

## Rediscovering Authenticity: Integrating Real-World Learning in Immersive Learning Environments

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### **Abstract**

The study “Rediscovering Authenticity: Integrating Real-World Learning in Immersive Learning Environments” addresses the growing concerns over the hyper-digitalization of education. Brought about by debates such as those initiated by Sweden’s Minister for School, the research unpacks the impact of digital technologies on student learning. Informed by Jean Baudrillard’s critique of digital simulations, the study unpacks how these technologies may limit critical engagement and independent thought by blurring the lines between reality and artifice.

The research focuses on undergraduate students at Barnsley College University Centre, exploring their perceptions of digital technologies and their experiences with real-world learning environments. Using focus groups and a phenomenological approach, the study captures rich, descriptive accounts from students across various disciplines, including Sports Coaching, Esports Education, and Criminology. Participants engaged in real-world experiences designed to complement their usual education.

Findings reveal that while digital technologies can enhance learning, their overuse can lead to a lack of progress and superficial engagement. Real-world experiences, on the other hand, provide valuable, unpredictable encounters that foster critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills. The study concludes with recommendations for higher education institutions to adopt a balanced approach, integrating both digital and real-world learning opportunities to better prepare students for the complexities of the modern world.

## Context and Rationale

The increasing reliance on digital technologies has caused significant debate around the world. In August 2023, Sweden's Minister for Schools, Lotta Edholm, called for a return to more traditional methods of learning, declaring concerns over the hyper-digitalized approach to education. The Karolinska Institute' endorsed this shift, claiming that clear scientific evidence shows that digital technologies impair rather than enhance student learning (Associated Press, 2023). Whilst such claims are approached with care, particularly when made for political purposes (Selwyn, 2016), they still reflect a broader state of anxiety about the role of technology in the lives of young people and education today. These anxieties towards using digital technologies form this study's rationale.

At a conceptual level, this project is informed by Jean Baudrillard's (1994) critique of digital technologies, which warns that digital technologies play an ever-increasing role in blurring the lines between reality and artifice. The problem, as Baudrillard (1994) explains, is that simulations of reality, such as those offered by digital technologies, prevent individuals from engaging fully with the real world. There is also the concern that simulacra and simulation result in the loss of critical direction as imaginations are fed appropriated images and ideas with predetermined meanings and associations. As such, critical engagement and independent thought are limited. This is particularly concerning given the increasing drive for institutions to acquire and prioritise immersive digital learning environments over non-digital, experiential methods without critical thought. What is more, these environments are often costly.

The condition Baudrillard (1994) describes is problematic for undergraduate students because the skillsets they develop in preparation for work are unlikely to reflect actual conditions. Simulations have an essential role to play in HE as they bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-life experience; however, the fact remains that what they offer are simplified representations of real-world situations and processes in safe and repeatable environments. Unfortunately, they do not prepare students for the complexity and unpredictability of real-world situations. Cathy Davidson (2022)

observed that students who are graduating from university feel uncertain about how the things they have been taught are related to real-world settings and circumstances. Under these circumstances, this research seeks to understand how undergraduate students perceive real-world learning experiences and if these experiences can better prepare them for employment and life after the last class.

### **The Research Problem Balancing Digital and Real-World Learning**

It would be inappropriate and out of touch with the present world to argue for abandoning digital technology. The opportunities made available are indubitable. Thus, the problem addressed by this project is the over-reliance on and non-evidence informed purchase and use of immersive learning environments in education. The proposed projects proposed that HE institutions can better prepare students for life in the working world if they are encouraged to simultaneously develop digital and real-world skills. In short, the project's overarching aim was to explore how students can make the most of real-world learning experiences and alleviate some of the potentially detrimental consequences of digital technologies. Furthermore, the study resulted in recommendations on how education institutions can integrate real-world learning more effectively.

### **Research Objectives**

1. Explore student perceptions of and experiences with digital technologies in a college-based HE setting.
2. Experiment with three real-world teaching experiences, allowing students to reflect on their perceived usefulness.
3. Make recommendations for how HE students can make the most of real-world learning experiences and alleviate some of the potentially detrimental consequences of digital technologies.

### **Research Design**

The study adopted a phenomenological approach, given its ability to capture rich, descriptive experiences of students in real-world learning environments rather than exploring why or how something occurred (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). The method was

particularly suitable for the project as it prioritised subject experience, allowing the participants to reflect on their experiences with real-world learning environments in a deep manner. Since few up-to-date investigations have attempted to understand the importance of real-world learning environments in what has become the 'Digital Age' (Selwyn, 2016; 2013), an existential phenomenological approach is appropriate as it will enable the collection of descriptive information that could provide a clearer understanding of the advantages of real-world learning opportunities.

### **Sample Group and Recruitment**

This project consisted of six students recruited from Barnsley College University Centre. A small sample size was selected to allow for an in-depth exploration of each participant's experiences. The participants were selected from three different undergraduate cohorts across levels: four, five, and six. These participants were studying either Sports Coaching and Physical Education, Esports Education, or Criminology. As a result, a variety of experiences and perspectives were collected.

The participants participated in three different real-world experiences designed to complement their typical in the classroom formal education: 1) a research module study group session at a public library with an adjoining café to encourage reading and socialisation, (2) a visit to Barnsley's Locke Parke, to explore the role of greenspace in promoting alternative forms of physical activity and mental health interventions (3) a lecture on enviro-leisure activism delivered within Sheffield's Megatron and Sheaf Culverts. These places/experiences provided a sweeping range of real-world contexts for the participants to reflect upon.

### **Data Collection Methods and Procedures**

Data was collected using the method of phenomenological interviewing. With this method, as Gregory Dale (1996) explains, participants take the place of the expert rather than the interviewer as they reflect on their personal meanings, feelings and sensations. An unstructured approach, which is said to be an important characteristic of

the phenomenological interview (Dale, 1996), was used to ensure that participants engaged in a conversation with the interviewer. All interviews started with the same question “*what was it like being taught in/at the?*” This was followed by subsequent questions directed by the responses they received. For consistency, the same two investigators conducted the three interviews.

The average duration of the interviews was forty-six minutes, and they were captured using a dictaphone. Member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of the data. After the data were analysed, participants were provided with the full transcripts and key summary points of the interviews for review. This ensured that the final report accurately represented the participants' voices.

### **Consent and Ethical Considerations**

Participants were fully informed about the study and their role. An information sheet detailing the study's objectives and methods was sent to each student's email. Following this, participants were asked to sign a consent form. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, with participants assigned a pseudonym. All identifying information was removed from the data before the publication of this report.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Student Perceptions of and Experiences with Digital Technologies**

Digital technologies are widespread in Higher education, yet student perceptions of their utility and value differ. The students in this study revealed mixed feelings regarding the use of technology in their learning journey. One theme of perspective was that digital technologies made learning more enjoyable.

*"It makes it more interesting when we are using technology, especially if it's a piece of kit you have not used before. (Julie)*

The above highlights the novelty and potential excitement new technologies can bring to the educational experience. Moreover, it could suggest that students value using innovative digital technologies to break the continuity of traditional learning methods.

However, students also expressed frustration with the repetitive use of the same technologies, suggesting a need for greater variety and intentionality in their application. One participant stating.

*"We do use technology a lot, like Kahoot and Microsoft Forms. But it is the same kind of technology all the time," (Bob)*

The above suggests a sense of stagnation and boredom that can arise from an overreliance on specific tools. Thus, while digital technologies can enhance learning, their impact diminishes when they become routine or are used without innovation. Likewise, students emphasised the importance of purposeful technology integration in their education.

*"It has to be purposeful; sometimes you feel as if technology is being used for the sake of it to tick a box." (Deborah)*

This insight reflects a broader concern that digital technologies are often used superficially rather than integrated in ways that genuinely enhance learning. This is coherent with the problem raised by Selwyn (2016), who argued that technology in education should be adopted critically and intentionally to avoid superficial engagement.

These insights are coherent with previous research that calls for a more thoughtful approach to integrating technology into educational settings. While students appreciate the role of digital technologies in making learning more dynamic, they desire greater variety and intentionality. To enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, educators must move beyond routine applications and consider how digital technologies can be used creatively and meaningfully to support learning experiences.

## **Real World V Digital Environments**

The students' reflections below relate to the study's core concern: finding the right balance between digital and real-world learning. Baudrillard (1994) critiqued digital technology for its lack of predictability.

“We saw a man walking in the middle of the street with a bedhead. It makes you realise that when you are speaking to the public that there are some nutters. You have to get used to speaking to people. Imagine trying to change their behaviour”  
(Shirley)

What Shirley was exposed to here was the unpredictable; it reflected the chaotic nature of human behaviour. From this, the participant realised the difficulties when engaging the public in people-facing roles. Students on this course often progress into public health roles. These roles include engagement with lots of different audiences, including the public. This event provided a catalyst for both student and practitioner to reflect upon the future need for skill development, in this case, communication skills.

Not all perspectives were positive, as some participants preferred a broader variety of environments beyond those they visited. They noted that technology could have provided access to wider contexts. While the outdoor sessions were conducted in favourable weather conditions, some students still voiced concerns about the potential for poor weather, indicating that environmental factors would influence their engagement and experience in real-world learning activities.

“You get the feel of what could be done for physical activity and mental health in this area? But it would be better to see other parks in other areas. Maybe you can take us to that big park in New York next time.” (Jennifer)

“It was good, but what if the weather had been bad, we wouldn't have been able to do this. I wouldn't want to walk to and around the park freezing” (Dave)

The students above recall some of the possible limitations of real-world learning, namely the unpredictability of the weather in the UK and its impact on participation and the limited scope of real-world trips. Physical trips often have limited time, budgets, and

locations. Digital platforms such as Google Earth VR can remove these barriers. This is a crucial advantage, especially for institutions that have students who may not get the opportunity to travel. Furthermore, digital learning environments can simulate historical events so that students can learn from the past or create interactive language practice scenarios which can develop students' communication skills across numerous populations (Williams et al., 2023). Yet, it must be noted that technology comes at a cost, and it is often found that the cost of equipment, technical issues and a lack of training for educators are equal barriers to the points raised by the students.

The reflections above bring to attention the potential of both real-world and digital learning experiences. Real-world learning provides valuable, unpredictable encounters that help students develop practical skills like communication, particularly in public-facing roles. In contrast, digital platforms like Google Earth VR offer opportunities to broaden access to diverse environments and simulate events and experiences that might not have been otherwise available given logistical constraints. Yet, these digital technologies come with challenges, including costs, technical difficulties, and the need for educator training. With both the real world and the digital having different limitations, it is clear that utilising both would result in a more fluid and comprehensive educational experience.

### **Differing Perspectives and Meaningful Conversations**

The comments made by participants suggested that by engaging in a real-world environment, they were able to capture different perspectives and have meaningful and deep conversations without the structure and formality of a usual class. Firstly, by speaking to people, one participant was able to develop a more nuanced understanding of their desires around physical activity.

“When we are speaking to other people about different forms of activity, you realise that there are different opinions. Like old people, they offer ideas you would not have considered. Usually, with old people, I think walking, crown green bowling”. (Paul).

Similarly, participants gained new ideas that might link to elements of a job, which they might only have considered if they were in a real-world environment.

“There is a much more than you think going off. When you come, normally, you do not observe. I saw a young lad recording a physical activity class. It didn’t really give me an idea of how to promote physical activity that I did not already know. But it did make me think, could I do it this way instead of inside a gym? Currently, I am doing my Personal Trainer, and I would not think about of doing it like that.” (Deborah).

The participants' reflections highlight the value of real-world environments in enhancing learning through understanding different perspectives and meaningful conversations, which are often missed in formal classroom settings. These experiences emphasise the value of real-world learning in adopting creativity and broadening perspectives.

### **Real World Authenticity and Industry Alignment**

As part of the real-world experiences, the Criminology student cohort visited a town centre library and adjoining café. This setting allowed students to observe and engage with their surroundings, immersing them in real-world contexts beyond their academic environment. During this session, the students observed two men walking by, prompting one student to remark, "Look at them two, they look a bit dodgy." This spontaneous observation not only exemplified a natural, real-world interaction but also opened a door to deeper exploration of how students interpret and respond to societal cues. It became a catalyst for meaningful reflection during the phenomenological interview, prompting critical discussion on the nature of stereotyping and its potential implications in professional contexts, particularly in relation to Policing.

“I wasn’t thinking before I spoke; it just blurted out. I was being stereotypical, wasn’t I? That’s bad. I am just saying what I saw and thought without thinking first, but I bet other people might have been thinking the same thing!” (Chelsea).

When the student group elaborated on the comment, they began to unpack the underlying biases and stereotypes that had informed this observation. This led to a rich, contextual, and critical debate surrounding the role of a Police Officer, stereotyping, and biases.

“Yes, but if I was a copper, I’d have my eyes on those two. I don’t see that (stereotyping) as a bad thing; we all have instincts, and we can’t just ignore them. In fact, I would say that if a copper didn’t recognise that, then are they fit to do their job? They have to recognise dangers and threats, don’t they?” (Daniel).

The term "dodgy" was also scrutinized during the interview process, leading students to reflect on what characteristics or behaviours had prompted this reaction. Was it the way the men were dressed? Their mannerisms? The context of the environment in which they were seen? This introspective questioning allowed the students to become more aware of their biases and how they might manifest in future careers in Policing and wider Criminal Justice settings. The student's ability to reflect on and discuss these real-world encounters is crucial for their professional development. In careers such as policing, officers are regularly required to make quick judgments based on observations, which can often be clouded by stereotypes. By engaging in these reflective exercises, the students could critically assess how they might approach similar situations in a professional setting, where a more nuanced understanding of human behaviour and an awareness of bias is essential.

This critical engagement mirrors the complexity and unpredictability of real-world situations, an issue often overlooked in more controlled, digital learning environments. As Baudrillard (1994) argued in his critique of digital simulations, these environments, while useful, do not prepare individuals for the unpredictable and often chaotic nature of real-world interactions. In this instance, the student’s initial remark and subsequent reflection provided a valuable learning moment that would have been difficult to replicate in a digital or simulated environment.

The criminology students' experience illustrates how real-world learning helps to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical, on-the-ground realities. By allowing students to encounter situations where biases and stereotypes naturally emerge, educators can guide them in developing the critical thinking and self-awareness necessary for effective transitions into the world of work. The town centre library and café experience exemplify the power of real-world authenticity in preparing students for their future careers.

Due to logistical challenges, the planned visit to the lecture on enviro-leisure activism, which was to be held at Sheffield's Megatron and Sheaf Culverts, could not progress. Consequently, no data was collected from this scheduled event.

### **Key Recommendations**

- Adopt a hybrid approach that integrates both real-world and digital learning experiences.
- Ensure real-world learning opportunities such as fieldwork and community engagement are embedded in the curriculum.
- Use digital technologies like virtual simulations as a complement, not a replacement, for real-world experiences.
- Provide adequate training for educators on effectively incorporating digital technologies in learning.
- Encourage organisations and funding bodies to critically assess resource allocation for digital technologies, ensuring investments enhance, rather than overshadow, real-world opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this study clarifies the importance of balancing digital technologies with real-world learning. Doing so will better prepare students for the uncertainty and complexity of their future careers. While digital provides students with valuable learning opportunities, they often fall short of emulating the unpredictability of real-world experiences. As detailed by the student reflections, real-world experiences develop

critical thinking, creativity, and an understanding of human behaviour. These skills, at times, can be absent or diluted in purely digital environments.

Under these circumstances, adopting a hybrid model where immersive digital technologies complement rather than replace real-world learning will best equip students with the skills needed to thrive in modern careers. In addition, given the costs of digital technology, institutions should think carefully about their purchases. Likewise, they should ensure that teachers are given appropriate training on how to use digital technology and how to best assess its effectiveness.

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