

Virtual and blended realities of learning and development



We are experiencing continuing shifts in how we work, live, play, and relate to each other. In the past three years of the pandemic, we tried to loosely capture this with the term, “new normal”. The term has gained currency and mainstream use, with McKinsey (2022) now referring to a “new era” given the broader macro and geopolitical shifts. In the February 2022 Fact Sheet, I reviewed this framing of the shifts in the world of work as the ‘new normal’. I suggested the need to recognise and explore our *blended* workspaces and the blended realities and identities therein. This includes hybridity - for example, hybrid forms of the workforce and working arrangements and hybrid spaces (or blending of physical, digital, and virtual spaces and realities).

Hybridity forces us think beyond dichotomies such as physical or virtual. Another dichotomy is on-site or remote. The dichotomies do not allow us to consider hybridity as the creation of a new forms of work experiences and arrangements, that incorporates elements of physical and remote/digital/virtual. For example, there is no exploration of how the physical and remote/digital/virtual workspaces may combine, blend, influence, and disrupt each other. We need to explore how we will - directly or indirectly - inhabit and be represented in some form or another in the blend of physical and digital/virtual workspaces. This will be even more the case when considering developments such as the metaverse (a fully immersive 3D shared virtual ecosystem) and Web 3.0.

We need to think about hybridity in *what* and *how* we learn as well as *where* we learn. There are numerous experimentations with an array of modalities and formats of learning, which has been

accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa, for example, we have the CHIETA's Smart Skill Centres experimenting with virtual reality for training. There are also many SA corporates experimenting with virtual and augmented realities for learning and development, as was showcased in the SABPP 2021 Learning and Development Conference. Globally, we see Vijay Govindarajan (2022), Professor at Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business and executive fellow at Harvard Business School, experimenting with virtual reality and worlds for immersions in Business Schools. These virtual worlds are part of the metaverse. The metaverse remains a significant theme in many L&D discussions and conferences. Louise Claassen (from Henley Business School) and I presented on the evolving metaverse including Microsoft's Mesh at the SABPP conference. Mesh will make us rethink our Teams-based or virtual meetings and consider the possibilities of blended meetings. Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella, states that as the "digital and physical worlds come together we are creating an entirely new platform layer, which is the metaverse."

Digital learning has now become a de facto reality and norm in many organisations, and the leveraging of the digital learning platforms and the delivery, measurement, and personalisation of learning these afford is foremost on many corporate HR agendas. Within the digital learning landscape, as noted, the nascent development is the use of virtual and blended realities for facilitating, delivering, measuring, and personalising learning. There is a need for us to explore virtual worlds as experienced by different segments of learners in the South African context. We need to investigate the learners and their experiences of entering, inhabiting, and exiting these virtual worlds. In addition, we need explore their experience with avatars therein. We can identify many themes for exploration. For example, two possible themes to explore in terms of enabling learning and development and the transfer of learning are: (1) embodiment and engagements in virtual and blended realities and (2) the experience and identification with avatars.

References

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