

Chapter 15

Second Life: A Novice/Expert Teaching and Learning Tale

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of educational institutions are trialling the use of virtual worlds as teaching and learning environments, particularly for distance education students. In 2009 the authors have begun a research project to explore the efficacy of one such virtual world, Second Life, as a viable adjunct to other online learning experiences. However, it is now recognised that most academics have no experience of teaching in a virtual world. An integral aspect of our research is to examine whether a novice user of Second Life could quickly learn to teach effectively with this tool. The teaching experience is outlined from two points of view: the novice and the expert. The emergent themes are discussed and conclusions are made regarding the efficacy of Second Life as a teaching and learning environment for distance education students and the level of support that might be needed to assist other novices to teach in-world.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning, usually conducted through a learning management system (LMS), is the norm rather than the exception in higher education institutions across Australia and, indeed, world-wide. However, this form of learning can still

be isolating as interaction between students and between students and academics may be limited. While having online contact can contribute to students developing a greater sense of community than is possible in the traditional paper-based approach to distance education, it still falls short of the development of meaningful relationships

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that can enhance engagement and learning (Jennings, 2003).

In 2009 this institution had more than 80% of students studying off-campus, from a distance via an LMS (Gregory & Tynan, 2009). They are provided with unit materials, discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, wikis and various Web 2.0 e-learning tools to interact with other students and with their educators. Second Life, one of over 200 virtual worlds (Gregory et al., 2010), is an additional e-learning tool offered in a few education subjects, predominantly, but not exclusively, Education Information Communication Technology (ICT) units. The aim is to provide enhanced interaction and learning for students.

Outlined in this paper are the authors' tales about teaching in Second Life. The writing style adopted for this paper is grounded in the reflections of the authors, both reflection-in-practice and reflection-on-practice (Schon, 1983). These reflections are presented from two viewpoints: the authors' reflection-in-action during the workshops and their post-teaching reflection-on-action.

This chapter is one aspect of a wider research study on the use of Second Life and describes the academics' viewpoint.

BACKGROUND

Sue subscribed to Second Life, created a virtual environment, Education Online, and began teaching in Second Life in 2008. She gave several presentations about her journey to interested parties (Gregory, 2008; Gregory & Smith, 2009; Gregory & Smith, 2010; Gregory, Reiners, & Tynan, 2010). Yvonne heard the story and created her own presence in Second Life in 2009. An avatar is someone's virtual 3D persona which can be in any form desired (Gregory & Smith, 2009). Jass and Tamsyn (see Figure 1) are always known as such when teaching in Second Life. Human forms were chosen for their avatars for professional reasons.

In 2009, the authors decided to embark on a project together. Yvonne could see the potential in using an e-learning tool such as Second Life to engage and interact with her distance (off-campus) students. An investigative study was developed to explore whether a virtual world such as Second Life could be used for professional experience (practicum) practice and supervision. While the possibilities seemed exciting, it was realised that there was a need to start small and work up to the end goal, particularly as Yvonne was a novice in the use of Second Life.

Figure 1. Jass Easterman and Tamsyn Lexenstar at Australis4Learning (Second Life Classroom and Playground)



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