



Teaching and learning in Virtual Worlds: Is it worth the effort?

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Educators have been quick to spot the enormous potential afforded by virtual worlds for situated and authentic learning, practising tasks with potentially serious consequences in the real world and for bringing geographically dispersed faculty and students together in the same space (Gee, 2007; Johnson and Levine, 2008). Though this potential has largely been realised, it generally isn't without cost in terms of lack of institutional buy-in, steep learning curves for all participants, and lack of a sound theoretical framework to support learning activities (Campbell, 2009; Cheal, 2007; Kluge & Riley, 2008). This symposium will explore the affordances and issues associated with teaching and learning in virtual worlds, all the time considering the question: is it worth the effort?

Keywords: virtual worlds, affordances, institutional adoption

Introduction

Though the enormous potential of virtual worlds for teaching and learning are well-documented, it can be overwhelming for an educator when contemplating the first steps towards teaching in such an environment. This symposium will highlight the sorts of factors that need to be considered before undertaking teaching in a virtual world and help those contemplating such a move decide whether or not this is the best strategy. Topics to be explored include:

- The affordances of 3D virtual environments including virtual worlds with particular reference to *Second Life* (SL) and *OpenSim*.
- The pedagogical styles and activity types that are best suited to these sorts of environments. And can these be achieved using simpler technology?
- The challenges associated with teaching in virtual worlds at the institutional, disciplinary, technological, pedagogical and individual levels.
- Exemplar practices from Australasian universities and a frank examination of poor practices in the sector.

Symposium format

Panel members will engage in a semi-structured debate while also engaging with the opinions of audience members. According to their particular expertise, panel members will showcase exemplary practices in the Australasian tertiary context. Using guidelines and a template supplied to them, audience members will be encouraged to think about their own ideas for teaching in a virtual world, initially with other audience members and then presenting them to the whole group using supplied guidelines and templates. After each presentation, audience members and panel members will debate the main issues potentially applicable in each case, drawing on examples from the wider education community. Finally, panel members will briefly summarise their own views, informing the question: Is it worth the effort?

Intended audience

This symposium is aimed at learning designers, discipline-based academics considering teaching in virtual worlds, academics associated with central or faculty-based T&L units, administrators and ICT support staff involved with implementing access to virtual worlds

Expected outcomes

- Inform the wider debate on the value of using virtual worlds for teaching and learning in the Australasian tertiary education sector.
- Grow the community of practice already established within the DEHub Virtual Worlds Working Group, providing support and opportunities for collaboration for Australian educators working in virtual worlds.
- An academic paper, to be submitted to AJET, will be written by the panel members based on the proceedings of the symposium. This will maximise the impact of the debate, informing the wider educational community of the issues associated with teaching and learning in virtual worlds.

References

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Presenter biographies and contact details:

All of the panel members have considerable experience designing learning in a range of virtual worlds.

Sue Gregory (*Chair; University of New England*). DEHub and School of Education, Faculty of The Professions, University of New England, Armidale NSW 2351, Email: sue.gregory@une.edu.au. Sue is the designer and manager of a Second Life school classroom and playground. She has been teaching in Second Life for the past three years and is focused on the efficacy of role-play in virtual environments.

Associate Professor Allan Ellis (*Southern Cross University*). School of Commerce and Management, Southern Cross University, Military Road, Lismore NSW 2480, allan.Ellis@scu.edu.au. Allan is the designer and manager of the Southern Cross University's first island. He is primarily concerned with the change management associated with the introduction of a disruptive technology and how to best secure institutional buy-in.

Professor Geoffrey Crisp (*University of Adelaide*). Director-CLPD, North Terrace, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide SA 5005, Geoffrey.crisp@adelaide.edu.au. Geoff is researching E-assessment in Second Life. He is concerned about improving assessment practice within virtual worlds (and other web 2.0 environments). Further, he has been working to develop Second Life- based e-assessment exemplars across various disciplines with a focus on interactivity, constructed responses, and integration with Learning Management Systems (LMS).

Dr Helen Farley (*University of Queensland and University of Southern Queensland*). Australian Digital Futures Institute, University of Southern Queensland, Brisbane QLD 4350, Email: Helen.farley@usq.edu.au. Helen is the designer of UQ Religion Bazaar in Second Life. She is interested in pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in a range of virtual worlds and authentic 3D movement in those environments.

Jenny Grenfell (*Deakin University*). School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Waurn Ponds VIC 3217, Email janette.grenfell@deakin.edu.au. Jenny is the designer and manager of the SL Arts Education Centre, and has been teaching and learning in Second Life for the past three years. Jenny will focus on student collaborative engagement in blended real world and virtual world scenarios and outline student responses to engagement within the immersive virtual environment.

Dr Angela Thomas (*University of Tasmania*). Senior Lecturer, England and Arts Education, University of Tasmania, Hobart TAS 7005, Email: angelaathomas@gmail.com. Angela has been an educator in Second Life since 2006 focusing on new media literacies with virtual Macbeth and English education.

In order to demonstrate the virtual worlds' potential for rendering geographical distance irrelevant, the Symposium will feature a panel member who will participate virtually from *Second Life*. **Matthew Campbell**, from the *Australian Catholic University*, Professional and Educational Studies, School of Education (NSW), Australian Catholic University, Strathfield Campus, Strathfield NSW 2135 Email: matthew.campbell@acu.edu.au, will explore identity in the virtual world. He will explore the notion of seeing the virtual world as a safe learning space, as opposed to the existing cultural and social boundaries of the traditional classroom using socio-cultural theory and embodiment of identity.

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