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Title Keynote: “Preventing social isolation: Avatar robots as alter ego for hospitalized students”

“As alter egos for students who cannot attend school in person due to hospitalization or medical treatment, avatar robots have been introduced to schools in Japan and Germany. The aim is to prevent social isolation and offer social participation and educational inclusion. This presentation introduces the findings of a qualitative interview study on the avatar robot OriHime (OryLab Inc.) in Japanese schools and AV1 (No Isolation) in German schools. Unlike a computer placed on a desk in the classroom, the avatar has its own presence through the ability to move and act independently and can foster a sense of belonging to a group. Through the possibility of gestures (OriHime) or facial expressions (AV1), the avatar facilitates communication with its reaction. Therefore, the avatar bears the potential to reduce fear and insecurity in interactions, counteract anxieties, and decrease the hurdle to return to school in person. The avatar’s presence also makes a difference in the awareness of the classmates and teacher. However, as I will discuss, avatar robots are not suitable for every student, and integrating them into the class community and raising awareness for the student’s condition are prerequisites to a successful experience.”

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