

The Fifth Dimension. A Thumbnail Description

An essential feature of the Fifth Dimension is its adaptability to specific local conditions. Nonetheless, there are similarities across implementations which make it useful to provide a provisional description for purposes of exposition. When asked to describe a Fifth Dimension briefly to potential collaborators or in articles we produce a normative description, such as the following :

The Fifth Dimension is an educational activity system that offers school aged children a specially designed environment in which to explore a variety of off-the-shelf computer games and game-like educational activities during the after school hours. The computer games are a part of a make-believe play world that includes non-computer games like origami, chess, and boggle and a variety of other artifacts. "Task cards" or "adventure guides" written by project staff members for each game are designed to help participants (both children and undergraduate students) orient to the game, to form goals, and to chart progress toward becoming an expert. The task cards provide a variety of requirements to externalize, reflect upon and criticize information, to write to someone, to look up information in an encyclopedia, and to teach someone else what one has learned, in addition to the intellectual tasks written into the software or game activity itself.

As a means of distributing the children's and undergraduates use of the various games the Fifth Dimension contains a table-top or wall chart maze consisting of some 20 rooms. Each room provides access to two or more games, and the children may choose. which games to play as they enter each room.

There is an electronic entity (a wizard/wizardess) who is said to live in the Internet. The entity writes to (and sometimes chats with) the children and undergraduates via the Internet. In the mythology of the Fifth Dimension, the wizard/ess and acts as the participants' patron, provider of games, mediator of disputes, and the source of computer glitches and other misfortunes.

Because it is located in a community institution, the Fifth Dimension activities require the presence of a local "site coordinator" who greets the participants as they arrive and supervises the flow of activity in the room. The site coordinator is trained to recognize and support the pedagogical ideals and curricular practices that mark the Fifth Dimension as "different"-- a different way for kids to use computers, a different way of playing with other children, and a different way for adults to interact with children.

The presence of university and college students is a major draw for the children. The participating college students are enrolled in a course focused on fieldwork in a community setting. At UC San Diego, an institution that emphasizes research, the university course associated with student participation is an intensive, 6 unit class that emphasizes deep understanding of basic developmental principles, the use of new information technologies for organizing learning, and writing fieldnotes and research

papers. The undergraduates write papers about the development of individual children, the educative value of different games, differences in the ways that boys and girls participate in the play world, variations in language use and site culture, and other topics that bring regular course work and field observations together.

In short, considered in its community context, the Fifth Dimension is organized to create an institutionalized version of the form of interaction that Vygotsky referred to as a zone of proximal development for participants. From time to time there is creative confusion about who the more capable peers might be (when novice undergraduates encounter children highly skilled in playing educational computer games about which they know nothing). But the general cultural of collaborative learning that is created serves the development of all.