Chapter 52
A New Vision for Distance Learning:
Learning to Teach in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This chapter centers on Second Life as a delivery option for distance learning in higher education. Social interaction is crucial for students enrolled in online courses, and instructors who teach distance education courses have long strived to promote strong and positive opportunities for interaction between and among learners. Second Life is a social virtual world which emphasizes the general use of immersive worlds for supporting an array of human activities and interactions, presenting innovative opportunities and challenges for enriching how users learn, work, and play (Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007; Prasolova-Førland, Sourin, & Sourina, 2006). A fundamental element of Second Life is the opportunity for real time collaboration in an immersive, 3D rich environment regardless of a user's geographical distance, allowing the user to more readily engage with the experiences as disclosed in real time. An avatar, the heart of the immersive Second Life experience, facilitates movement, choice, and interaction within the virtual environment (Gazzard, 2009).

INTRODUCTION

Second Life is a social virtual world, constructed mostly by its users, emphasizing immersive environments that support a variety of human activities and interactions, presenting a plethora of new opportunities and challenges for enriching how we learn, work, and play (Boulos, et al., 2007; Prasolova-Førland et al., 2006). Although Second Life was not initially intended for educational purposes when it was released in 2003, it has quickly become a valuable tool for instructors

from over 250 academic institutions and at least 15 countries (Foster, 2007; Bowers, Ragas, & Neely, 2009). Second Life has presented new opportunities for real time collaboration in immersive, three-dimensional (3D) rich environments without regard to geographical distance or traditional limits of location and space, allowing the user to engage in activities within real time (Gazzard, 2009). In Second Life the user is represented as an avatar, a virtual representation and embodiment of the user, facilitating movement, choice, emotion, and interaction within the virtual environment. An individual's personification with his/her avatar is the key to an immersive experience (Gazzard, 2009). Although avatars can take on human, animal, robotic and futuristic appearances, for classroom meetings and activities, they should appear in human form and wear classroom-appropriate clothes to minimize distractions. A key tenet of Second Life is the creation of a collaborative environment which supports team work.

Although allowing for 'anytime, anywhere' instruction, faculty and students who were engaged in traditional online teaching and learning frequently complained of feelings of isolation and loneliness (McInnery & Roberts, 2004). For many students and faculty, studying in an online environment can lead to frustration when sound interaction is poorly devised (McInnery & Roberts, 2004). If this frustration is to be minimized, faculty should put a great deal of consideration into communication methods to meet the needs of the students. Asynchronous communication generally does not give the immediacy that is required for successful social interaction because of the lapsed time between questions and answers. Virtual technologies provide opportunities for increased interactions and reduced isolation by encouraging communication and collaboration (Tu, 2005). Recent studies of online learning environments indicate that social presence, which offers a feeling of community and connection among learners, improves learning outcomes and learner satisfaction in online courses (Pic-

ciano, 2002; Tu & Corry, 2002). The Second Life Initiative at a regional, research-intensive university in the southeast portion of the United States encourages faculty and students to collaborate while immersing themselves in a virtual environment offering a greater social presence with the goal of a successful learning experience. Looking beyond learner satisfaction is the idea that collaboration improves learning outcomes and reduces the potential for isolation in traditional online courses. Within collaborative virtual learning environments, faculty and students have the chance to broaden and intensify their learning experiences, test out new ideas by sharing them with a supportive group, and receive critical and constructive feedback (Paloff & Pratt, 2005). Wang and Hsu (2009) posited, "Second Life instructors can design authentic tasks whereby learners can explore the world, solve problems, construct and negotiate meaning, and collaborate with other learners" (p. 80).

This chapter describes information related to the background of Second Life with a focus on the development of Second Life as a classroom for teaching, especially as used in higher education settings. Present perspectives on the current use of Second Life will be presented, along with a trajectory of future trends in this exciting adventure called Second Life. The chapter provides examples of authentic situations experienced within the Second Life environment.

BACKGROUND

Over the last few years, the emergence of 3D virtual environments to facilitate educational experiences stems largely from a set of socio-technical transitions such as wider access to broadband, the development of powerful Web 2.0 technologies, platforms and computer graphics capabilities, the emphasis upon social and experiential interactions, and advances in the uses and applications of the Internet. Together, these tools allow for a

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