

Virtual Reality Oral Histories for Reconciliation Education

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Digital Oral History for Reconciliation (DOHR) is a project that leverages the ground-breaking virtual reality technology to create a digitally rendered representation of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children (NSHCC). The primary aim of the project is to find a way to teach young people especially grade eleven students about the history of the home and more importantly about the experience of former residents in a way that could help them foster enriching relationships with the people from diverse backgrounds and propel them to lay a platform for more equitable and egalitarian societies for the marginalized communities moving forward.

The project, which was introduced to a few students during the pilot phase, had a two-week curriculum designed to form restorative circles in order to encourage students delve into the root causes of the verbal slurs they witness and contemplate possible ways to eradicate them. Students are assessed based on the performance in the in-class activities, outcome of the assignments and interviews. These are some of the measurement parameters that captures whether or not students historical thinking skills is augmented after listening to the oral histories.

Kristina Llewellyn, faculty member of the Games Institute and Social Development Studies professor at the University of Waterloo, founded the DOHR project with support from Smith and other survivors in partnership with the NSHCC Restorative Inquiry and the organization Victims of Infant and Child Exploitation Services (VOICES), said efforts are ongoing to implement the project at a much larger scale but owing to the current COVID-19 situation that has an unprecedented detrimental effect on the modus operandi of the educational system, the implementation and widespread distribution of the deliverables timeline could be impacted.

Meanwhile, the research team is currently focussing on sharing the knowledge pertaining to the virtual reality based learning within the academic community and the logistics of designing community-based projects. Besides, the team is also planning on incorporating student and teacher feedback system which will be accessible in the final product for broader applications in schools.

Llewellyn further highlighted the importance of effective collaboration with people from different disciplinary backgrounds such as history, law, design, gaming, theatre arts to name a few. Therefore, profound comprehension of each other's disciplinary perspectives and framework is of paramount importance.

Llewellyn emphasised that virtual reality technology helps researchers design place-based oral history.

“The primary objective is to meet the requirements of the project’s framework rather than directing attention to the technological determinism. In other words, the role of virtual reality is not the sum and substance of the project but should be thought as more along the lines of means to accomplishing a goal, which in this context is revealing a historically recreated version of the story”, Llewellyn said.

Llewellyn further added that while visual aspect of the project brings out a wholly new technological experience, it is also important to keep in mind that the success of this project mainly depends on how effectively students grasp the information, which Llewellyn terms as the “pedagogy of listening”.

Llewellyn believes that the interactive experience could be created when students pay active attention to hearing stories, which is often overlooked in education system.

“Acute attention to details creates a sense of relationality, meaning wanting to understand the narrator’s experiences in ways that last an impact on the students and makes them feel they have a responsibility to act upon the story they heard”, Llewellyn said.

This will eventually lead to restorative actions or plans which could motivate working groups (students taking part in the project) to come up with reconciliation education in many forms such as sharing the story with their family members, writing children’s stories to communicate to the younger students in age appropriate ways thereby raising awareness.

“The story of Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children (NSHCC) has long been silenced. Therefore, the former residents called for people to heed to their experiences, which Llewellyn termed as the “Journey to light”.

In conclusion, DOHR project is expected to create a transcendence in ways of communicating oral histories and the results from the pilot phase roll out were positive as students engaged in meaningful discussions during restorative circles and other group activities.