Chapter 4.7

Second Language E-Learning and Professional Training with Second Life®

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 technologies are described as new and emerging for all fields of knowledge, including academia. Innovative e-learning formats like on-demand video, file sharing, blogs, Wikis, podcasting and virtual worlds are gaining increasing popularity among educators and students due to their emphasis on flexible, collaborative and community-building features, a promising natural channel for the social constructivist learning theory. This chapter addresses the application of e-learning in university degree programs based on exploiting the practical, intensive and holistic aspects of Second Life® (SL™). Although the specific framework dealt with is English as a foreign language, it seems feasible to assume that the learning processes are equally transferable to other disciplines. In light of the aforementioned premises, the outlook of e-learning 2.0 approaches require action research and shared experiences in order to back up or challenge the claims and expectations of the academic community concerned with best practices in education.

INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO WEB 2.0

With the arrival of the so-called Web 2.0, a term coined by Tim O'Reilly (2003), windows of opportunity have burst wide open for internet users to participate, share, communicate and collaborate with one another in order to spread knowledge and learning experiences. The second generation web,

coupled with a significant increase in users, has been favored by the appearance on the scene of new technologies such as AJAX, FLASH or RUBY, and standards like XML, XHTML, RSS, RDF and CSS. The combination of these new support systems, plus the fact that internet access has reached even the most remote corners of the globe, has generated the development of innovative Web applications. Unlike their predecessors, the latest developments are not merely limited to displaying multimedia information. They also allow users to interact, modify or create more dynamic and enriched information by means of the integration of social networks (nodes where users interact and share knowledge) as well as encourage initiatives in collaborative web projects.

Regardless of the degree of acceptance and use made of Web 2.0 thus far, the availability of a continuum of tools, applications and platforms is progressively leading higher education towards making virtual learning activity a viable option. Although a minority of teachers and learners has adopted interactive learning models to date, these can alter current educational practices. For instance, by substituting teacher-oriented linear learning processes for a methodological approach where students choose their own resources, manage their learning, collaborate with co-learners, communicate and socialize through blogs, wikis, postcasting, chats, learning and knowledge communities, and learning management systems (LMS) like Moodle™ (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment is a trademark of Open Source Initiative). Worthy of mention is the birth of Sloodle™ (Second Life Object-Oriented Distance Learning Environment), an Open Source Initiative Project application which allows Second Life® and Moodle™-users to share certain tools in this brave new virtual world for educational purposes.

This study is centered on the analysis of user-learner capacity to engage and interact in English as a foreign language for the future professional purposes of engineering students. Total immersion in the specific learning scenario of virtual worlds offers the global experience of exposure to elements of interaction rarely present in the teaching-learning of isolated items of knowledge. Three-dimensional interaction provides the means to create motivating environments for students to learn in context, such as foreign language sessions held in a monumental setting of the target language country (Stevens, 2008). In this type of environment the central and the periphery components of any topic are presented as a whole to learn from. Computer Assisted Language-Learning (CALL) specialists are particularly interested in the emerging concept of the second generation Web. The second language learning prospects it can offer regard students collaboratively constructing knowledge on topics of common interest while using the target language and publishing pupil-authored reflections throughout the entire creative process. Thus, the interactivity promoted by these new technologies is bound to have a profound impact on how CALL is approached. Nonetheless, a crucial question remains – Just how effective is a virtual world for second language learning and professional training?

In order to unfold this desideratum, the aim of the work herein presented lies in examining the potential of various pedagogical aspects and second language learning strategies for professional training purposes with the 3D virtual platform Second Life®, a.k.a. SL™ (an unregistered trademark of Linden Research, Inc.). Of the many motivational resources included in this social networking environment, first is virtual role play represented by the individual learner's avatar (Figure 1). Secondly, preferences in engaging activities and interrelationships with other **avatars** are analyzed once immersed in the simulated setting (Figure 2). Finally, the effectiveness of the methodological domain for learning foreign languages for professional applications is scrutinized with research instruments, namely, a learner questionnaire and

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