

## Chapter 9

# Engaging Classes in a Virtual World

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are multi-user, interactive computer-simulated environments created for users to inhabit and interact via avatars, which are graphical representations of a person that can be personalised and used in the virtual world. In this research, 239 off-campus (distance) education students chose to attend weekly sessions in Second Life from 2008 to 2011. These sessions catered for a diverse group of students. It is internationally claimed that virtual worlds are engaging for distance education students. Engagement is the combination of student's feelings, observable actions or performance, perceptions, and beliefs. This mixed-methods research sought to investigate whether virtual worlds were engaging for adult student learners. Recorded in-world (in the virtual world) conversations and the completion of a survey by university students provide data from which the findings are made. In-world discussion found that the virtual world, in this case Second Life, is an engaging environment in which to learn. These findings indicate the need for further research in using a virtual world as an educational resource.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Research was conducted with voluntary students at the University of New England (UNE) in Australia. These students were enrolled in Information Communication Technology (ICT) Education or Teaching and Learning units (subjects) in an off-

campus mode from 2008 to 2011. The research was to determine whether a virtual world, such as Second Life, was engaging for the students who participated in the sessions. Over the semester students attended weekly sessions where they spent the first part of the session in a space created for them discussing topics relevant to education using

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virtual worlds. The second part of the session was spent attending virtual lectures from educators around the world or going on virtual excursions, tours, simulations, role-plays and web quests. At the end of each session, students regrouped to reflect on their experiences in the virtual world. Students were engaged during these sessions and this research demonstrates this.

Second Life is a virtual world, which is a low cost computer-based simulation with features of real and fantasy life and can be a substitute for many real world activities (Gregory, 2007). Second Life is one of over 200 virtual worlds (Campbell, 2009; Farley & Steel, 2009; Honey, Diener, Connor, Veltman, & Bodily, 2009; Lemon & Kelly, 2009). People enter a virtual world via their avatar, which is an electronic presence that imitates real life in the form of personal presence and can be personalized (Gregory & Smith, 2008). In the virtual world an avatar can interact virtually by talking (through text and audio, complete with lip sync), walking, running, sitting, dancing, flying, driving, riding, teleporting (moving locations), making gestures (such as clapping or waving), changing appearance (such as clothing, gender, hair and skin colour), interacting with other avatars and the environment including land formations, (Gregory & Smith, 2008), ie if the avatar walks into a wall, they cannot go through it, they have to go through doors that open, just like real life.

This chapter discussed research undertaken from 2008 to 2011 and firstly provides context of the study. This is followed by a discussion of three adult learning theories and how they relate to adults learning in a virtual world. Outlined is why the virtual world of Second Life was chosen for the research and how engagement was measured by students participating in virtual world activities. Methods of data collection and findings were discussed followed by ideas of future research and concluding remarks.

## **BACKGROUND**

When students are not on campus, a virtual world provides flexibility so students can connect through a highly interactive, immersive, multi-modal learning environment (Wood & Hopkins, 2008). For adults to learn and be engaged in a virtual learning environment, adult learning theories of transformative, constructivist and connectivism theories all need to be taken into consideration, using andragogy as an approach to teaching. A combination of learning theories contributes to one's learning in the virtual environment. The research presented here is an analysis of students' engagement in their learning via virtual world sessions over a four year period – 2008 to 2011. The students were studying education ICT or Teaching and Learning units UNE. They were either undergraduate or postgraduate students. Theories of how adults learn in a virtual world were explored by examining student's engagement in their learning. The result of this research is presented in this chapter.

## **ADULT LEARNING THEORIES**

### **Contemporary Adult Learning**

Theories surrounding the way in which adults learn is relatively new and have only bandied around since the time of Ivan Illich, in the mid 1950's. Adults predominantly learn by symbolic interactionism which is one's ability to manipulate symbols (Finger & Asun, 2001). There is no objective reality when it comes to human interaction. The meanings things have result from social interaction. Three learning theories, transformative, constructivist and connectivism, with andragogy as an approach to teaching, provide context to how adults learn in a virtual world.

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