



A Virtual Presence: Creating Connections through Second Life

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Literature review

The use of virtual worlds in higher education, particularly for distance education students, has gained in popularity in recent years. A recent paper focusing on the Australian and New Zealand situation [1] outlined the activities of around 20 academic institutions that are delivering a wide range of learning programs primarily in Second Life, probably the best known virtual world supporting higher education. In North America, one of the key providers of distance education, San Jose State University, opened its Second Life campus in 2007 [2] and other leaders in distance learning, such as the UK's Open University, also have a strong presence in Second Life [3].

The creators of Second Life, Linden Labs, have been quick to see the possibilities offered by linking with educators. They market Second Life as 'the leader of compelling, cost-effective virtual education solutions to amplify an existing curriculum or create new models for engaged, collaborative learning.' [4].

This move to the use of virtual worlds for distance teaching has been seen as a positive step in attempting to meet concerns expressed by many students regarding the isolation and lack of connectedness they felt when undertaking distance study. Caplice [5] notes that from her experience, external studies fail to provide the learning opportunities afforded by the traditional tutorial and Heirdsfield, Davis & Lennox [6] highlight isolation and the lack of face-to-face contact as some of the challenges of distance education. In a survey undertaken by Schmidt and Gallegos, IT students were concerned about their lack of interaction with both faculty and classmates [7] and Valentine noted the need for distance students to 'feel part of a community' [8].

The study

Within Australia, one of the largest providers of distance education is Charles Sturt University (CSU). With 20,000 students enrolled in DE subjects, it has a commitment to excellence in the development and delivery of online education [9]. One of the leaders in the field at CSU is the School of Information Studies (SIS), which has offered DE courses for nearly 30 years. A review of SIS courses was undertaken during 2008/9, and as a result new courses were introduced to take advantage of the affordances offered by the online, particularly Web 2.0, environment [10].

In 2009, after investigating the possibilities offered by virtual worlds, the decision was made to invest in the development of a Second Life learning centre. The learning centre comprises classrooms, a lecture theatre and informal meeting spaces, where students interact socially, attend lectures and tutorials and access resources. The use of Second Life was then piloted in two subjects, with the results reported elsewhere [11]. The relative success of that first pilot led to further use of Second Life in 2011 and this paper will focus more directly on the experience and outcomes for undergraduate and postgraduate students studying an introductory preservation subject.

The number of students enrolled was small – 14 undergraduates and 8 postgraduates – with one subject coordinator and one tutor. With their major assignment to be delivered in Second Life as a formal presentation, there was a level of anxiety engendered in both cohorts. In order to allay this anxiety, the lecturer emphasised that marks would be awarded for content and presentation style, rather than ability to negotiate Second Life.

Students undertook one 90-minute training session in order to create their avatar, learn how to use the virtual space and work through any technical issues. All students found one session sufficient to gain a basic level of proficiency in the virtual world, although for some students not all issues relating to technology were resolved. Students also attended two virtual lectures and were encouraged to ask questions and interact as if they were in a 'face-to-face' lecture.

Their major assignment, a slide presentation followed by discussion was delivered 'live' in Second Life with the other students as an audience, expected to interact, ask questions and make comment. To reduce the 'technological load' on students, their slides were submitted to the lecturer who uploaded them onto a 'virtual' laptop before their presentation.

This study sought to evaluate student perceptions at the beginning of the semester, and compare them with those expressed after their experience, but before their results for the subject were received. Due to the small cohorts, no formal questionnaire was developed and no attempt made to undertake statistical analysis of results. Instead, students were encouraged to express their expectations about the use of Second Life prior to their involvement via the web-based discussion board with which they were familiar. Their attitude to Second Life after completing the subject was gathered from responses to the anonymous end-of-session anonymous survey.



Results

Two of the students mentioned previous Second Life experience, the remainder appeared to have no familiarity with it. Twenty undertook the training sessions and two did not. This created a problem as the two students had to work through a number of issues during their presentation. A number of students started to 'play' in Second Life following their training, becoming familiar with what was available and how to negotiate the 'world'. All students did present in Second Life and attended at least one of the lectures. Most of the postgraduate students commented before using Second Life, half of the undergraduates commented. Comment was common across both cohorts, typically suggesting interest but a level of anxiety with the overall attitude being one of a cautious, 'let's wait and see' approach. The following examples sum-up the general attitude:

*... but must admit to experiencing some trepidation about Second Life!
Second Life is completely new to me, but I am looking forward to the task.
I don't have any idea how I going to manage with Second Life.*

Prior to the actual presentations, no student reflected on its potential to improve communication or assist in building networks or a sense of identity within the class. The strongest antagonistic comment came from one undergraduate student:

I have to say that I am a bit annoyed at being forced to use Second Life – I have fairly strong views about its many negative aspects and have seen first hand how it can detrimentally affect young people's real lives. I have refused to use it on principle in the past ...

In the subject evaluation survey, only a small proportion of the students directly mentioned their experience. Those who did comment were all positive, (with one exception included below) noting that it had been a useful and enjoyable learning experience.

Thus comments included:

Initially I was dubious about the value of using Second Life in this subject, however it proved a very valuable learning experience and the simulated classroom was a good way to interact with others in the class.

There was also probably more interaction with the lecturer than I have traditionally experienced, no doubt brought about by the Second Life assessment task.

This was an enjoyable subject...Second Life certainly has stretched the boundaries!

I was just wondering ... if our avatar will still remain the same etc. as I have a few friends on SL now I could actually see a Second Life classroom environment working well for the theory side of the training ...

However, one student did note that:

I am not convinced that Second Life provides much benefit. Yes it was good to hear other students but it also necessitated extra expense for purchase of headphones etc and connection issues caused problems my end which put me under more stress.

Discussion

The outcome of this small study does suggest that Second Life can provide an effective learning space for students. Initial anxieties as to working in a virtual world were common and no real surprise. Exposing students to any new technology, particularly when it is related to a major assessment exercise, is likely to cause a level of stress related to the challenge of using any new approach. The training program undertaken before doing the presentations enabled students to gain confidence and proficiency 'in world' and made the actual presentation relatively straightforward for most students. Two students did have significant technical issues in connecting to Second Life and participating which took some time to resolve. The only piece of negative feedback is likely to have emanated from one of these students.

During the presentations students 'sat' attentively and had to be encouraged to ask questions and enter into discussions that showed they were thinking about the presentation. Being unfamiliar with the virtual classroom, and also the physical one as DE students, it is not surprising that it took a little effort to engage students. And while not all students did actively participate, enough did to make it at times akin to an on-campus tutorial.

Given the low level of response to the evaluation conducted after the Second Life experience, broad generalisations are difficult to draw. However, it can be seen that those who did comment were generally positive and did see the virtual world approach as one with the potential to create a more inclusive environment, similar to a 'real world' classroom. The actual conversations conducted while 'in world', and the interaction recorded by the lecturer, also support the view that this environment encouraged more interaction than otherwise occurred in the usual DE experience.



The capacity for immediate and real world feedback to support authentic and peer learning experiences has been shown to be appealing to many DE students [12]. Students believe this helps them understand new concepts or challenges them to consider a range of viewpoints based on the immediacy and intimacy of the synchronous classroom. Students participating in classes conducted within a virtual world often cite 'gaining instant feedback' as one of the key benefits, and this was echoed by a number of students in this study. The challenge for lecturers when designing learning tasks and assessment tasks in virtual worlds is to ensure students are well-versed in the mechanics of the interface, basically the only negative aspect voiced by students in this study. However, the technical problems were essentially faced by only two students and, to some degree, this was as a result of their own reluctance to participate in the earlier training sessions. Given appropriate preparation, most students found Second Life easy and fun to negotiate and a positive learning experience. The overall feedback from the student evaluation surveys for both subjects were well above the School mean for its subjects, with the undergraduate program scoring 5.7 (School mean 5.35) and the postgraduate well above with 6.3 (School mean 5.37), confirming in part, the positive reception to Second Life.

Conclusion

This small study builds on earlier examinations of the role of Second Life in DE teaching. It confirms that while there is an initial level of anxiety and reluctance among students, after their experience 'in world' most responded positively, and a number noted that the exercise was beneficial and helped improve communication within the cohort. The small numbers responding suggests that, for most, Second Life was just another tool used in their learning journey that did not cause them any great anxiety after those initial concerns while for some, it did indeed provide significant benefits. Virtual worlds can create powerful 'connected classrooms'. For the School of Information Studies at CSU, more subject work will be conducted in Second Life and more research will be undertaken as to its efficacy in building a better sense of identity and inclusion for distance education students.

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