; Turkle, 1995). The experimental imperative given to participants is for them to discover how successfully they can create a harmonious microcosm where individuality and varied cultural and religious heritages and allegiances are sustainable and are able to produce a shared, common citizenship identity (Deakin et al., 2004) drawing on Kohlberg's proposition that moral development is shaped by participation in democratic social institutions that encourage self-government and group decision-making (Kohlberg, 1985).

The project uses a highly modified version of an immersive virtual environment generated by a computer and similar to those now often seen in video games, where a realistic-looking geographical 'space' exists to be explored. The environment includes terrain to be explored and features a town where dwellings can be designed, built and furnished and a 'debating space' where formal or informal discussions are held (Figure 2). The environment also includes a range of incidental animations and sound effects to suggest a realistic setting, such as weather, wind effects, resident wildlife, etc. Within this environment young people play the role of an imaginary character that exists and moves in the created environment (an 'avatar') alongside

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Figure 2.



others created by other young people at the same time. Each avatar is able to have its appearance customised in terms of its ethnicity, gender and attire so as to reflect the characteristics of any of the main cultural and religious heritages within the UK today, or a mixture of these, or none at all.

Young people are asked to build and furnish a ‘home’ for their avatar to represent the values, activities and objects that are of most importance to them as real people in the physical world in their daily lives. Periodically avatars are summoned to the debating area for group meetings where they are presented with typical scenarios taken from the mass media (TV news and newspapers) about topical and contentious issues of citizenship identity, such as gay (or arranged) marriage, the voting rights of prisoners, limitations to rights of protest, different cultural or religious views about family life, justice and human rights and so on. Participants are asked to discuss each scenario and say what they think should be done to resolve any conflicts or inappropriate behaviour, or address any issues that are felt to conflict with ‘being British’. During these discussions, the environment offers young people the option

to attach particular cultural, religious or moral ‘values’ to their statements, to show why they believe their comments should be taken seriously and supported by others. Their comments and values (and their definitions of each ‘value’) are visible to all others taking part in the debates. Groups working together in the environment are asked to try to achieve a consensus view for each scenario. This approach is designed to minimise the possibility of assumptions being inferred by participants from the nature of the experimental environment about whether moral development proceeds universally from concrete to abstract thinking (Kohlberg, 1976), or is differentiated by gender (Gilligan, 1982) or is conditional upon differences in individual thinking (Papert, 1987; Turkle & Papert, 1992). Young people also complete questionnaires about their cultural and religious attachments and take part in interviews about their experiences in the virtual environment and their thoughts about what they have learned and the implications of this for them. Their views are also sought on the value of using of such environments for study as compared to their established experiences of teaching and learning.

Abstract and universal expressions of values are created by participants through recording and discussing them and their explanations and definitions in the communal values dictionary developed by the community. Artefacts and defined values thereby become structured “collective repositories of meaning” (Bers, 2001, p. 383) by virtue of the recurrent meanings and relationships developed through their repeated application. A semi-structured reflective diary allows participants to record their reflections after each session and at the end of the experiment complete a ‘legacy document’ for subsequent visitors, summarising what they feel they have learned about citizenship and themselves by using this technology and reflecting on the most important message they would bequeath to individuals coming for the first time to such an experience. The use of such tools is known to facilitate interactions between individuals and is effective in forming group identity in virtual worlds (Park & Seo, 2010). Individuals also form affinity groups and social connections with other players both in their real world spaces and online, thus creating a meaningful interplay of their real world and virtual identities in a variety of ways (Burke, 2013).

The project’s work to date has demonstrated that virtual immersive technologies are able facilitate and support reflection and discussion about identity and social or citizenship choices and related ethical issues, which has tended to be a little studied aspect of their use (Deakin et al, 2004). The project is providing insights that are having an impact on civic or democratic education in several of the educational institutions involved and on their approach to multicultural understanding, the development of personal identity in relation to that of others, and about how these can promote a fairer, more coherent, inclusive and tolerant civic society.

DISCUSSION

Schools, colleges and other educational institutions in the North-east of England have participated in the project to explore and articulate new ways for learning about adolescents' emerging adult identities and to develop more effective approaches for facilitating this process and for teaching about citizenship. Collaborative engagements of this kind are essential to bridge the traditional gulf often found between research, policy and practice in education. This is acute in the UK where there is a strong utilitarian approach to educational pedagogy (Alexander, 2008) although the disconnect between research, policy and classroom practice has for some time been an international phenomenon of growing concern (Hattie, 2009). The current project is bridging this gulf and exploring the advantages of evidence led practice and pedagogy informed by research over practice based on 'what works' or political dogma. The project is producing a greater understanding of how young people construct their internal sense of identity in the context of wider social structures and cultural and religious influences, and how novel uses of emerging technologies can be applied to the experimental study of this.

Findings to date are drawn from 976 students aged between 12 and 19 (male = 36%, female = 64%; white = 58%, Pakistani = 23%, other Asian or African = 19%) in over 50 groups in schools and colleges in the North East of England. Most participants strongly felt that their ethnic origin had little impact on their everyday life (56%), whilst 29% said it had an impact 'sometimes' and 15% said it had an impact 'all of the time'. Participants gave their religion as: none (40%); Christian (28%); Muslim (21%); Sikh (6%); Jewish (2%); other (3%), although most said that their religious orientation had no influence on their daily life (50%), whilst 32% said it had 'some' impact, and 18% said it 'often' or 'always' had an impact on this (figures rounded).

Many participants found it easy to develop criteria for national identity and even to arrange them in priority order of importance. However, once thoughtful discussion began, items from these lists were quickly perceived by young people to be difficult and unreliable - as, for example, when they realised that classmates who they thought of as sharing their national identity were excluded when criteria such as 'place of birth' were applied - i.e. they discovered that some of their classmates had been born outside the UK. Despite this, most participants characterised 'being British' as largely defined by residence or birthplace (25%). For some young people, national identity required a preference for a particular diet (12%) or the holding of particular beliefs or allegiances - such as unwavering support for law enforcement agencies or the military (15%). Many associated national identity with patriotism, support for free speech and equality and a strong tendency towards acceptance of other cultures. Some prioritised possession of a relatively neutral accent and high

verbal fluency in the dominant national language (12%) whilst others stressed possession of legal documentation such as a UK passport (11%). These five criteria covered 75% of responses whereas an individual's appearance (e.g. being white or non-white), lifestyle, religion, wealth or education were given much less emphasis.

Clearly emerging from the debates in the virtual world were a smaller number of criteria for 'a good citizen' and these issues attracted greater consensus across fewer domains. Over 87% of participants concluded that a good citizen was defined most by behaviour and character, with the key elements being (in priority order) helpfulness, kindness, being polite, friendly, caring, respectful, honest, law abiding and trustworthy. A good citizen was seen by young people in the sample as essentially someone who was morally good, fair, compassionate, tolerant and unprejudiced in their approach to others. Emphasis was placed on holistic and responsive characteristics. Next in order of importance were closely related behaviours such as involvement in voluntary activity that helped the community or the elderly, caring for the environment (not 'green' but averse to graffiti, litter, etc.) and generally not indulging in anti-social behaviour - i.e. being non-confrontational; not behaving badly, not taking drugs or committing crime (9%). Emphasis here was placed on the obligations of a good citizen and on characteristics of duty that esteem individuals who act in the interests of the wider society or even more generally as a 'global citizen'. Deemed to be of less importance were an individual's job, appearance, education or religious beliefs and such factors accounted for less than 4% of responses. These dimensions accord closely with the knowledgeable citizen, the responsive and holistic citizen and the self-responsible 'free' citizen models found in other neo-liberal societies such as Sweden, even when cultural norms are perceived as potentially constraining (Olson et al., 2015).

The project has extended and developed the impact of citizenship education in UK schools and enhanced the effective use of ICTs in the schools involved to provide teachers with skills in technology use. The existing pedagogy within the schools involved has changed for some teachers, especially with regard to technology use, but also with regard to moving away from a 'top down' delivery approach to one featuring more experiential learning. Two of the schools involved have expressed the view changes in professional practice have also been useful for them during the government's Ofsted inspections. However, schools have reported that the most substantial changes have been in raising young people's ability to debate topics in structured and evidenced ways and in their awareness (especially those approaching the age at which they may vote) of the ethical and moral nuances of citizenship-related issues and in particular those normally associated with particular cultural or religious elements in society

The ability of young people to customize their avatar representation has not so far produced any differences in their willingness to reveal their offline ethnic identity

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and white participants have been no more or less willing than black participants to customise their avatars to exhibit features of other ethnic or cultural groups, irrespective of whether the virtual world's range of ethnic representations has been of lower or higher diversity. The avatar-based racial diversity representation in the virtual environment has not been found to influence racial minority individuals' expression of their physical world ethnic identity in the virtual realm, in contrast to results found elsewhere (Lee, 2014).

Participants involved in the project have also examined the 'Life in the UK' examination that all aspirant citizens and permanent residents are required to pass (Stationery Office, 2011a), and its published preparation booklet (Stationery Office, 2011b). These tests include questions on topics from knowledge of civic institutions and responsibilities to questions about historical issues or statistical information about contemporary UK society. These questions and their underlying criteria have been strongly rejected by participants, who see many as unworkable, irrelevant or elitist and likely to be failed by most existing UK citizens; examples particularly criticised included questions requiring knowledge of why the Huguenots left France for Britain in the 16th and 18th centuries and whether more boys than girls smoke in the UK.

CONCLUSION

Debates in the immersive virtual world have had particular resonance in the current international climate, where citizenship rights, responsibilities and identities are the back-text for many economic and social tensions in some countries and feature prominently in nightly media reports of activities around the world. The connection between education and the kind of individuals and citizens it seeks to produce is particularly important in western democratic societies and, in the UK and western Europe especially, has been at the heart of debates about immigration, political cynicism, spending cuts, budget down-sizing and associated political protest. Arguments for a 'big society' have rung hollow to many participants in the project to date, given a present where there is concern that future generations may be educationally and economically poorer than at present (BBC, 2005) and where there is at times a growing frustration from many participants at substantial inequalities in the distribution of social rewards and resources (BBC, 2012)).

In line with the findings of other work, participation in the immersive virtual world appears to have enhanced many participants' intercultural literacy through cross-cultural encounters and friendships, has encouraged a greater awareness of the cultural perspectives of others, and openness towards new viewpoints and has opened up a new space in which to explore different ways to act and think with regard to citizenship learning and teaching (Diehl & Prins, 2008). Participants have also

appeared to enjoy creating their own shifting cultural identities through modifying their avatar's appearance. This greater understanding of how culture, values and heritage inform group and individual identity in virtual cultural and social spaces may therefore help illuminate the impact of these on individual identity and the possibilities for an inclusive sense of 'Britishness'. For politicians, community and faith representatives and educationalists these issues are of more than passing interest in post-industrial pluralist democracies where there is anxiety about how individuals do and should understand and relate to community, politics and values and how these influence personal identity and accepted perceptions of citizenship. The relationship between personal identity, responsibility and engagement with political issues in a participatory democracy is a source of continuing tension not just within the UK but more widely where some countries have adopted highly directive approaches to citizenship education (Martin and Feng, 2006).

What has been discovered by this research is that the young people who have taken part in this study to date do not generally hold views about 'Britishness' or common moral and ethical standpoints that are derived from or heavily influenced by any particular cultural or religious affiliation. They feel that social norms and acceptable behaviours within society should be judged primarily on the basis of humanistic values of 'goodness', 'fairness', 'kindness', 'consideration for others', and the prevention of unnecessary or gratuitous harm to other living things. Significantly, participants have not subscribed to radical values and have not been sympathetic towards those who advocate extremist religious or cultural practices, irrespective of their own personal attachments (if any) to a particular cultural heritage or religion and tend to associate extremist practices with feelings of revulsion and fear.

The virtual environment appears to be highly attractive as a means of learning about things and participants reported that they enjoyed the immersive experience much more than their usual technology use or experiences in more traditional citizenship-type lessons. This suggests that the appropriate use of technology can be a powerful way to explore, understand and influence the religious, cultural and humanistic values, beliefs and understandings of individuals and that the current project's specialist use of technology can be a powerful means of educating individuals to be more aware of religious and culturally extremist and radical views and appears to encourage a more critical and unaccepting attitude towards these.

It is also clear from this research that with the exception of a few enthusiasts, the educators who have been involved in the study so far (over 40, mostly working in secondary education or FE colleges and roughly equally divided between males and females) make limited use of digital technology as part of their teaching and that this has little to do with the possession of specialist expertise or training, which most teachers who were involved felt should not be necessary and for which they had no time and expressed little interest in acquiring. Frequently these teachers pointed

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out the ease of use and lack of training needed to use social networking, to consume other digital media, make online purchases and use the internet as examples of the kind of well-designed 'easy' technology that is needed by schools.

The educators who have been involved in the project reported that the technology motivated and engaged their students and that there was much more informed subsequent learning and engagement of young people with regard to citizenship-related, moral and ethical issues. They also felt that the young people involved had become more socially involved and were now more interested in social and political events and were therefore more likely to become politically and socially engaged in such things as voluntary work and voting in general elections. The current phase of the *Citizens* project is developing a model of citizenship identity formation and the processes at work as young people reflect upon their entry into the adult world and they approach their first experience of democratic participation through voting. This model is being used to refine the development of the immersive environment that the project uses to more explicitly map the contribution to citizenship identity that is made by cultural, religious and other values and will contribute to an understanding of how these articulate within the family, the local community and civil society more generally. It is anticipated that with a larger sample this model and its associated instrumentation using item response theory will provide the foundation for wider studies to develop a Citizenship Assessment Scale for use with individuals and inform a better understanding of the development of identity in young people and its implications for a pluralistic capitalist democracy.

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