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The new digital landscape: a challenge for language users, observers and educational designers?

This paper considers the challenge of using new technologies in educational contexts and in analysing how they work - or fail to. I look at two increasingly pervasive learning environments and associated communicative practices - electronic discussion forums (or message boards) and avatar-based virtual worlds (such as Second Life). Focusing on the way in which these environments are used as spaces for the exchange of different ideas and perspectives (argumentation) and drawing on data from two research projects I will explore the following questions:

- ❖ How far do users of new technologies (such as school students in history or research students in second life) draw on the meaning-making potential of language combined with other semiotic modes?
- ❖ To what extent does access to new multimodal resources enrich the exchanges that take place in discussion forums and on educational islands in Second Life?
- ❖ What are the challenges and problems for linguistically based methodologies when analysing the interactions that take place in new digital environments?
- ❖ Based on the findings so far what might linguists have to offer educational professionals, programmers and designers and their target audience (students)?