BOOK REVIEW

Higher Education in Virtual Worlds: Teaching and Learning in Second Life

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In this new edited collection Wankel and Kingsley have assembled a collage of serious studies focusing on the efficacy of Second Life as a viable learning environment. These studies range from a very narrow focus, such as how an instructor avatar stands, smiles, and gestures to engage other student avatars, to very broad studies that measure students’ ability to not only design business solutions for product branding, but also for them to use Second Life as an environment to experience these campaigns through a wide range of audio, visual, and 3-D media. An important plus point of this book is that every author draws upon data gathered within the Second Life environment with the most helpful identifying qualitative comments from users. It is also noteworthy that none of these authors reported the ability to construct a learning experience within Second Life that was without significant problems, either technological in nature, or from users who were disappointed with the initial levels of engagement they had anticipated prior to class. It was reported that after the initial novelty wore off, the frustrations with bandwidth issues, manipulation and mobility of the avatars, and the inability to express one’s self adequately, often overshadowed the richness of the 3-D environments.

The book contains 12 case studies that are varying widely according to subject, teaching
style, epistemology, and pedagogy. For this reason it is recommended that the entire book be read in total rather than using any one chapter as a reference that adequately describes the potential for Second Life. The authors admit that since Second Life and the 3-D virtual environment is so new, these accounts of their use were largely experimental, and could not be based on an extensive literature review, thus the reason why this book was assembled. As much as it is difficult at times to relate to the foreign literature base cited as justification for their studies, each author arrives at a realistic conclusion for the successes and failures of their attempt to use Second Life as a pedagogical alternative. It is this honesty that is the strength of the book. Similar to early writings on distance learning, the usual strategy for designing a course of study or experience within Second Life springs first from how one would approach a traditional classroom experience. This was also the basis for comparison in many cases, yet the door was often opened to suggest that this is possibly not the best way to judge Second Life’s ultimate pedagogical value. Its potential for supporting constructivist epistemologies, design studies, economic modeling, adult learning, identity exploration, performance appraisal, and technology skill building, are some of the values identified. The key to success appears to be hidden in the methods used within the Second Life environment and available tool sets.

From the first chapter the reader encounters the hurdles facing educators to even acquire the Second Life space. Administrators are not prone to invest financial support for unproven technologies, and Second Life falls into that category. Making the case that our students are so familiar with video game technologies was quickly dispelled as a viable argument since few of the subjects had experienced Second Life, and when they entered the environment, they found it quite different from their traditional game functionality and robustness. However, these same users were given quite different problems to solve in Second Life than they encountered in their game environments, and many were actually surprised at how much they learned when given appropriate tasks for the Second Life environment.

By reading this book one begins to see a linkage between content, pedagogical style, and the tasks given to students for learning purposes in a virtual world. Just as in any video game, one can learn much from failure, and in the same manner, the reader can learn from the ‘less than expected’ success rate of the studies illustrated in this book. We see a wide range of ‘structure’ imposed on the learning experiences assembled in these studies, and it is interesting that possibly the most successful case study presented was by far the most highly structured. This was also the same study that reported on a third iteration of the course experience – a process which also gives us encouragement that given enough time and effort, it is possible to reach some of our pedagogical goals within Second Life.

Lastly, it is helpful to see new terminology of virtual worlds such as, flying, teleporting, cross-over into real-life, identity leveling, avatar attributes, virtual world economies, Lindon Dollars, and polarization of virtual functionality, applied in the context of real case scenarios. A couple of authors incorporated outside virtual world tools such as blogs, email, and even books, as strategies and resources necessary to foster successful communication and collaboration within Second Life. This brings virtual worlds more into the cadre of available experiences that we as educators have at our disposal, and as one author stated ‘Second Life has a high potential for faculty who want to invest enough time to make it work!’ This book is recommended for any educator about to enter a virtual world learning environment. By reading it educators will be presented with insights into methodologies that could be used to raise the learning outcomes of students and the pedagogical awareness of online teachers.
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