The Metaversity
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Schools and universities around the world moved quickly to adopt video conferencing technologies in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. The transition was abrupt, with applications such as Zoom, Blackboard and Canvas leading the way for remote learning. Over 4000 US universities and colleges closed their campuses and switched to remote learning in response to the virus, affecting at least 25 million students. For all the talk of stable or even increased productivity for companies and their work-from-home (WFH) policies, students at universities generally do not share the positive sentiment.

As such, students across the US have filed class action lawsuits against their colleges and universities seeking tuition refunds and other forms of reimbursement. In all, more than 70 Universities have been sued for refunds following these campus closures.[1] As an example of the sentiment, the complaint at Emory University alleges that students' college education during the Spring 2020 semester was lacking due to the "online experience presented by Google or Zoom, void of face-to-face faculty and peer interaction, separated from program resources, and barred from facilities vital to study."[2]

Virtual Reality as a Solution to the Problems with Remote Learning

Where typical video conferencing applications and other online communications tools fall short for students, universities are not necessarily turning away from the integration of remote learning. Virtual reality technologies are seen as a means to achieving this transformation.

This fall, students at 10 universities will attend so-called 'metaversities'. According to a recent article in Inside Higher Ed, "[a] metaversity is an immersive virtual reality platform where remote faculty and students don VR headsets and meet synchronously as they would on a physical campus".[3]

The idea here is to make online classes much more immersive and amplify the learning experience beyond the capabilities of the traditional in-person classroom setting. Imagine, as detailed in the Inside Higher Ed article, if a professor could remove a human heart from a cadaver and, virtually, hand it to a student who could then feel the weight of the heart and examine the organ. The organ could be enlarged to a point where the whole class could walk into the organ to touch and examine the ventricle walls. This is exactly the scenario already conducted at the Fisk University cadaver lab.

Morehouse College in Atlanta launched a metaversity pilot program in 2021, and has data to support the claim that the technology used can enable greater retention of the information that is learned.[4]

VictoryXR and Meta

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[1] Cappellino, Anjelica, J.D. "More Than 70 Universities Sued for Refunds Following COVID-19 Campus Closures". Expert Institute. Updated on April 27, 2022. Available at: https://www.expertinstitute.com/resources/insights/universities-sued-for-covid-19-refunds-following-campus-closures/ Accessed on August 4, 2022.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] D'Agostino, Susan. "College in the Metaverse Is Here. Is Higher Ed Ready?". Inside Higher Ed. August 3, 2022. Available at: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/03/college-metaverse-here-higher-ed-ready Accessed on August 4, 2022.

[4] *Ibid*.

The Morehouse College pilot program and each of the other nine universities mentioned are supported by tech from Davenport, Iowa-based VictoryXR, as well as Meta (formerly Facebook), to use Augmented Reality (AR) / Virtual Reality (VR) technology, including Meta Quest 2 virtual reality headsets, to enable the new approach.

Founded in 2016, VictoryXR provides AR/VR solutions for online education, as described on their website, to enable "'immersive classrooms and campuses'. This platform allows for students to interact in a synchronous yet virtual environment. Educators are given training and 3D objects (over 6,000 and growing!) to teach a variety of subjects to their students."[5]

VictoryXR CEO Steve Grubbs explains that students, using their VR headsets, basically enter their school's twin 'metacampus' (i.e.- virtual campus), with other students and professors for classroom activities:

> *It is persistent — meaning it's always there. You put on your headset and your metaversity is right there. And it is immersive and experiential, meaning that you learn kinesthetically in a metaversity as opposed to Zoom learning, which is not kinesthetic. You're not going to tear apart a car engine in Zoom, but you will in a metaversity.*
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> *It's a digital twin, so it looks exactly like the real thing — to the paint, the glass, etc. You're going to get the campus quad, and you'll have five to seven buildings and the interior of two to three buildings. That's generally where universities will start with their digital twin.*[6]

The ten colleges and universities are as follows:

- Morehouse College in Georgia
- University of Kansas School of Nursing
- New Mexico State University
- South Dakota State University
- Florida A&M University
- West Virginia University
- Southwestern Oregon Community College
- California State University
- Alabama A&M University
- University of Maryland Global Campus

Going Forward

To be sure, these 'metaversities' will coexist with their physical twin counterparts. Most students at these ten universities and beyond will continue to choose the physical classroom for the time being. As real as VictoryXR describes the experience, anyone who has donned a VR headset knows that it has its limitations. As much as interaction can be enhanced with VR – not just as compared to a Zoom session, but even as compared with the physical classroom – there is a whole philosophical question of what this option means for the social aspects of physical interaction in the classroom. Not to mention, educational best practices will need to be employed to ensure that student and faculty use data is not misused and that the interests and incentives of all parties remain aligned.

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[5] About Us. VictoryXR Website. Available at: https://www.victoryxr.com/about-us/ Accessed on August 4, 2022.
[6] Paykamian, Brandon. "10 Universities Plan 'Digital Twin' Metaversities for Fall". Government Technology. July 05, 2022. Available at: https://www.govtech.com/education/higher-ed/10-universities-to-launch-digital-twin-metaversities Accessed on August 4, 2022.