

2009

Faculty Preparation for Teaching and Learning in Second Life

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Recommended Citation

Ashford, Robin; Headley, Scot; and Zijdemans Boudreau, Anita, "Faculty Preparation for Teaching and Learning in Second Life" (2009). *Faculty Publications - George Fox University Libraries*. Paper 7.

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Faculty Preparation for Teaching and Learning in Second Life [eLearn 2009 Poster Presentation]

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Background and Statement of the Problem

Faculty adoption of new technological tools related to teaching and learning is an ongoing challenge. Searching for new tools and reading the literature in an attempt to begin the evaluation and adoption process takes time. Complex technologies such as Second Life (SL) and other multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) can be difficult to grasp by reading the literature alone. Time to further explore these new technologies, and hands-on experience is needed to become proficient in their use.

The virtual three dimensional online environment of Second Life has much to offer educators and students, and it can be a rich environment for both formal and informal teaching and learning. For those educators new to the Second Life environment, one challenge is seeing the potential without becoming overwhelmed by the technology itself. Becoming comfortable and eventually proficient in Second Life is an ongoing process, which many faculty members simply do not have the time to fully explore and investigate on their own. Opportunities to utilize potentially rich learning environments can be lost if faculty don't keep up with understanding and utilizing these increasingly digital learning venues.

A Description of the Project

The project is built on a process of incremental steps in preparing faculty and students for success in working in Second Life. During the summer 2008 semester, a faculty member in a school of education at an independent regional university taught a course for graduate education students, which was offered and taught primarily in Second Life. From the course syllabus, "The purpose of the seminar is to acquaint participants with Second Life (SL), a 3D virtual environment. Our intent is to discover the functions, processes and relationships that exist and the potential that exists for educators and people of faith in SL." Additional collaborating faculty members assisting with this course included an academic librarian, an instructional technology consultant and a visiting professor from a neighboring university. While the course served to inform graduate education students, it also served as a vehicle for faculty exploration of the MUVE for teaching and learning. A great deal was learned during the short four week intensified studies course by direct observation while in-world as well as through exit data collected after the course was completed. That information was carefully considered in the design and implementation process of the subsequent course.

For the next course, offered spring 2009, the dean and department chair looked at the possibility of using the course as a purposeful professional development experience to prepare university faculty. Since this course was funded by serving graduate students who were enrolled and taking the course for credit. Administrators believed that this would be a worthwhile trial and it was decided that students and faculty would join together as participants in an exploratory experiential journey. The course ran over an entire 15 week semester and was taught in Second Life along with asynchronous work done each week using a wiki. The course was titled, "Intro to Second Life for Educators." From the syllabus, "The purpose of the course is to acquaint participants with Second Life (SL), a 3D virtual environment. Our intent is to discover the functions, processes and relationships that exist, as well as the potential of virtual worlds (VWs) for educators and education."

The course concluded in the third week of April and from all indications it provided a level of support which met faculty expectations. Preliminary data from participants' reflections throughout the course as well as a final presentation held during the last group session in-world indicates that this was a rich learning experience for all involved. Specific strategies employed in this faculty development program included:

- a) Integration of university faculty into a pre-developed course introducing principles and practices for educators in second life;
- b) Weekly live in-world sessions which combined direct instruction, demonstrations, virtual touring, visiting

lectures, small group discussion, one-on-one tutoring, student presentations and student laboratory activities;

c) within-world Second Life faculty resource center containing static displays, video helps, links to library and web-based resources and communication media;

d) a public wiki site used for information sharing, reflections of participants, discussion of concepts, issues and learning activities and a collection of tutorials and information links regarding the development of skills and knowledge related to learning in Second Life.

Showcasing the Project

A visual representation of the process and learning that took place during this course will be the focus of the showcase presentation. It will include: a) a live demonstration of our university faculty support center in Second Life, which served as a home base for students and faculty and includes information resources that were provided to assist in learning basic SL skills; b) a flickr slideshow portraying the progression from the beginning to the end of our course; and c) a poster display highlighting both graphical and text representations of the principles, strategies and learning associated with this project.

Formal survey data collected along with participants' reflections will be analyzed and used to make adjustments for the ongoing development and implementation of this course offering. Plans are in process to open the course to faculty and students interested in teaching and learning in Second Life from other academic units and institutions.

Project Significance

Support of faculty in their work of acquiring new technological skills is an important need for the future of academic work in many institutions. Multi-user virtual environments are proliferating at a rapid rate and educators need to be prepared if indeed they are asked to investigate the implications of this growth for teaching and learning. Many children are growing up interacting and playing in virtual world environments and this trend continues. A forecast on virtual world adoption by Strategy Analytics in 2008 (<http://www.strategyanalytics.com/default.aspx?mod=PressReleaseViewer&a0=3983>) titled *Virtual Worlds Projected to Mushroom to Nearly One Billion Users* claims "the research indicates that virtual worlds represent a massive activity that is growing in Asia, the Americas and Europe, which so far emphasizes interests that appeal to Children and Teens. Adult virtual worlds are beginning to emerge with more social and educational applications."

A 2007 press release by Gartner, Inc. titled *Gartner Says 80 Percent of Active Internet Users Will Have A Second Life in the Virtual World by the End of 2011*, discusses the emerging trend of virtual world development. (<http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=503861>) One conclusion "The collaborative and community-related aspects of these environments will dominate in the future." These reports indicate a need for educators to gain an understanding of MUVES and to prepare for their work with them.

A major benefit adding to the importance of this work is related to the opportunities MUVES such as Second Life can provide for networking and professional development purposes. Opportunities abound in Second Life for making connections with others but educators must feel comfortable enough with navigating, communicating and other basic competencies needed to take advantage of what the environment affords. The ability to share and collaborate with teachers and learners on a global level is becoming increasingly important in our networked world.

Without proper preparation, faculty members may not be able to realize the potential for multi-user virtual environments for teaching and learning, let alone develop competence in their use. The use of purposeful faculty preparation, as demonstrated by this presentation, provide the opportunity for educators to decide for themselves just what the potential is for their practice and for their professional development.





