

# Chapter 10

## Developing Digital Literacies in Second Life: Bringing Second Life to Business Writing Pedagogy and Corporate Training

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### ABSTRACT

*The proliferation of virtual environments and their use in business and industry begs the question of where in higher education and corporate training various literacies associated with these digital environments, such as using the technology and critically examining its affordances and constraints in applications, can occur. The author argues that such literacy training can occur in business writing courses as well as in corporate training environments that engage students and trainees in situated learning experiences. This chapter describes an instructional approach that integrates Second Life in a business writing course, which could also be applied in corporate training; and it reports on survey research related to student perceptions of their learning experience with that pedagogy. The discussion also includes how the instruction can be implemented in a corporate training environment to give employees experience using and critiquing business applications in Second Life. Generally, students perceive that Second Life is appropriate to include in business writing pedagogy because it is relevant to their career development as more companies use it in their operations. Implications of this study include identifying activities to help train students with virtual environments that they may experience in workplaces after graduation and offering activities that can be used by corporate trainers to help those already in workplaces develop these situated digital literacies.*

### INTRODUCTION

Video games have proliferated throughout popular culture, as pre-teens and teens adapt to new

video technologies. Educators have adopted a fresh perspective on pedagogy that integrates students' familiarity with video game technologies. People in their twenties and thirties also have become gamers outside and within workplace settings. A number of companies are using video game technologies in

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training new employees or training employees for new tasks. James Gee (2007) observes that airlines and the United States' military uses simulators to train pilots, and Newitz (2006) acknowledges that American Express and Intel are using Second Life for training as well. With these technologies and their proliferation in workplace settings comes the need for new, digital literacy skills. Graduating college students who are entering the job market need to have these digital literacy skills in order for them to be able to be productive on the job in using and evaluating business applications of virtual environments.

Lankshear and Knobel (2005) assess the dimensions of digital literacy and ways for educators to become "digitally literate insiders" that are able to assess the many forms of this new literacy and the socio-cultural impact of the practice of particular digital literacies within learning environments. This literacy also extends to workplace environments that integrate virtual applications. To Lankshear and Knobel, digital literacy in its various dimensions is best represented or considered "as a shorthand for the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received distributed, exchanged etc., via digital codification" (p.9). Researchers and educators revise their assumptions about the forms and delivery of a text as they study and try to understand how, within multiple digital literacies, "the ways skills and techniques are acquired and become practiced and fluent within the context to participating in the social practices of a digital literacy" (p.21). This understanding can help educators and trainers develop classroom and training pedagogies that optimize learning of digital literacy skills.

Among the new literacies included in this scope are 3-D gaming and non-gaming environments. Second Life is an example of non-gaming 3-D environments. Gee (2007) acknowledges thirty six principles of learning and literacy that gaming environments facilitate. These include situated group learning and engagement with multiple

modalities of communication. He also suggests that such learning can be part of what Peter Senge (2006) calls the "learning organization," encouraging continuous learning and innovation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, Senge argues the need for employees to develop five particular disciplinary talents: self-awareness, mental mapping abilities, group learning, systems thinking and shared vision. All of these disciplines are entailed within learning environments that engage virtual environments such as Second Life.

The need for these new literacies and disciplines begs the questions, "Where can these new literacies and disciplinary skills be developed within academic and workplace programs, and how?" In this chapter, I argue that such digital literacy instruction can occur within writing pedagogy in higher education and with contextualized, situated training projects within business and industry. Further, I offer a description of a certain teaching approach that integrates these principles associated with virtual environments and findings of survey research associated with this approach. I describe two particular activities: The collaborative report assignment on which I report is an example of a problem-based learning activity, while the interview activity is an example of situated practice. Then I report on results of empirical research I conducted on students' perceptions of their learning experience with these activities.

## **BACKGROUND**

While the term "business writing" tends to generate images of documents that integrate tables and charts, letters and memos, several studies call attention to the increasingly multimodal nature of writing (Selfe, 2004; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; New London Group, 1996; Witte, 1992). Increasingly, writing is defined beyond the traditional perception of print-linguistic, text-based forms of composition; forms of representation

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