

Christian Education in the Metaverse

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Abstract

The metaverse, an immersive virtual reality space where users interact with other users, has become a legitimate consideration for organizations as they strategize for the long term. Education is one industry, among many others, which has joined the metaverse with the hope of engaging students in a new way. Given the reach of the metaverse, Christian education and other faith-based educational institutions have the opportunity to interact and learn in a new way on a global scale. The purpose of this reflection is to offer a starting point for Christian educators and organizations to discuss this new endeavor of the future of education.

Education in web 3.0

Web 3.0, the era of the Internet which is characterized by advances in technology such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), has prompted major changes in culture and society. These technologies have altered way industries operate and how they are planning the future. Industries such as healthcare, commerce, manufacturing, and agriculture have all been and continue to be impacted by Web 3.0 accompanying technologies.

An additional area which has felt the impact of VR and AI is education. Educators and students from pre-school to university are continuing to assess, learn, implement, and utilize AI and VR technologies in the classroom. While challenges exist with these technologies, opportunities are available, as well.

One of the unique opportunities Web 3.0 has presented is the metaverse. The metaverse, can be described as, “a 3D-based virtual reality in which daily activities and economic life are conducted through avatars representing the real themselves” (Go, et

al. 2021). It has also been defined as, “concept of a future iteration of the internet, made up of persistent, shared, 3D virtual spaces linked into a perceived virtual universe” (Hackl, 2021). Though the metaverse has been in existence in some form for many years, it wasn't until Meta (Facebook) began to focus upon its presence in this space, that it garnered attention in media and academia. Consequently, the metaverse has grown significantly. For example, global brands such as Nike and Walmart are present there.

Along with these corporate brands, education has also entered the metaverse. The metaversity, or a “campus created in the metaverse” (Viano, 2023), has emerged as a new channel for educators and students to achieve educational goals. Morehouse College, Stanford University (U.S.), and Soonchunhyang University (South Korea) each have digital twin campuses in the metaverse. While studies are still being conducted on the efficacy of the metaversity, it has been found that Morehouse experienced a 10% increase in student grade point averages (D'Agostino, 2022), and that a metaverse education has positive outcomes in regard to personalisation of the course (Kahla, 2021).

The initial success of a metaverse education and of the metaversity brings creates new questions for educators, students, administrators, and other collaborators regarding finances, enrollment, security/privacy and other issues. However, Christian education and its stakeholders may have special opportunities and a unique calling to the metaverse. Higher education entities that are specifically faith-based offer environments which emphasize servant leadership, a holistic view of students, caring and concern for all individuals, and a global outreach for missions. The metaverse can encompass all these traits. The metaverse offers multiple opportunities for Christian outreach in addition to formal education. Podcasts, church services, Christian conferences, faith-based concerts, and other venues are possibilities. However,

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Christian higher education offers one of the most applicable and effective methods of involving persons in a realistic and pragmatic faith-based environment. Three areas of Christian involvement and efficacy include learning experiences, inclusion, and mission and outreach.

Opportunity #1: Learning experiences

Kye, et al. (2021) found education in the metaverse to be a space for social communication and high immersion through virtualization. With the continued popularity of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), the metaverse may be a place where personalized emotional and social skills may be practiced and perfected. In addition, a learner can be immersed into a learning experience not found in a physical classroom. The metaverse is an environment devoid of time and space. Therefore, the learner could be fully engaged in a Bible story just as easily as learning a chemistry lesson. For example, at Morehouse College, students were able to witness what it was like to be on a slave ship and have a discussion after the experience (Bellamy, 2022). Christian education could use the same model to discover what it was like to be in the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem, for instance.

Opportunity #2: Inclusion

Henschke, (2011) suggested elements of an inclusive classroom. These are setting a learning climate of respect and support, mutual negotiation of learning needs and learning experiences being planned by both the learner and facilitator. The metaverse provides a space where people with disabilities may thrive. No matter the type of disability (physical, mental, social, etc.), the metaverse possesses minimal barriers to participation. Cultural boundaries may be removed as avatars (digital representation of a human) dissipate stereotypes and language barriers. With the inclusiveness of the metaverse, a culture of acceptance may be realized in the Christian educational classroom. The Christian ethos of equity for all was exemplified by Jesus and his acceptance and compassion for the poor, the mentally and physically disabled, and the culturally shunned. The metaverse is an impartial environment for all persons.

Opportunity #3: Mission and outreach

In the metaverse, learners have the opportunity to perceive and observe from a different perspective and to collaborate with people they would not have in the physical world (Hwang and Chein, 2022). For Christian educators and students, this is an opportunity to engage in discipleship in a new way. The metaverse provides an avenue to extend mission work not possible in a physical environment. Constraints on funding, time, and travel are no longer problematic.

The educational institution can embark on Christian outreach to places they never thought possible. In addition, students have the chance to participate in servant learning and leadership in an environment where they help and empower others, build relationships, and foster faith-based connection around the world. The metaverse offers a truly global Christian perspective to missional opportunities.

The Future of Christian education in the metaverse

Within the metaverse, challenges have already been seen. For example, scholars have noted privacy risk, legalities, and addiction issues (Lin, et al., 2022). In addition, the metaverse has been a destination for inappropriate activities. However, this is no different than the internet in general and the physical world. Some argue the metaverse is too negative and that faith-based organizations should refrain from entering the space. However, there are currently numerous churches and other faith-based entities in the metaverse holding church services and connecting with other users on an almost daily basis. Therefore, faith-based education has a responsibility to be present, as well.

It is predicted the metaverse will be mainstream within the next decade. If this is accurate, Christian educators and institutions have a major opportunity to not only be a participant in the virtual world, but to play a role in its ever-changing culture and to make a difference in a world yet established. It may be posited this is the most important reason for Christian education to be present in the metaverse. As society continues to transition into Web 3.0, it is crucial that Christian education transition, as well. Christian education has made a difference in the world. But, the next world, the metaverse, awaits. **TEACH**

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