Chapter 24
Professional Development in a Virtual World

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ABSTRACT

The virtual world Second Life (SL) can be part of professional development deployment and mentoring using online learning. This chapter provides a portrait of professional development and teaching in SL. While SL requires a more extensive learning curve than might be expected, the virtual campus becomes a functioning instructional site for all disciplines, supplementing personal and text-based asynchronous learning in various other platforms with synchronous voice and text, enhancing the interactions in virtual professional development settings. In addition to regular face-to-face professional development meetings, the virtual campus allows faculty and staff to meet for professional development, mentoring, discussion groups, committees, and virtual academic conferences. Key ideas for operating educational sites in SL include training prospective faculty, staff, and instructors, mentoring, dealing with appropriate presentations of self as avatar, tracking activities and behaviors in SL, choosing modes of communication, and moving from lecture to discussion to immersive learning in media rich constructed spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) is complicated and has profound implications for the nature and quality of educational experiences for participants and the universities or schools that they attend;

yet faculty development in distance education is often limited and idiosyncratic. Universities and schools have bought learning management systems (e.g., BlackBoard) and various databases for communications and workflow (e.g., Sharepoint, Webstar, GoogleDocs) while others have focused on personnel and an open source LMS (e.g., Moodle). This chapter reports on the use

of Second Life (SL), as part of an overall hybrid deployment of DE with professional development, using autobiographical, archival, survey, and interview methods to provide a portrait of one implementation of instruction in a virtual world. The project started in 2006 and received funding from 2008 to 2011 from the Louisiana Board of Regents SELECT fund.

Faculty development has a tradition of formality. The faculty members meet and receive a lecture and then go their way. This results in virtually no implementation of the new ideas presented in the session, even with the best intentions and acceptance of ideas from the presentation. The flaw is the one-shot presentation without follow-up support. The use of technologies for instructional development fits this sort of framework, especially in the days of uncertainty surrounding the implementation of various online and distance education schemes. Online virtual worlds provide opportunities for presence and support for innovation that goes beyond tech-support, but certainly includes it. Park (2011) provides a framework for ubiquitous learning using various mobile devices that is based on the embeddedness of computing devices in various environments and connectedness of communication devices. He proposes the importance of using high levels of interactivity with distance learning that is compatible with synchronous platforms. A constructivist, hands-on, mentored, curricular model for faculty development (Bereiter, 1994; Glasersfeld, 1996; Joseph, Bravmann, Windschitl, Mikel, & Green, 2000; Keengwe, Kidd, & Kyei-Blankson, 2009; Kincheloe, 2005; Phillips, 1995; Pinar, 1994; 1998; 2004; Steffe, & Thompson, 2000) can replace the traditional model, using mentoring, collaboration and virtual words to achieve technology integration.

Generally, published research has yet to investigate synchronous support functions adequately. Supporting the notion of online instructor presence, Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found that the most important factors of that presence related to timeliness of feedback, clarifying requirements, and response to student needs. Although they did not investigate use of any synchronous platform, Sheridan and Kelly denigrate synchronous contacts and face-to-face online communication. Rodriguez and Anicete (2010) found a need for live online support from the instructor during the periods of online activities in the hybrid course, suggesting a need for synchronous involvement in faculty development training. McAnuff-Gumbs (2011) used asynchronous discussions to train coaches in best practices in literacy coaching. However, her participants indicated that the best practices could be difficult to carry out, and she did not follow up with their implementation although she found a mismatch between the presented environmental situations and those of the participants. Hu, Caron, Deters, Moret, and Swaggerty (2011) found that higher-education instructors benefited from establishing collaboration through an online learning community. Douglas-Faraci (2010) considered both synchronous and asynchronous issues in delivery of online professional development, suggesting that the potency of the learning comes from the use of various multimedia: audio, video, animation, graphics and text that activate various participant learning styles or preferences. She also noted that administrators and staff developers need to embrace both synchronous and asynchronous online development tools to further standards-based instruction using e-learning. Chiero and Beare (2010) demonstrate the feasibility of online development of teachers, with considerable advantage in their performance on various measures, and consider that their online population might be different from the campus-based population because of self-selection for the online course of study.

Yet we know that students and faculty engage in technological support. Darby and Speaker (2009) found students used cell phone more than any other technology to maintain contact and communicate orally and with text. Face-to-face (FTF) instruction has seen an explosion of mul-

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