

Chapter 36

Second Life: Simplifying and Enhancing the Processes of Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds are quickly becoming standard in the technology-driven educational landscape. Much beyond its origin as a gaming platform, Second Life has grown into one of the most popular multi-user virtual platforms used by individuals and educators. The software platform provides an immersive instructional tool offering innovative opportunities for simulation, collaboration, and virtual field trips not easily replicated in the traditional or online classroom. Through a manifestation of self in a virtual world, a Second Life avatar enhances interaction in a virtual space, facilitating movement, choice, and interaction within the virtual environment, allowing the user to take on a visible persona (Falloon, 2010; Peterson, 2005). This chapter goes beyond simply advocating Second Life as a teaching tool in the higher education classroom by describing how Second Life can both simplify and enhance the teaching and learning process.

INTRODUCTION

In existence for 10 years, Second Life, a 3-Dimensional (3-D) virtual world designed and developed by Linden Laboratories, allows educators to teach in an immersive visual environment (Linden Laboratories, 2013). With an emphasis on social interaction, Second Life encourages instructors to rethink not only how they teach but

also how they deliver instruction. The creation and use of a unique and interactive environment provides access to users through Second Life settings, using real time interactions in a unique 3D multi-user educational environment (Bignell & Parson, 2010).

Second Life, one of the best known of the virtual worlds, consists of a flat-earth simulation of roughly 1.8 billion square meters, which would

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6046-5.ch036

be about the size of Houston, Texas, if it were a physical place (Warburton, 2009). First launched in 2003 by Linden Laboratories, a San-Francisco-based company, Second Life supports a high level of social networking and interaction. Individuals enter Second Life as avatars that can take any form the user chooses. In the Second Life virtual world, residents can explore environments, meet and socialize with other residents (using voice and text chat), participate in individual and group activities, and learn from designed experiences. Built into the software is a 3-D modeling tool, based on simple geometric shapes that allow anyone to build virtual objects. These objects can be used in combination with a scripting language to add functionality.

Colleges have turned to online learning environments to address the educational challenges of today. Their missions and a changing skill set for the 21st century student are key factors which drive the need for instructional transformation. Other factors which are encouraging a change in educational delivery to include additional critical thinking and interaction are: “1) Global demands on society as a whole; 2) the changing aptitudes of students and faculty; 3) and consumer demand for education content delivered through multiple media” (Atkins et al., 2010, pp. 6-7). Additionally, “academic institutions, charged with equipping graduates to compete in today’s economy” (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008, p. 4), are looking for ways to embrace the opportunity for collaborative learning. Integrated with technology, collaborative learning may improve educational quality and create a more student-centered environment (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008). These changing teaching philosophies “support the constructivist approach to education” (Lowerison, Sclater, Schmid, & Abrami, 2005-2006, p. 402). Thomas Friedman (2006) analyzed the ways in which all countries will eventually become as one in business and other capacities, declaring that the “world is flat” (p. 1). He predicted that the integration of Web applications, software packages, mobile devices, and learning will become

one in the future as the clouds begin to merge. Colleges and universities are establishing student communities in the virtual environment. Second Life is being used as a recruitment tool, pulling in the next generation of users from Generations X, Y, and Z. Researchers have begun identifying how Second Life can be used to enhance student learning as well as building student and faculty communities. Traditional and wholly online institutions are enhancing their online teaching methods by offering students classes in Second Life. Courses can easily integrate other Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs, and course management systems with the Second Life environment to enrich the learner’s media experience. The rich media integration is also a major advantage of Second Life that is valued by many educators.

Distance learning instructors delve into technologies that provide a positive impact on their course materials. The use of virtual worlds has become popular for delivering education and training because of their collaborative and interactive nature. Government agencies and businesses are also very interested in the use of virtual environments (Alvarez, 2006) for the same reasons and thus are studying them to discover their effectiveness in the delivery of courses and/or training. “The fact that virtual worlds combine technology, social learning, role playing and games make them a ‘sleeping giant’ in education, despite concerns of cost and widespread acceptance” (Alvarez, 2006, p. 1). Virtual worlds have distinct characteristics and are not considered to be strictly technology-driven games. Focusing on the educational uses for the classroom, virtual worlds such as Second Life are more suitable for training and education (Alvarez, 2006). Many simulations are being designed, developed, and implemented in-world for a variety of purposes such as facilitating learning for pre-service teachers designing classrooms, teaching personal finance through a game simulation, and conducting role playing activities. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2005), people who train on a simulation program or game where they have a chance to “practice by doing” retain

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