



Second Life™ and the novice user: What issues exist prior to commencing teaching in a virtual environment?

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With more and more universities developing online modes of teaching and learning and embracing a range of technologies including web 2.0 and social networking tools, virtual worlds are becoming more common as learning spaces and many universities have a virtual presence, particularly in Second Life™. Over the last 18 months two pilot studies have been conducted into the efficacy of Second Life™ as a learning environment with teacher education students at the author's institution. These studies were shared research between an expert user of this particular virtual environment and an academic who was 'old' in teaching, but who was a novice in terms of using virtual worlds and who had only just been introduced to Second Life™. This paper discusses the experience of the novice user as she became familiar enough with Second Life™ to teach there and provides a commentary on the journey undertaken. It explores some of the instrumental areas for consideration if higher education institutions wish to explore the possibility of academics transforming their teaching and learning environments and routinely using Second Life™ within their repertoire of e-teaching.

Keywords: Second Life™, virtual teaching and learning, professional development

Introduction

In 2009, Gregory & Tynan wrote that "how an academic teaches in a virtual world is something that hasn't been explored in great detail" (p.384). They also alluded to a pilot study being undertaken where an academic was teaching in both traditional face-to-face tutorials and in Second Life™ with the purpose of exploring student engagement in their learning in a virtual world compared to real life as well as exploring the possibilities of teaching in Second Life™ as a novice user of virtual worlds. I am that academic, a co-researcher with another lecturer in the pilot study mentioned and also in a current, second, pilot study examining the comparative benefits of different online tools for discussion, including Second Life™, in terms of assessment outcomes.

Some research has been reported about the role of the person teaching in virtual worlds and the challenges facing these people rather than solely reporting on the effect of the use of virtual worlds as a learning space on student learning (Carr, 2008; Macedo and Morgado, 2009; Santo, 2008; Warburton, 2009) although this discussion of teacher role is almost always inextricably linked with the discussion of student learning. There needs to be more focused research on the support needed for academics to enhance their teaching repertoire and on the skills that they require in order to successfully teach across a range of environments including the traditional face-to-face, the growing online learning management systems and also virtual world environments such as Second Life™.

My own experiences as an academic engaging in the use of Second Life™ as a teaching and learning environment have raised a number of issues that need to be considered if academics are to engage in effective teaching in this medium. The issues range from technical issues such as creating one's avatar

and learning to move within the virtual world, as well as use its resources effectively, to issues such as professional development in effective use of the learning spaces within the world to enhance student learning. As my early journey in Second Life™ is told, each step on the journey also discusses the issues raised at that time. The conclusion discusses more broadly the preliminary issues for those who wish to teach effectively in Second Life™.

Surviving the Second Life™ ‘birth’ process

In Second Life™ I am known as Tamsyn Lexenstar and this current avatar is my second attempt at creating an in-world persona. In 2008, I first created an avatar after attending a presentation about this particular virtual world by Torsten Reiners from the University of Hamburg, a university with a strong presence in Second Life™ and one which has moved a long way down the teaching and learning path in this environment for students. I felt that it might be possible to use the world to allow teacher education students to practise their teaching skills before embarking on school placements. With high enthusiasm to embrace an unknown technology, but with only sketchy knowledge of what Second Life™ was really like, I downloaded the program and set about creating my avatar.

Creating the avatar posed its own difficulties. I had believed that I could name it as I liked, but found this was not the case, having to accept a surname from those suggested. After making decisions about using my own first name (eventually rejected in favour of anonymity except for those with whom I would choose to share my avatar name) and choosing a surname that I was confident of remembering, I ventured in-world. I arrived, dressed in a pink polka dot dress (a dress that immediately proclaims ‘newbie’ to any regular user of Second Life™), at what was to me a strange place, and was accosted by a dragon figure who apparently wanted to dance. I had no idea as to how to respond and no idea how to move. Feeling inadequate and out of my comfort zone I quit from the program, returning only several days later to try again. Again I had trouble knowing what to do to speak to people and where to go once I had mastered the art of movement. I again quit and did not return to this strange, new world for nearly 12 months.

When I decided to return to Second Life™ in order to be part of a research project I discovered that I did not have any recollection as to what my original avatar’s name was or what password I had used to gain access to Second Life™. I needed to create another avatar with a different name, this time written down along with my password, and then essay entering the world once more. I tried exploring Orientation Island and gained some minor expertise in skills such as communication, walking and flying. I also learned how to touch objects and how to change my appearance. I experimented with some ‘free’ clothes that were extravagant and very different from my own personality, but, as I was intending to teach in this environment, I quickly chose to look professionally dressed. My appearance has not changed since then other than the colour of my shirt changing occasionally. I would now be recognisable to my students.

My re-entry to Second Life™ also coincided with the decision by another academic and me to co-research in the area of learning in a virtual world. This lecturer assisted me by providing some orientation and this, plus a firm purpose to be in Second Life™, rather than my original meanderings through the world, changed my views on giving up completely. This sense of purpose and its importance is discussed in the next section.

Some learning insights

While there are undoubtedly many issues that could be addressed in this section such as having the correct bandwidth, enough graphics power and other more technical issues, I have concentrated on two aspects that relate more closely to an academic’s beginnings as a teacher in Second Life™.

1. Creating an avatar

An important consideration that teachers need to take into account when settling on their avatar persona is how they wish to portray themselves to their students and whether they wish to use any part of their own name (remembering that surnames can only be chosen from a limited list). A chosen name can portray certain characteristics which may or may not be present in the person and which may or may not be the characteristics that a teacher wishes students to believe to be existent. Such a decision would need to be made before creating an avatar. Similarly, it is also important that the academic teaching in Second Life™ decide how their avatar should appear. Do they wish to be an animal figure or a fantasy

figure? Do they wish to change gender? Given that students will know who the 'real' person is in some way (face-to-face or online through university systems) what image does the academic new to the virtual world wish to present? (A corollary of this is whether the academic wishes students to present in a particular way, but this issue lies outside the scope of this paper). While seemingly an easy step in beginning the journey towards teaching in a virtual environment, even the creation of an avatar has these deeper issues of what it means in terms of an academic's teacher persona and identity that must be teased out before plunging into the whole virtual experience.

2. Learning the skills

For academics, with their own expertise in teaching already developed, it can be very easy to judge that Second Life™ holds no advantage for what they do because moving out of a well-rehearsed comfort zone can be frustrating and unsettling, as well as being difficult to immediately see how teaching can be transformed to incorporate virtual world experiences. For those who have never experienced a virtual world in any capacity, as I hadn't, it can be like going through a birth, or re-birth, process. Just as babies enter the real world and need to learn a range of skills to function successfully in terms of communication, movement, social mores, etc., people who choose to enter Second Life™ need to do the same. Also, like babies, it is helpful to have someone with you who knows the world and can assist you to develop the skills required. While Orientation Island can give you tips, someone accompanying you can extend your knowledge, particularly in terms of how to conduct yourself socially.

Having a purpose

I had first broached the idea of using Second Life™ as a learning environment with my fellow lecturer, an advanced user of the world, in 2008 after hearing Reiners' presentation. At that stage my purpose was for preservice teachers to engage in practice teaching, but, beyond that, I had no firm ideas as to what I wished to actually achieve. The other academic was interested, particularly around our preliminary discussions of programmed child avatars, but the idea lapsed at that time under the pressures of other exigencies and, as an experiment, I made my first foray into this virtual world alone (with the results described in the previous section) and with no real focus. My second venture in-world came in 2009 and there was a major difference - I had a clear purpose.

The other lecturer had already completed one pilot study in Second Life™ and both she and I were now ready to discuss the actual possibility of a virtual classroom where preservice teachers could practise their teaching skills. While this was the big picture, we decided to begin with a pilot project where a classroom space would be built and where we would test the idea of developing teaching strategies by introducing a group of 1st year primary education students to de Bono's Six Thinking Hats strategy (de Bono, 1985) in both real life and Second Life™ (author and co-researcher, 2010a; author and co-researcher, 2010b). We applied for a small seed grant through the School of Education research funding scheme and were successful. It was now time to learn how to use this virtual world in a short time in order to not compromise the students' learning as much as possible.

Over a few sessions my co-researcher taught me important skills that would assist with my teaching. Firstly she took me on a tour of several areas of Second Life™, demonstrating to me how to move, communicate and interact with objects in-world. This session occurred very early into our research and provided an important familiarisation. After several episodes of walking into walls rather than through doors I became more confident in being in-world and began to feel excitement as we approached the development of the classroom and the trial of student engagement in this space. The second session with the other lecturer came after the classroom had been built. I was introduced to how to negotiate the classroom and playground space, both of which had been based to a large extent on real classrooms and playgrounds, and also how to communicate with small groups of 6 students as well as with the whole group of about 24. The different forms of communication would be very important when the actual teaching began.

It is important to note that all the building of the classroom and playground was done by the other researcher. She also developed the avatars for the students and set up the groups. This latter included establishing group chat for the smaller groups within the whole class and collecting the data from these chats. I was also provided with instructions as to how to answer some of the likely student questions such as 'how do I put my hat on?' so that I would be able to demonstrate some competence when my teaching actually began. I still do not know how to build in Second Life™ or how to set up separate

group chats, nor do I have a paid subscription to Second Life™, but I have not found this limiting in the short time that I have been teaching there.

Some learning insights

As described in the last section, entering Second Life™ can be daunting and frustrating. My two pre-teaching experiences showed that perseverance in-world, particularly in terms of wishing to use the world for education, required a more clearly defined purpose than just saying it seemed like a good idea at the time. Second Life™, as one example of a multi-user virtual environment, has “no natural purpose unless one is created or built” (Warbuton, 2009, p.416). With the building of our virtual classroom and playground space, linked to clearly defined foci regarding teacher education (student engagement and the possibility of practice teaching), a purpose was created. Also, because an advanced user of the world was involved it was possible to effectively learn to use an environment custom built by her. This second experience of Second Life™ as a possible learning and teaching environment raised two key aspects for academics wishing to incorporate this new teaching ability into their repertoire.

1. Purpose driven experience

As is the case with all areas of educational innovation, planning and a clear educational purpose are necessary before the adoption of the innovation becomes common practice. Such planning and purpose will be necessary for academics to begin to work effectively in a virtual medium. If there is a strong belief in the purpose then a novice is more likely to persevere with the specialist knowledge that needs to be acquired before even attempting to teach in-world. There will also need to be demonstration of how novice users, both academic and student, can quickly gain the immediate skills necessary for the use of a virtual learning space.

2. Mentoring

Because there are many things to be learned within Second Life™ in order to build the required learning space and also to manage the learning environment in terms of communication, grouping and even planning activities within such a space, a mentor who shares the common purpose and who can develop the space and activities needed is a crucial element. This mentor need not be another academic, sharing the project, as in my case, but might be an educational developer who can assist in the technical aspects of the preparation for teaching. The professional development gained by this mentoring can increase the confidence of the novice user to the point where they are ready to begin teaching in-world.

Conclusion

My first teaching experience in Second Life™ occurred in the second half of 2009. With only a few hours of mentoring I led 98 1st year students through a six thinking hats exercise. All of these students were also novice users who had been given a one hour lecture in how to function in-world. The experience was not without its frustrations and how my co-researcher and I worked together and analysed the teaching from group to group will be the subject of another paper. However, as a teacher I experienced enough success in that first teaching project to begin a second project in 2010. In this project, although still researching with the same person, my teaching is done alone. My confidence is developing in the simple things, but I need much more professional development before I can assay the big picture: practice teaching by students.

The use of Second Life™ as a virtual learning space has the capacity to transform student learning, particularly distance education students, due to its capacity to allow student to feel a presence as part of a learning community (Gregory, 2009; Macedo and Morgado, 2009; Warburton, 2009). However, the issues discussed in this paper need deliberate consideration before any novice user academic begins to teach in-world. These issues were:

- Creating an avatar;
- Learning the skills;
- Purpose driven experience;
- Mentoring.

The time required to consider and address these issues is not long, but it is crucial. Without this early preparation the uptake of teaching in a virtual world seems destined to be low and arduous.

Can effective teaching take place once the preparation has occurred? Two pilot studies by my co-researcher and I suggest it can. But for the novice it is not without its own frustrations. And that is another story.

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