Here Comes the Immernet

Are you ready for virtual reality-based learning? **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**

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On April 22, 1993, less than 10,000 days ago, the Mosaic browser introduced humanity to the World Wide Web. Since that time, the Web has woven its way into our lives to such a pervasive and profound extent that it has altered virtually every aspect of our daily lives.

The first wave of the Webvolution was about connecting to the Internet to access data and information housed in databases and rendered via Websites. The second wave was about connecting to other people through the Internet via media-sharing sites and social media platforms. The third wave, now in its ascendency with the frenzy around virtual reality (VR), is about connecting within the Internet in immersive virtual environments.

The transformation of the Internet from being a static, one-way conduit of information to becoming a three-dimensional virtual immersive environment within which people connect, work, play, and learn will be more sweeping and substantial than the prior two waves.

As we rapidly transition from the Internet to the "Immernet," the opportunity to leverage this new technological platform to democratize learning on a global scale is unprecedented.

BREAKING FREE FROM CLASSROOM CAPTIVITY

Immersive virtual environments have seven key characteristics that enable learning designers to reunite content with context, scale the master-apprentice model, and increase the opportunity to learn from experience. The characteristics that provide learning designers with the opportunity to break free from classroom captivity and move in a direction that is more congruent with the learning needs of an increasingly digitized and virtualized world are:

1. The Sense of Self: From Cursor to Avatar—Virtual immersive environments provide the opportunity for embodied interaction. As you don your VR goggles, you are transported into a virtual world and you navigate that world in an embodied sense as an avatar in the virtual space. You virtually inhabit the space and feel like you are part of it.

2. The Death of Distance: Geography Is History—Virtual worlds afford a third place in cyberspace within which people's virtual selves can connect, communicate, collaborate, and take collective action irrespective of their actual physical locations.

3. The Power of Presence: Being Virtually There—Virtual presence in a 3-D immersive context requires ongoing and active participation and engagement with others in the space in a way that mirrors physical space.

4. The Sense of Space and Scale: A Matter of Perspective—Within virtual immersive environments, space and scale are virtually unlimited. It is just as easy to become a white blood cell traveling through the body as it is to become a moon in orbit around a planet. Integrating space and scale with new 3-D visualization mechanisms for rendering complex data sets provides a significant opportunity for collaborative generative learning.

5. The Capability to Co-Create: Making Meaning Together—Virtual immersive environments provide the opportunity to bring people into a shared context within which they can actively engage in collaborative creative activity.

6. The Pervasiveness of Practice: Learning While Doing—Virtual immersive environments can be designed to simulate real-world situations that allow learners to practice as much as desired in advance of engaging in the actual real-world activity.

7. The Enrichment of Experience: Learning Through Trial and Error—Virtual immersive environments create the opportunity to learn from experience through trial and error in a way that is compelling, visceral, and memorable.

These seven characteristics can be integrated to design experience-based virtual learning environments in which teachable moments are surfaced at every turn. Such moments will not be encountered the same way for every learner. Instead, the topical content being covered within the learning context is encountered, consumed, and applied based on the experiences of the learner, not the mandate of the instructor. In virtual learning environments, the learner is at the center, not the teacher.

So the next time you strap on a VR headset and dive headlong into the Immernet, pause to consider how you could leverage the characteristics of this disruptive technology to democratize experiential learning on a global scale. Because if you don't, someone else surely will! **t**