

Chapter 16

Learning and Teaching in Second Life: Educator and Student Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Formal off-campus flexible learning has been a feature of higher education since the 19th century. The introduction of various educational technologies over the years has provided additional opportunities for learners to undertake courses offered anytime and in any location, providing greater flexibility for the development of cost-effective learner-centred curricula. With the emergence of 3D virtual worlds such as Second Life in 2003, educators are quick to realise the potential of such immersive environments to extend the flexible learner-centred approaches that have been a feature of off-campus learning over the decades. However, the benefits of technology-enhanced learning can be contradictory and incompatible and can both widen and reduce access to education. Despite the proliferation of articles attesting to the benefits of teaching in virtual worlds such as Second Life, until relatively recently, there has been a lack of empirical evidence reporting on the learning outcomes for students participating in these virtual learning sessions. Good pedagogical practices must be taken into consideration when educating in a

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virtual world. The case studies presented in this chapter aim to go some way in addressing this perceived gap in the literature. In this chapter, six authors from five Australian Universities provide their accounts of teaching in a virtual world and report on the learning outcomes as well as their students' perceptions of their learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Off-campus learning has been a prominent means of educating students for decades (Bates, 1997; Harding, 1944; Kalinić, Arsovski, Milanović, I., & Ranković, 2010), however, the focus on the delivery of materials has changed considerably with the advent of the Internet, social computing tools and emerging technologies. Students who choose to study by distance have traditionally been provided with paper-based study materials through the postal system, often supported by phone, voice mail, and in later years, email correspondence (Willems, 2005; Kalinić et al, 2010). As we move to a more technologically savvy world, students are increasingly being provided with their study materials online through a learning management system (LMS) where they can retrieve and share documents, read through study materials, view multimedia learning objects, interact with each other through discussion boards and chat rooms, use a blog for reflection, wiki for interaction and collaboration, or a virtual world such as *Second Life* for all of the above and more. A virtual world is a software-based solution that enables users to experience a simulated environment through an avatar persona, a person's 3D graphical presence.

The perspectives of educator and student experiences of learning and teaching in a virtual world from five higher education institutions are explored. Educators provide an overview of their perspectives of teaching in a virtual world, introduce their cohort of students and report on their students' learning experiences.

TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED OFF-CAMPUS LEARNING APPROACHES

Traditionally, on-campus education was the most common form of learning and teaching through face-to-face lectures and workshops where the education was passive and non-interactive. With the advent of online information communication technology (ICT), the capacity for learners to access information anytime, anyplace and using any device has become a reality for more than a quarter of the world's population (Wood, 2010). Web 2.0 and other emerging collaborative technologies employed by higher education institutions have extended these flexible learning options even further (Collis, 2008; Franklin, 2007; Gillet, Helou, Chiu Man, & Salzmann, 2008; Leslie & Landon, 2008; Rogers, Liddle, Chan, Doxey, & Isom, 2007). Students can still attend lectures, workshops and tutorials, but these are often supplemented (through blended learning) by incorporating elearning tools provided by the LMS. On-campus students are not always required to attend face-to-face sessions with their educator but can undertake their education through the use of wikis, blogs, discussion boards, chat rooms, social networking tools and virtual worlds. There is now greater interaction between on- and off-campus students as educators explore blended learning approaches to curriculum design (Graham, 2006; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Virtual worlds are an extension of LMS and Web 2.0 technologies as they incorporate many of the immersive, collaborative and interactive elearning tools and experiences together in the one portal.

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