Using Virtual Reality Tools in Design and Technical Graphics Curricula: An Experience in Learning

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Introduction

Three-dimensional visualization ability, to a great extent, determines students' performance in design and technical graphics courses. Prior research shows that 3-D visualization ability greatly influences students' future career success in science, engineering, and technology (McKim, 1980; Norman, 1994; Pleck et al., 1990). Students without sufficient 3-D perception ability may become frustrated and drop out of CAD programs, or may be advised to pursue studies in areas that do not require CAD skills. However, if students could improve and gain confidence in their 3-D visualization skills, they would enjoy CAD instruction more and become more engaged. Fortunately, prior research also shows that visualization is a skill that can be learned, developed, and improved with proper instruction and methods (Bishop, 1973; Gagon, 1985; McKim, 1980). Thus, to help our students remain in and succeed in CAD programs and to succeed in their future careers, it is essential to find effective methods for delivering graphics concepts and for enhancing student 3-D spatial visualization skills.

One way to enhance students' ability to visualize 3-D objects is to make their experience of the objects as realistic as possible while learning. Recently, virtual reality has brought learners closer to a natural learning environment. VR immerses viewers in computer-generated stereoscopic environments. Using special equipment such as data gloves and joysticks, users can interact directly, and more realistically, with virtual models in a virtual environment.

In industry, VR has proven to be an effective tool for worker training and helping designers evaluate product designs. For example, GE Corporation used VR to determine part removal paths for machine maintenance (Abshire & Barron, 1998). Motorola developed a VR system for training workers to run a pager assembly line, and they discovered that participants trained in VR environments perform better on the job than those trained for the same time in real environments (Wittenberg, 1995).

In academia, the potential of VR has especially drawn the interest of mathematics and science educators. Several prior experiments have shown that VR can help students understand abstract

spatial data and scenes that cannot be physically realized (Bell & Fogler, 1997; Haufmann, Schmalstieg & Wagner, 2000; Winn & Bricken, 1992). VR can also improve users' visualization skills (Osberg, 1997). In contrast to reading textbooks and listening to lectures, VR allows students to see images and move around in a virtual environment. Prior studies report that VR is especially effective when students use VR tools to create virtual objects, rather than to just look at objects or worlds which have already been created (Byrne et al., 1994). The new learning paradigm could create a dramatic benefit for all students, particularly for visual learners.

Using new technology in education can both improve learning and make learning more enjoyable. Some prior studies showed that VR appears to improve student motivation (Byrne et al., 1994; Sulbaran & Baker, 2000). In one study, 82% of learners rated a VR learning environment more engaging than learning from reading books or lectures with overheads containing graphics or pictures (Sulbaran & Baker, 2000). At the same time, new technologies demand critical evaluation to determine their proper and vital role in transforming educational styles. For example, due to advances in information technology, multimedia now provides greater flexibility in teaching and learning.

Although prior short-term experimental programs conclude strongly that VR can enhance learning, educators still must overcome several technological and educational challenges to bring VR into regular classroom use:
- When, where, and how should we introduce VR into existing curricula?
- How can VR be used as a communication tool, rather than just a visual aid, in the classroom?
- How should we teach students to use VR tools?

Introducing new technology into classrooms also brings in the requirement for course reformation. This paper describes a teaching and learning experience in which VR tools were introduced into design and technical graphics courses at three educational institutions. In particular, findings are presented that show how the implementation of VR technology affected and changed pedagogical practices between instructors and students in classrooms at the three educational institutions. Implementation findings provide insights into how to use VR technology in design and technical graphics education, which can help instructors effectively introduce the new VR tools in their classrooms.

Implementation

The project was a collaborative effort, which involved two community colleges and one four-year university. A VR software tool, VRCADViewer, was developed using open source software from OpenSceneGraph (www.openscenegraph.org). VRCADViewer can create and separate left-eye and right-eye images of a CAD model, so that the model can be viewed stereoscopically. Each of the participating instructors developed instructional VR models for topics they planned to cover in their classes. For this project Autodesk Inventor was used for CAD model creation, because all three participating institutions already owned the Autodesk Inventor CAD software tool. However, since Autodesk Inventor does not have VR display capability, Inventor CAD models were converted to file formats that VRCADViewer could recognize, for example, .3ds, .osg, .wrl, and .iv.

Participating instructors were invited to attend each other's classes to provide peer-observations. Several instructors from the Curriculum and Instruction Department were also invited to each class to provide feedback concerning instructional delivery and pedagogical practices.

In the first test class, held at the four-year university, basic information concerning 3D engineering graphics was introduced. Example 3D models, corresponding to printed images from the course textbook, were used to present the concepts. Rather than using traditional CAD model viewing methods, the new VR tool was used to help students visualize 3D models from different views (Figure 1). After the students acquired 3-D spatial concepts, they were asked to sketch projection views of the models.
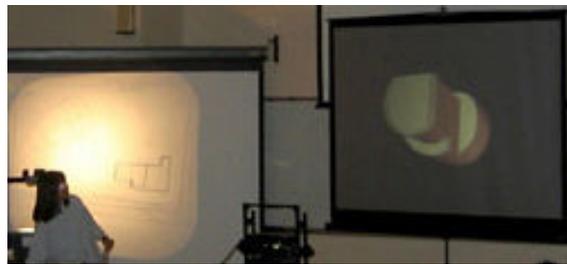
(a)

(b)

Figure 1. First test class.

Figure 2. Second test class.

Immediately following the test class, the instructors from the Curriculum and Instruction Department held a meeting to discuss their experiences and to develop recommendations for improving instructional delivery and pedagogical practices. The team of experts recommended using virtual models for real-world mechanical parts for instruction, rather than less-meaningful models from the textbook. They also recommended allowing students to create and manipulate models. Both recommendations were followed for a second test class.

In the second test class, the concept of pictorial views was covered. Students were invited to personally manipulate models and to explore the models from different views (Figure 2). Real-world mechanical parts, with more complex geometries and moving parts, were used. Students involved in the test classes made positive comments about using the VR equipment during lectures.

In the third test class, held at one of the community colleges, descriptive geometry was covered. The instructor explained how to find and draw a surface line that represents the intersection of two cones. The instructor first used a SMARTBoard™ to explain the concept using 2D sketches (Figure 3(a)). He then used the VR tool to show the 3D relationship between the two cones (Figure 3(b)).

Using conventional 2D viewing methods, most students struggle to grasp the true shape of the surface line. The VR tool gave a better spatial realization of the objects and what the surface line actually looked like in 3D space.

In the fourth test class, held at the second community college, the instructor covered using Visual Basic programs to drive a CAD software tool to create generic geometric forms representing mechanical parts (Figure 4). First, students were asked to develop a program that would produce a cylinder and a sphere with specific dimensions. They were then asked to verify their results against a VR model. Next, they were asked to modify their programs to make the center of the sphere coincident with the center of the cylinder. Again, students used a VR model to verify that the output met their expectations. Finally, students were asked to visualize shortening the cylinder by a specific amount and to produce the change by editing their programs. After their programs produced the change, they were again asked to examine a virtual model and to compare their results with their expectations.

The purpose of the learning exercise in the fourth test class had two goals: (1) to enhance logical thinking and design processes through programming, (2) to use a 3D virtual model to verify and illustrate the results of logical thinking and design processes, and (3) to begin to develop a visual and conceptual 'sense' for the effects of change in both the local and global state of a component's form. All three goals rest upon the precept that students, when offered a model with which to compare their own concepts, will develop a sense of how change creates impact on a design. After the first change exercise, students were led through a full series of model changes and given an opportunity to compare their 'mental' expectations against a virtual model illustrating the change impact.
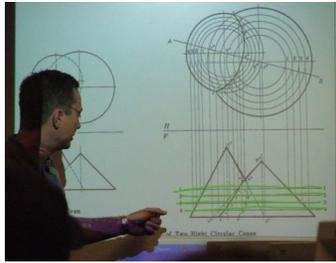
(a)

(b)

Figure 3. Third test class

Figure 4. Fourth test class.

Classroom Impacts and Pedagogical Change

The most obvious impact that using VR technology had in the test classes was *increased student motivation*. Students appeared to be excited about using a new technology, which previously was not available in the classrooms. Within the first few minutes of using the VR tool, students often made comments that they were either surprised about or felt affirmed in their expectations by what they were seeing. A handful of students made casual comments comparing what they were seeing to video games they used at home. The correlation was interesting, because it indicated that students were attempting to adapt to a new instructional technique by relating their classroom experience to a familiar personal experience. They were attempting to create a zone of comfort by drawing on what they saw to a similar technology that they had already used.

Students' engagement with their instructors and other students increased, due to several factors. The first factor was a significantly shorter mental feedback cycle. Students could produce

a model and see the result using the VR tool. As a result, they had a realistic virtual 3-D product that was similar to a real object that they could hold in their hands. Their minds were no longer forced to mentally convert 2-D images into mental 3-D scenes, before they could develop and accurate concept of an object's shape and dimensions. Instead, they had a virtual product right in front of their eyes.

A second factor which had an impact on classroom interaction was that students appeared to accept the technology as an *instructional tool* rather than as a tool for critiquing their work. Students who were normally reticent about sharing their CAD drawings with other students seemed more willing to share their models and images. On the surface, it seems that one reason for the change in classroom behavior was that, since the technology was new to the classroom, most students felt they were on equal footing; they were all embarking on a journey together. As a side point, students may also have felt more comfortable sharing virtual models because they generally require less explanation than 2-D drawings.

Virtual models also created a stronger connection between instructors and students, since they were able to explore 'what-if' scenarios together. The instructors and students, for the first time, were able to share a common 'mindspace' together as they proposed changes and saw the immediate impact of the changes. Receiving immediate virtual results allowed instructors to use even faulty expectations as teachable moments.

Evaluation Results

Student survey

Demographics   A total of 8 females and 30 males from the three institutions participated in the student survey. Students ranged in age from 18-57. Nineteen students were freshman, 11 students were sophomores, 5 students were juniors, 1 student was a senior, and 2 students identified themselves as other.

Students' graphics experience   Students' years of graphics experience ranged from 0 to 8 years.

Open-ended questions   Students were asked to respond to 3 open-ended questions. Overall, responses to the questions were positive. The questions, with a summary statement, follow.

> Q: *Describe the ways in which you found the VR models effective for your learning and provide examples*

Students' responses described their learning experience with the VR models as fun, more realistic, engaging them in their learning, and providing them with visualization enhancements.

> Q: *Describe two major strengths and two major weaknesses of the VR models and give examples for each.*

Students' described the strengths of the VR models as realistic, good for visualization, easy to understand, retained attention, made learning fun, gave ability to rotate objects and parts, improved depth perception, created better understanding, and was exciting. Weaknesses reported by students included expense, size of equipment, needed better resolution, difficult to work with, lag time and inconsistency of the program, more time consuming, some people not being able to see the stereoscopic view, location not mobile, dizziness and sickness as a result of viewing the VR models.

Q: Please describe your previous experience using VR and provide detailed examples.

Previous experiences using VR cited by students included Disneyland, CAVE, and one student who was epileptic and could not wear the 3D eyewear or participate in the VR experience because of the physical condition. Eight students had never used VR before and it was their first experience with the technology.

Student survey results and existing research findings   Survey results from the three institutions support existing research findings. A Likert scale was used for the survey, with 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = undecided, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree. Table 1 details the aggregate means for survey items.

The results of the survey show that students agreed or strongly agreed that the course improved their graphics communication skills; students agreed that they gained confidence in their 3-D visualization skills in the courses; students agreed or strongly agreed that VR is a good playground for experiments and that they wanted to experience VR again; students agreed or strongly agreed that learning with VR is more engaging than learning from reading books and listening to lectures using overheads containing graphics or pictures. Further, students from the three institutions disagreed with the item, "The VR program was dull and uninteresting," (mean=4.03).

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted to probe for a deeper understanding about students' experiences with the VR technology in the classroom. A total of five focus groups were conducted, which involved students enrolled in classes at the three institutions. Consistent focus group protocol was used for each focus group at the participating sites. The questions posed to students during the focus group follow with a summary statement for each question.

Q: How was your experience in this class different using the VR tool than in classes that did not use it?

All students stated that the use of the VR tool in their classes was a positive experience. All students reported that the use of VR in their classrooms was primarily in the form of a visual aid by the instructor, but unfortunately, they did not have access to the technology or equipment on their desktop computers for their own use. Several students mentioned that the use of the VR equipment by their instructors enhanced their ability to visualize models and that it made the experience more realistic.

Table 1. Aggregate means for common survey items.[1]

Survey Items	Aggregate Mean (n=38)
The course improved my ability to design products.	1.83
The course improved my problem-solving ability.	2.03
The course improved my presentation skills.	2.47
The course improved my graphics communication skills.	1.90
I considered dropping out of the program.	4.50
My instructor encouraged me not to major in CAD.	4.43
I gained confidence in my 3-D visualization skills in this course.	2.00
I enjoyed the 3-D instruction in this course.	1.73
I was fully engaged in the instruction in this course.	2.03
This method of delivering graphics concepts is the most effective.	2.23
My experiencing of the 3-D objects was realistic.	1.93
The class stimulated my interest in leading-edge technology.	2.00
The class improved the way that I learn.	2.33
VR is a good playground for experiments.	1.73
I want to experience VR again.	1.67
It is easier to view a 3-D world in VR than on a flat computer screen.	2.13
Learning with VR is more engaging than learning from reading books and listening to lectures using overheads containing graphics or pictures.	1.83
VR helped me better remember how to do something again the next time I used it.	2.50
VR technology is a useful tool for design and technical graphics education.	1.90
I can now use VR technology in product design.	2.77
My 3-D spatial visualization skills improved as a result of this course.	2.20
The instructional materials for this course were clear.	2.17
The instructional materials for this course contributed to my learning.	2.10
The VR is easy to use.	2.33
The VR program is user-friendly.	2.53
I believe that I could learn more in other subjects if VR programs like this one were available.	2.20
The VR program was dull and uninteresting.	4.03
The VR was not easy to understand	3.77
I could not clearly understand the material presented in VR.	3.77
I prefer to learn multi-view projections using 2-D pictures rather than VR 3-D simulation.	3.53
Viewing the VR model makes me feel dizzy.	3.77
I cannot see the stereoscopic view of the VR model.	3.93
I feel physically uncomfortable when using VR.	4.03
Using VR makes my eyes hurt.	4.00

[1] Scale: 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=-undecided, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree

Q: Are you now able to use VR tools in product design?

Because the students did not have the VR capability on their desktop computers in class, they did not have access to it for product design for their assignments or projects. They all were cognizant that their access to and experience with VR over the course of the semester was primarily as a visual aid by the instructor. Some students speculated on the usefulness of VR for product design and others interchanged the idea of VR with 3D modeling software.

Q: Do you feel that you are now a better candidate to join the workforce because of your experiences using VR technology?

Limited experience with and exposure to VR was again the prominent factor in students' responses. Students' frames of references were primarily to the different software programs they learned during the semester, however, some students saw the value of VR's use to their future in the workforce.

Q: What do you believe the strengths are of using the VR equipment/technology?

Students identified visualization, the ability to manipulate and rotate objects, the depth and perspective created through the use of VR, and advantages for product design as strengths of the VR equipment/technology. Students cited infrequency of use, no hands-on experience, and lack of exposure to VR as obstacles to providing a completely informed response.

Results for pre- and post-visual literacy tests

In order to examine students' conceptual growth and changes in their knowledge base about VR, pre- and post-visual literacy tests were developed. The test used includes 50 items, weighted at 2 points each, for a total of 100 points.

Twenty-five students took the pre-visual literacy test. Students' scores ranged from a low of 18 out of 100 to a high of 66 out of 100, with a mean score of 39.00. Post-test scores ranged from a low of 28 out of 100 to a high of 70 out of 100, with a mean score of 52.96. The mean increase for the students was 14.23%.

Results for pre- and post-mental rotation tests

A mental rotation test was used to assess students' growth in spatial visualization over the course of the semester. Twenty-nine students took the pre- and post-MRT tests. Pre-test MRT scores ranged from a low of 2 to a high of 34. Post-test MRT scores ranged from a low of 6 to a high of 39. The mean for the pre-MRT test was 17.69, and the mean for the post-MRT test was 24.17.

Discussion

All instructors and students were enthusiastic about using the VR tool in their classrooms. The use of VR models was connected to overall curricula taught in the classes. Thus, the use of VR models seemed to have a purpose, and was not just an add-on to the lessons. Students seemed

more engaged in collaborative groups formed to solve problems during the lessons.

Primary suggestions made by the instructors from the Curriculum and Instruction Department included providing opportunities for students to have more hands-on experiences with the VR tools, increasing student group activity, increasing opportunities for student to manipulate the VR models, and increasing student engagement during class sessions. Evaluation results confirmed the suggestions. The instructors were all open to providing more opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience with the VR tool, as recommended by the curriculum and instruction experts. To provide more hands-on opportunities, the instructors suggested developing an independent lab, separate from the instructors' computers and their classroom facilities, where students could work with their design models and then bring them into a VR environment. To connect use of the VR tool with authentic meaningful activities for the students, it is important to invite representatives from industry, who are currently using VR in for product testing and development, to speak with the students and to demonstrate possibilities for use of similar VR tools in the business world.

Future Directions

For the given study, typically, students were usually in a passive role, however, they expressed interest in more hands-on opportunities for working with the software. The instructors need to redesign their existing lectures and labs to provide more hands-on interactive opportunities for students, opportunities that will give them more control over their own learning and that will create a cognitively active learning environment. The course contents need to include more problem-based learning lessons using VR. Integrating VR in the classroom, beyond using VR as a visual aid during lectures, needs to be studied. Applying VR in other courses will also be explored.

To shift students from a passive role to a more active role, students need to explore current uses of VR in their particular areas of interest. Students also need to learn how to use VR to evaluate other students' designs. Finally, further research is needed to determine how the VR tool affects students' engagement in the subject matter and changes that can be made in both software design and in pedagogical methods to make the tool more useful and available to students, at a level comparable to other multimedia tools now used in education.

Acknowledgement

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