THOUGHT PIECE
‘Thought Pieces’ are papers which draw on the author’s personal knowledge and experience to offer stimulating and thought provoking ideas relevant to the aims of the Journal. The ideas are located in an academic, research, and/or practice context and all papers are peer reviewed. Responses to them, or new thought pieces are always welcome, should be submitted to the Journal in the normal way.

RESPONSE TO THOUGHT PIECE: THE USE OF AVATAR BASED LEARNING AS A MEDIUM FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE EDUCATION:
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Charlotte Knight, De Montfort University

I was interested to read the Thought Piece by Annette Crisp on the use of Avatar based learning in the spring/summer 2012 edition of the journal. I think Crisp provides an example of some very innovative and creative pedagogical methods in criminal justice education that could be applied to a wide range of teaching and learning within universities. I am aware of the increasing use of a range of social media by young people in particular. Crisp challenges all of us involved in teaching and learning to embrace and harness these new forms of communication and interaction rather than simply ban them from the classroom. She gives examples of how the students in her teaching sessions have been engaged and enthralled by some of her use of avatars to explain theoretical perspectives and depict situations in which offending occurs, and how this has encouraged debate in the student group.

In wanting to support these developments and encourage this harnessing of new and creative forms of technology for teaching purposes I also wish to raise a few issues of concern that I hope will inform the debate that Crisp is stimulating through her work and her writing.

One question relates to the students themselves. Whilst it might be tempting to make assumptions that young students will find this form of learning more attractive than mature students I acknowledge this may not be the case. However, I can envisage some mature students being deterred by the use of ‘virtual’ characters as opposed to ‘real’ people, with the risk that images may appear to be cartoonish and provoke some
resistance to learning. I would be interested to know more about how different groups of students respond to these methods and how some potential resistance may be overcome.

My main concern relates to the issue of reductionism. The use of avatars may offer an opportunity to consider the visual ‘drama’ of an event or a set of circumstances, such as a domestic violence incident, as it unfolds and this may make a strong impact on students. However, with domestic violence as an example, I wonder if there is a risk that the multiple layers of social reality that underpin why it occurs, including issues of power and control that precede the violence, and how organisations should respond to this, may be subsumed. The more insidious long-term erosion of a woman’s respect, safety and emotional well-being that domestic violence in all its manifestations imposes, I would argue is much less easily depicted through the use of avatars. I wonder if there is a risk that ‘avatars’ are favoured for their visual appeal and other, more complex theories are confirmed as ‘boring’ subjects and less worthy of study. Is there a risk that using avatars for teaching about complex social issues, of which domestic violence is just one example, may narrow rather than widen the learning?

The author presents a strong argument for the use of enhanced and interactive ICT in teaching and there clearly is a case for the support, but not substitution for, traditional teaching methods. As well as lending themselves to classroom based teaching, such methods could also provide variety and motivation for students on distance learning programmes. I believe there is a need for engagement with, and debate about; the sorts of issues, theories, and methods of teaching that lend themselves well to this form of technology. There is also a need for discussion about what should remain embedded in the more traditional methods of classroom teaching, interactive debate and dialogue. I would hope that this is the start of a debate about how and when these methods could be best deployed and any safeguards that may need to be considered in their future use.

Charlotte Knight
Associate Researcher
Division of Community and Criminal Justice
De Montfort University, Leicester