Laying *Second Life* foundations: Second chance learners get first life skills

Merle Lemon and Oriel Kelly
Manukau Institute of Technology

This paper examines the use of a MUVE (Multi-User Virtual Environment) to train foundation students in interviewing skills. Foundation students at Manukau Institute of Technology are the first students to utilise the build on Kowhai in *Second Life*, designed and constructed as part of the SLENZ (*Second Life* Education in New Zealand) project. Research has suggested the potential efficacy of *Second Life* for education and that interview skills can be enhanced through virtual training in role-playing scenarios. Academic engagement and social engagement have already been displayed in early sessions in *Second Life*. The educational gains of using *Second Life* for interview skill development will be demonstrated through this pilot study and in future the build on Kowhai can be further developed and offered to many departments in institutions throughout New Zealand where interviewing is an essential part of the professional training package.

Keywords: *Second Life*, foundation education, immersive education, interview skills, MUVE

Introduction

"Engaging with *Second Life*; Real Education in a Virtual World" is a project funded through the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission's Encouraging and Supporting Innovation Fund, and began in July 2008. The project's aim is to determine and understand the additional value of an environment such as *Second Life* to adult learning experiences. Although the project is collaborative, this paper describes the experiences of educators and students in the lead institution only.

Second Life is a virtual world launched by Linden Labs on June 23, 2003. *Second Life* is a MUVE (multi-user virtual environment):

> a term used to describe a persistent 3D graphical environment accessed over the Internet which allows a large number of simultaneous users to interact synchronously. (Salt, Atkins, & Blackall, 2008, p 15.)

The new *Second Life* Education Blog states,

> Hundreds of leading universities and school systems around the world use *Second Life* as a vibrant part of their educational programs. (Virtual Environments Enable New Models of Learning, 2009, ¶1.)

The SLENZ (*Second Life* Education in New Zealand) project funded the building of a futuristic interview complex with a distinctly New Zealand atmosphere, where the main learning objective is the discussion, demonstration, and practise of key interview skills. The designed procedure is for a class to enter *Second Life* as a group, in the company of their lecturer. They create and personalise their avatars and take part in a number of orientation activities to allow them to learn to control their avatars: to walk, sit, shake hands, and speak, as well as to utilise the functionality of the virtual environment itself. This leads to interview preparation and critique of interview performance.

The pilot target is foundation students. Foundation students are sometimes referred to as bridging students, enabling students or second-chance learners. They are students who have decided to pursue

tertiary training despite not having the necessary school qualifications to continue on to tertiary training immediately. Foundation provides the "bridge" to further study. Interviewing is taught in some form in all foundation departments in institutions around New Zealand (Benseman & Russ, 2003, p.3.) Foundation or bridging education lays skills for academic and professional futures for students. A bridging programme provides a link between a student's past, his previous learning opportunities or lack of opportunities, and the possibilities that lie ahead for further training in an academic environment or employment in the current job market.

Whether progressing on to further tertiary study or entering the work force, foundation students will be faced with interviews and interview acumen will be a key to successful progression on their chosen pathways. It is hoped that the situated learning environment in *Second Life* will put students in meaningful, realistic activities which have direct application to their real life needs – it is hoped that interview skills learned here will enable these students to apply for further educational programmes or directly into the workforce.

In the real life classroom, students find lessons on interviewing to be a theoretical experience, with limited opportunities for role plays because of time and resource constraints. These constraints can be removed within the *Second Life* environment. It is possible to maximise the use of time as all students can practise interviews synchronously. Stephen Lieb (1991) is one of many educators who have acknowledged that adult students have a great need for social networking, for community, and the *Second Life* platform is ideal to promote this in a positive manner. The ability to be represented by an avatar provides a sense of security so that more reserved students can be encouraged to participate in role-plays in a less threatening environment. Jodie Coleman, a DECS project officer, who worked on the VATA Project in *Second Life* commented that students were "communicating more online than when they were sitting together in person." (2009.)

Second Life provides a rich 3D graphical world in which participants can customise their appearance and. behaviour. It is suited to "developing a sense of immediacy, shared experience and emotional closeness" (Salt, Atkins, & Blackall, 2008, p 15) which can have an impact on real life. Research has suggested that virtual learning environments can facilitate superior educational outcomes to traditional classrooms. (Schutte, 1997.) Loyalist College in *Second Life* has created a simulation for training border guards in interview techniques. Their executive summary states:

> The amazing results of the training and simulation program have led to significantly improved grades on students' critical skills tests, taking scores from a 56% success in 2007, to 95% at the end of 2008 after the simulation was instituted. The success of the program has encouraged over 650 students and 8 faculty to explore *Second Life* for mixed purposes. (Linden Lab, 2009, p.1.)

> "The learning in these spaces is amazing, and when we are working with 30% increases in success, there is nothing more memorable than that." -- Ken Hudson, Managing Director, Virtual World Design Center, Loyalist College (Linden Lab, 2009, p.1.)

Research indicates that both academic and social engagements are important factors in foundation learners' success. The utilisation of technology like *Second Life* to support student learning brings together both of these elements (Salt et al, p.26.) It aims at offering an engaging, dynamic and stimulating environment for students.

Keller's (2006) theory of motivational design can identify reasons why this environment is beneficial for the learning process. An individual's learning outcomes from participating in *Second Life* are directly impacted by the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to participate. (Salt et al, 2008, p.43.) Keller differentiated between four motivational design models: person-centred models, linked to the satisfaction of psychological needs and drives; environmentally-centred models, where motivation to learn is facilitated by moving students from extrinsic to intrinsic motivators; interaction-centred models such as Keller's ARCS Model (2006, p.12); and omnibus models, which are complete systems of teaching for specific instructional purposes.

Motivational design refers to the process of arranging procedures and providing resources that lead to increased levels of student motivation (Keller, 2006, p.3.) Keller stresses the importance of the designer considering processes and strategies for making learning appealing and rewarding. The key is that learning must be efficient in terms of teaching resources and time, inherently interesting and effective. This can be done by ensuring that motivational tactics support instructional goals.

According to Keller's ARCS Model, promoting and sustaining learning motivation is accomplished by: attention (through perceptual or inquiry arousal), relevance (using concrete language and examples), confidence (helping students realise they can succeed), and satisfaction (providing positive results and feedback) (Keller, 2006, p.7.) The environment of *Second Life* is ideal for promoting motivation through attention. The Foundation build in *Second Life* uses colour, design features, and striking graphics to enhance perceptual arousal. The information provided to students in the form of notice boards around the build has been designed to be simple, using concrete language and relevant examples. The scripts for specific job interviews were put together using concrete language and questions relevant to a specific job context. By starting students on simple activities, basic skill-building, then leading them step-by-step through successive stages and levels of interviewing it was hoped that students would be able to have successful and positive experiences.

There is another core area where *Second Life* provides opportunities for foundation education. There is a nationwide push towards improving levels of adult literacy. *Second Life* provides a tool for improving verbal literacy through avatar communication, reading literacy through information on note cards, notice boards, and links to documents and web pages, and digital literacy through using the computer for activities outside of mere document creation and presentation (Salt et al, p. 19.)

Method

Learning design begins with setting the context for learning. The first stage of the Foundation project was determining the context for foundation students from the collaborating institutions. Although each institution provided its students with a fairly distinctive programme, the learning outcomes and student needs were similar. (Lemon, 2009.) Oliver (1999) outlined the importance of learning activities, resources and supports in online teaching. These have all been considered as essential elements in the development of the Foundation Pilot.

Learning activities were discussed and documented prior to the listing of resources that needed to be built inside *Second Life*. A purpose built environment on the island of Kowhai in *Second Life* has been created for the use of foundation students. This environment includes a large hyperdome area where different scenes can appear as they are required: a shop with changing rooms and pose stands becomes a catwalk and seating area, or a demonstration interview room, or a media and discussion area. Resources include a Stairway of Learning, with large boards that summarise key elements of interviewing knowledge. Each board has an associated note card with extra information. A quiz tests students' absorption and retention of the information on the boards and cards.
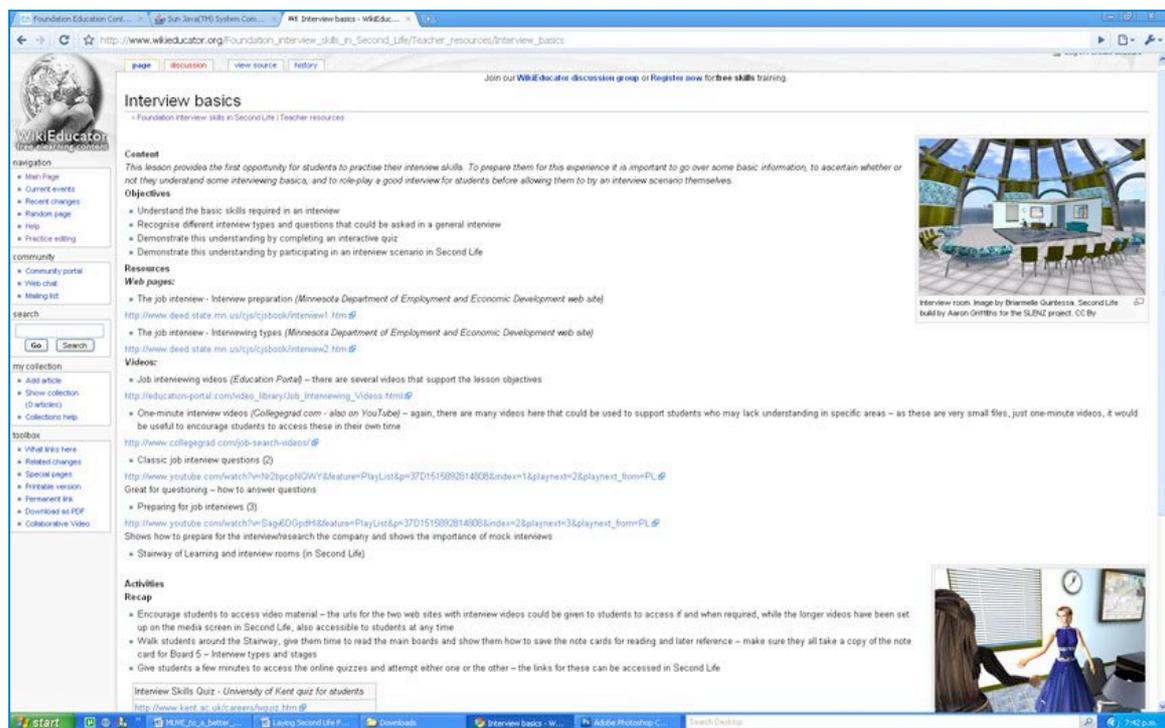
**Figure 1: Lesson planning resource on Wiki Educator**
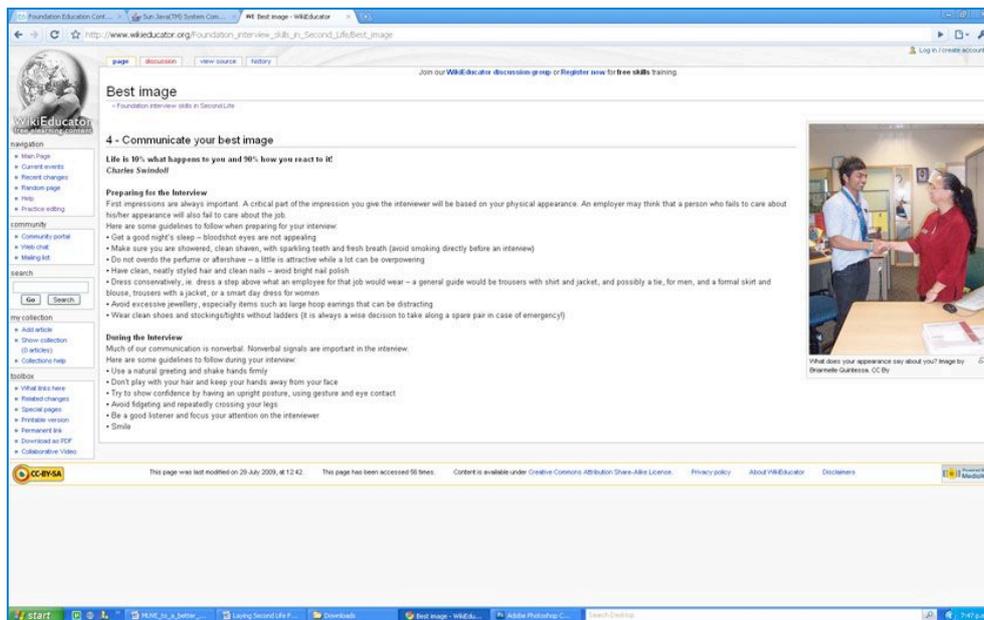
Figure 2: Students information resource on Wiki Educator

A set of twelve interview rooms can be accessed as required by small groups of students. Students wear a HUD (Heads Up Display) that enables them to either shake hands, hongi or bow as required. The interview rooms have lists of generic and behavioural interview questions that interviewers can use as a guide in practise sessions. Once students have gained some degree of mastery in the basic interview room, they can select a career pathway or job interview. Career pathway interviews include teaching, nursing, and policing. Students need to prepare for these interviews using web information and criteria given for each pathway/job. A further scenario that can be selected is the wh_nau interview, with the setting being an interview with the health provider Te Kupenga o Hoturoa. There are also five specific job interview scenarios. These include: National Bank (finance), 3M (marketing), Rainbow's End (travel and tourism), Motorworx (automotive), and Hell's Pizza (hospitality/customer service). These companies have participated in the preparation of resources that include interviewer scripts for each scenario.

Figure 3: The hyperdome and gardens on Kowhai

Figure 4: The clothing store: Rapungakore (You have come to the right place...)

The build on Kowhai has the feel of New Zealand with ponga and pohutukawa trees, so that students can identify with the environment, as well as futuristic design that draws on the elements of fantasy to promote creativity. The resources available on the build have been made available to all educators and information from note cards and lesson plans have been shared using Wiki Educator. The build is designed to be functional, unambiguous, and reusable. The build has the potential to be further developed and utilised by many disciplines in higher education institutions.

Figure 5: Information notice board on the stairway of learning

Figure 6: Group interview in the nursing room

Figure 7: Bowing to the interviewer in the 3M interview room

Figure 8: Hongi (M_ori greeting) prior to a wh_nau (family) interview
The wh_nau (family) interview is an interview where the interviewer takes support people with him/her.

Interim results

The first four classes at MIT have completed their allocated time in *Second Life*. Classes started with two sessions of orientation. Effective orientation activities are essential to help students become comfortable in the *Second Life* environment and start to create meaningful learning experiences (Salt et al, 2008, p. 56.) Students utilised Linden's user guide, as well as orientation materials developed by SLENZ, currently on Wiki Educator. A skills checklist was used so students could self-assess their own level of skill mastery. Students were presented with a Challenge Quest, where the answers to questions required the learning and use of essential skills, and successful completion was rewarded by an extrinsic motivator – the acquiring of Linden dollars (the Linden dollar is the basis of the inworld economic system and the Linden dollar fluctuates with the world markets.)

Many positive outcomes were achieved during these first orientation sessions. From the personal observations of the lecturers involved, it appeared that student motivation was extremely high. Students seemed to be happily engaged in the learning activities. One older Pacifica student with limited computer knowledge or skill, worked steadily, with a smile on his face. Students were very supportive and helped each other.

The success of the orientation process may be partly attributable to the nature of the resources and partly to the inherent interactivity and sensory stimulation provided by the environment. There were problems encountered, but these were largely technical (a loss of voice ability for 15 minutes) or situational (the media was present in the first class and there were many distractions.)

Following the initial orientation sessions, it was interesting to note that the number of students present increased from session one to session two and session two to session three in all classes. Two anecdotal examples deserve mention. Two students in trouble for poor attendance and poor behaviour, were present in all *Second Life* sessions, demonstrated engagement and worked hard to complete tasks. A previously non-attending student approached the lecturer before the third session and asked if she could please come to class! She wanted to participate in the interview training in *Second Life*.

A further anecdote indicates a positive outcome for the *Second Life* classes at MIT. Students involved in Future Focus courses through the Foundation department, are assessed in a real life interview with a guest interviewer brought in specifically to conduct one-on-one interview sessions with students. The guest interviewer was asked if any students were particularly memorable in interview sessions. The interviewer

selected students he felt had been the most prepared and confident interviewees, and all students selected had been involved in the *Second Life* sessions. As only four out of ten classes had been in *Second Life*, this seemed like an impossible coincidence. Marks were examined that had been recorded in Jaspar (the results recording programme currently in use at MIT). It is possible for students to be awarded a Merit Pass for the interviewing assessment. The results seem to indicate the effectiveness of the *Second Life* addition to course presentation.
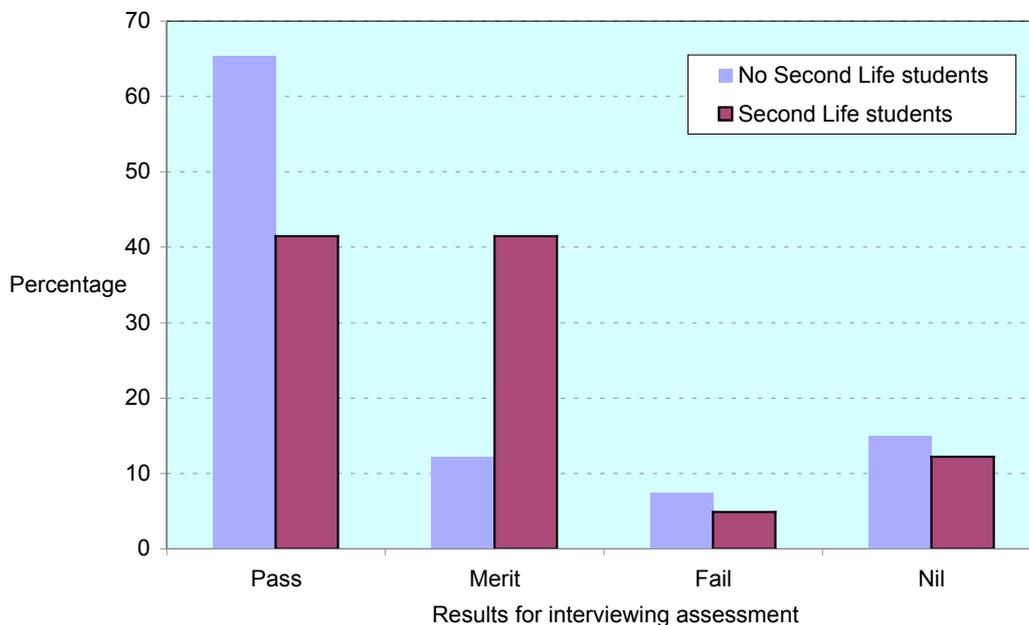

Figure 9: A comparison of Jaspar results for students who practised interviewing in *Second Life* and those who did not

Conclusions

The SLENZ (*Second Life* Education in New Zealand) pilot for foundation students is aimed at improving interview skills. This pilot is part of the "Engaging with *Second Life*; Real Education in a Virtual World" project. The SLENZ foundation team worked through a development process that started with an examination of student context and learning design. A build was created in *Second Life* to enable the learning activities to take place. The lessons in *Second Life* have met with enthusiasm from the majority of students. A high level of engagement has been demonstrated to date.

Dr Clare Atkins, joint leader of the SLENZ project, has been involved in *Second Life* teaching and research for a number of years. At the completion of a student project in 2008, Dr Atkins stated:

> (We) emerged from the project with a strong belief in the value afforded by the *Second Life* environment, a strong sense of the apparently limitless possibilities for education and a very clear understanding that we are currently on the edge of a major shift in educational delivery for which the maps are only in the very early stages of development. (p.88.)

It seems that there is potential for foundation education in *Second Life*. There is a need for more research to redefine a theoretical framework that suits the *Second Life* environment, to discover how best to utilise the potential of *Second Life* to facilitate the learning experiences of students, and how to enable students with the skills they need to progress academically in an engaging and motivating way through the use of MUVEs such as *Second Life*.

It is anticipated that the resources provided by SLENZ for interview training have a huge potential in many other disciplines. The resources can be further developed and refined and offered to departments for training nurses to take patient information, for training teachers to conduct student and parent interviews, for helping business and hospitality students to develop customer handling skills, and to help social work students take case notes.

References

Atkins, C., & Caukill, M. (2008). Serious Fun and Serious Learning: The Challenge of *Second Life*. In J. Molka-Danielson & M. Deutschmann (Eds.) *Learning & Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life* (pp. 79-89). Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press.

Au, W. (2008). Simulating *success: SL to RL Border guard training simulation Improves test scores by 28%.* Retrieved August 10, 2009 from http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2008/09/simulating-succ.html

Benseman, J. & Russ, L. (2003). Mapping the territory: A survey of bridging students in New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning, 31*(1). Retrieved 22 October, 2009 from http://www.teacherswork.ac.nz/nzjournalcontents/nzjal.php

Boud, D. & Feletti, G. (1997). Changing Problem-based Learning, Introduction to the Second Edition. In D. Boud & G. Feletti (Eds.) *The Challenge of Problem-based Learning.* (2nd ed, pp. 2-16). London: Kogan Page.

Keller, John M. (2006). *What is Motivational Design?* Retrieved 10 December 2008 from http://www.arcsmodel.com/pdf/Motivational%20Design%20Rev%20060620.pdf

Lemon, M. (2009). Foundation Education Context. (Feb. 26th, 2009) from http://briarmelle.edublogs.org/

Lemon, M. (2009). Foundation interview skills in *Second Life.* From http://www.wikieducator.org/Foundation_interview_skills_in_Second_Life

Lemon, M, (2009). Learning Design. *Foundation Interviewing with SLENZ – Developing Student Skills in Second Life,* (March 2nd, 2009) from http://briarmelle.edublogs.org/

Lieb, S. (1991). Principles of Adult Learning. Retrieved 22 August 2009 from http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/adults-2.htm

Linden Lab (2009) *Virtual World Simulation Training Prepares Real Guards on the US-Canadian Border: Loyalist College in SL.* Retrieved 22 August, 2009 from http://secondlifegrid.net.s3.amazonaws.com/docs/Second_Life_Case_Loyalist_EN.pdf

Oliver, R. (1999). Exploring strategies for online teaching and learning. *Distance Education, 29*(2), 240-254.

Salt, B., Atkins, C, Blackall, L. (2008). *Engaging with Second Life: real education in a virtual world.* Retrieved 20 August, 2009 from http://slenz.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/sliteraturereview1.pdf

Schutte, J. G. (1997). Virtual teaching in higher education: the new intellectual superhighway or just another traffic jam? Retrieved 20 August, 2009 from http://www.csun.edu/sociology/virexp.htm

Second Life Education (2009), *Virtual Environments Enable New Models of Learning*, Retrieved 22 August, 2009 from http://secondlifegrid.net/slfe/education-use-virtual-world

Authors: Merle Lemon and Oriel Kelly, Manukau Institute of Technology.
Email: merle.lemon@manukau.ac.nz, oriel.kelly@manukau.ac.nz