

Chapter XXVII

The Usefulness of Second Life for Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Within academia, distance learning as an approach to education has its share of skeptics. Regardless of how some feel about the methodology, it has become a viable alternative to more traditional classroom instruction. In fact, distance learning methods such as learning management systems, video conferencing, and CD-ROM programs can yield success in second or foreign language courses as well. While those other computer-based learning tools have produced positive results, this study attempts to gauge the usefulness of an Internet-based virtual reality environment called Second Life. This virtual world, not initially intended for second or foreign language teaching, contains environments that are similar to those found in the “real world” that can be manipulated by users for educational purposes. The subjects in this study—three students in an introductory German class and students of two semesters of composition—45 in number, all felt that Second Life helped their language progression and/or helped inspire their writing. All wanted to see expanded use of Second Life in their classes.

INTRODUCTION

Everett Rogers (2003) first described how people adopt and embrace change in his book *Diffusion of Innovations*. Rogers stated that members of

a society do not accept new ideas all at once. Instead, the adoption of innovations resembles that of a bell-shaped curve. The innovators are a small percentage of people who bring about change. The early and late majority of adopters

comprise the bulk of society. And, lastly, the laggards—those who either never accept a new idea or are the last to do so—make up another small percentage. While Rogers used his bell curve to describe economics and consumerism, it can certainly be used in other areas as well, especially education.

The trend in education tends to be that a very small percentage of bold yet risky instructors represent the innovators. They put their reputations and often their jobs on the line for a new instructional approach or tool. The rest of the education populace seems to fall into the late majority and laggard categories, with the bulk of them being laggards. Educators are often skeptical of new teaching tools and approaches, primarily because they do not believe that many innovations actually improve the learning experience, much less equal that of previous techniques. However, it has been theorized and proved that distance learning is a viable alternative to standard classroom-based instruction. Specifically, *Second Life*, a form of distance learning in an Internet-based virtual reality, can be an excellent supplementary tool in a second or foreign language class.

DISTANCE LEARNING

As new technologies become accepted in education, instructors are encouraged to adapt and incorporate them into their pedagogy. Many innovations are intended for the enhancement of the classroom experience itself. Some of these frequently adopted tools are overhead projectors with transparencies, streaming audio and video from the World Wide Web, and PowerPoint presentations with LCD projectors. These tools make the learning experience much more interesting for students and teachers alike. However, there are few widely accepted innovations surrounding Distance Learning. One reason for this is because of the often prohibitive cost of high-speed networking and equipment on both the sending and

receiving end of the exchange. But what exactly is distance learning?

Kathleen Davey (1999), founding Dean for Instructional Technology at Florida Gulf Coast University, defines distance learning as “any formal educational process that occurs with the teacher and the student separated by either time or distance” (p. 44). Given that definition, distance learning is not a new phenomenon. Students who are given homework or take-home essays are clearly obtaining their knowledge through a means of distance learning. The evolution of the practice has included heavy use of the Internet and the World Wide Web for course delivery, communication, and document exchange.

However, many in academia have become familiar with the interpretation of distance learning provided by Dr. Jan Wilson (2002) of Jacksonville State University. She states that “distance learning is an educational approach that integrates technology, connectivity, curricular content, and human resources” in order to teach students out of the traditional classroom (p. 638). In that respect, distance learning is relatively new. That, then, would explain some of the reluctance of those in education to implement distance learning in their curricula.

Dr. Charles Notar (2002) of Jacksonville State University, along with his colleagues, say that the use of technology in the classroom has been met with so much resistance and reluctance “due to the unfamiliarity” many teachers have with those new methods (p. 649). They state that teachers would rather rely on their “traditional methods of teaching and interacting with students” (Notar et al., 2002, p. 649). Indeed, teachers’ skepticism of distance learning is not without reason. Many in academia believe that new innovations, especially those that are of the technological variety, do not equal the educational experience of the classroom. According to Dr. Gilbert Furstenberg (1997), a senior lecturer in French at MIT, teachers simply do not want to take the time to learn about new innovations because they fail to see their roles

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