Chapter 15
Exploring Second Life as a Venue for Peer–Teaching:
A Case from Teacher Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online teacher preparation courses have become a popular way to offer professional development for both pre- and in-service teachers. This move has not only provided greater access to professional development, but it has also afforded learners with more non-formal learning experiences. Moving online, however, has largely replaced an important, traditionally non-formal component of the learning experience, namely peer-teaching, with more formal, less authentic student presentations. In order to explore a possible solution to this problem, 25 Teaching-English-as-a-Second-Language (TESL) students were trained to conduct peer-teaching activities in Second Life virtual world. The suggestions and implications given in previous Second Life research guided the implementation of these activities in the hopes that an informed design would overcome problems previously documented by other educational users of Second Life. Despite this, the authors were not able to over-

come previous difficulties, and did not find Second Life to be useful as a tool for peer-teaching in online teacher-development courses. Virtual reality, however, has promise for facilitating teacher development; thus, further investigation is needed to find an appropriate virtual venue for this purpose.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

This study was conducted at a mid-sized Midwestern state university. The university supports Desire2Learn course tools for managing courses, as well as a number of other products for use in computer-assisted teaching. While most of its course of-ferings are face-to-face, the school offers a number of completely online programs, including teaching licensure in the area of English as a Second Language. A number of the institution's online courses include a synchronous chat component in which students meet weekly for typically 90 minutes with their instructor and classmates in an online chat room. The ESL-licensure program was in its second year of being fully online when this study took place.

SETTING THE STAGE

Synchronous online courses at this institution often utilize Adobe Acrobat Con-nect Pro (after this Adobe Connect) conferencing software for their meeting space. Adobe Connect allows a number of individuals to gather in a two-dimensional room where everyone can use webcams, microphones, and/or text chat to communicate. There are spaces for projecting PowerPoint slides, sharing documents, and utiliz-ing a whiteboard, as well as the ability to form small groups, each with their own meeting room. The state-school system, of which this institution is a part, was in the process of creating its own Second-Life virtual island at the time of the study. Only students, faculty, and staff from the state system are allowed to enter the is-land, and the central IT office provides support for utilizing their pre-built venues, which we were minimally allowed to redesign and equip to meet our peer-teaching needs targeted toward teachers of both adult and K-12 students (see Figure 1 and 2).

There were two course sections of students who participated in this study, the majority of whom were seeking ESL licensure. A face-to-face section during fall 2009 (the pilot group) provided the context in which the technical elements of the project were tested. An online section—spring 2010—(the experimental group)

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