2009

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract: This paper reports outcomes of our first Action Research study involving implementing Second Life [SL] in a graduate distance course on exploring community online. Participant blog entries and transcripts of 'in-world' class sessions were analyzed to determine: how well the participants learned to be successful SL residents; whether observations and meeting discussions reflected themes of community and experiential learning; and how participants evaluated their experiences and the educational potential of SL. Results indicate that SL is a complex environment requiring much practice to develop competencies for navigating in-world. Once accomplished, however, participants reported that although SL did not replicate real life, they experienced personal and emotional connections with the communities and residents they engaged with. It was also agreed that SL has potential for a variety of educational applications. The affordance of SL to sustain community and actively engage participants – crucial elements for collaborative and experiential learning – warrants further investigation.

Context & Motivation

Web 2.0 has generated growing interest amongst educators; its inherently collaborative tools can be seen as being ideally suited for supporting learning communities and constructivist approaches. Amongst these, Second Life ® (SL) is an immersive 3D virtual world imagined and created by its users that has grown to millions of participants worldwide since its launch in 2003. This research explores the affordances of Second Life for supporting community and experiential learning in the context of distance learning.

Second Life is considered by some to embody the true spirit of Web 2.0 in that resident-generated content comprises an essential part of activity 'in-world'. Here is a world entirely imagined and constructed by its participants, and it is this feature that has attracted a host of institutions, universities, colleges, and libraries to use SL as a platform for distance learning, K-12 and higher education teaching and learning, professional training, and virtual campuses (De Lucia et. al, 2009). But what is it exactly that Second Life has to offer? Can it support learning communities? Does it truly enrich the learning experience? Is it a viable educational medium or just another passing trend? Do educators need a second life?

As a research team with varied backgrounds – in teacher education, technology-based distance learning, and library sciences – but a mutual interest in distance education, we were interested in studying the capacity of Second Life for enhancing rich community, experiential learning, and recreating the richness of face-to-face interaction. This paper reports our first study involving implementing Second Life in a graduate level distance course on exploring community online.

Community and Experiential Learning in Second Life

The definition of community is much debated in the literature on virtual community and online social networks (see, e.g., Dawson, 2004; Wellman & Gulia 1999; and Rheingold, 1994 and 2000). Using Dawson's characteristics of virtual community – interactivity; stability of membership; fixed identity; netizenship; personal concern; and communal space – Klein (2008) provides strong evidence to support that community does in fact exist in Second Life [SL]. She documents robust examples of 'legitimate' real life [RL] Christian communities that are thriving in-world and suggests that the same factors that draw people together in RL – such as shared beliefs and the search for personal fulfillment and emotional connectedness – are successfully replicated in SL.

In education, the notion of personal connectedness is an important aspect of experiential learning. Kolb refers to experiential learning as the richness of learning that occurs when one is emotionally involved in meaningful, authentic experiences. Otherwise stated, experiential learning is a direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it (Smith, 2001). Winn (1993) further distinguishes between direct, spontaneous, subjective, and often tacit first-person experience versus vicarious, objective, reflective third-person experience – for example, when interacting with a computer through an interface such as a keyboard, or reading about a community rather than directly participating in it.

The Study

The Action Research Study Design. It was not within the scope of this study to investigate how community is created in immersive 3D worlds such as Second Life, but rather to understand the process of preliminary engagement such as learning how to navigate and experience community in-world groups and in turn, gain insights into the feasibility of SL for educational practice. It therefore seemed fitting to situate this action research study within the context of a graduate course on faith and practice online that would require active engagement in SL counterparts to RL authentic religious communities.

Action research is defined as research that focuses on the effects of the researcher's or researchers' actions within a community of practice (e.g., a professional community such as education) with the goal of improving the performance of the individual practitioner or community, often addressing a particular area of concern. (Dick, 2002; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Our strategy was to enlist doctoral students in education to join us on an in-world exploration as active participant observers.

The Communities in Second Life Course Summer. During the summer semester of 2008, a group of graduate students in a doctoral program in educational leadership participated in a seminar based within Second Life. Design principles for the course were informed by the research design framework described above. The objectives of the course were threefold: a) to learn how to be a successful resident of SL; b) to experience community life as a group member in SL; and c) to investigate the educational potential of SL.

Each participant attended a face-to-face orientation to SL and agreed to become active participants in the following groups: Anglicans; Religious Society of Friends; ALM Truth; and Jesus House. They were also encouraged to explore other groups in Second Life. For the duration of the course, participants spent time with their group as a member, and while becoming a community member also shared their learning about self, SL and their community group with other course participants by posting observations on their experiences to a course wiki and attending class meetings in-world. These wiki postings and transcripts of in-world meetings were collected and analyzed for connections to the following key questions:

1. How well did the students learn to be a successful resident of SL?
2. In what ways did students' and researchers' observations and in-world meeting discussions reflect the themes of community and experiential learning?
3. How did students evaluate their experience and the educational potential of Second Life?

Findings. In total, ten people participated in the study. Two members of the research team were 'seasoned' SL residents having been actively involved in-world for the past year and a half and mentored the group along with another experienced mentor. The remaining seven participants, including the third member of the research team, were what are referred to as 'newbies' or new residents in SL. The following table presents some representative examples of the participants' observations that relate to the research question themes: SL Residency, Community,

Experiential Learning and Educational Viability. As we were also interested in learning from the participants' experiences to inform ongoing research in this area, other emergent themes arising in the data are also presented.

SL Residency	*One thing that really is frustrating for me is that I have not had enough experience to remember where items are, I forget how to find my landmarks, I forget where the command functions are, people ask me to do something and I have NO IDEA WHAT THEY WANT Also sometimes I can hear people talking and sometimes I can't... not sure why or how...OH I cannot walk... not good at it, I go too far, then I over steer. I feel like a major klutz. Also, is there a way to extend the amount of time that the text [message] stays on your screen? It can be difficult to keep track of what is going on when you are in a conversation with many people* ************ *I think I will be fine if I can spend some more time in SL, but the [steep] learning curve thing is definitely true*
Community	*I had a lovely chat with a woman from Michigan and a man from Belgium, who both talked to me about their experiences and beliefs about spirituality in SL. They both attend services in RL, one is Episcopalian and the other Catholic. They both believe that sacraments in SL are non binding and do not actually count in RL. They go to SL for the community and a chance to meet people from all around the world who are similar thinkers.* ************ *Bible study at the Anglican Church was great. I am very impressed with the sensitivity and how they encourage everyone to get involved. All questions are answered in a manner that causes more inquiry on the part of the person asking the questions. The leaders are very skilled and they take this ministry very seriously. It is very easy to get connected to this group.*
Experiential Learning	*I sat down in one of the chairs on the skydeck and really thought about how that felt. I did not like the feeling and have never felt anything quite like that before. I'm not sure if I agree or disagree with the rules there as I'm not real familiar with role plays in SL and I suppose as in any play, people need to look and act the role...but the color of ones skin...that seemed like a different issue to me...and it felt ...well it felt like I was being excluded because my skin was a different color from the crowds. Still reflecting on what that all meant. Probably reading more into it than I should but I'm not usually overly sensitive or easily offended. Isn't it interesting how SL allows one to experience things like this? Definitely not the type of thing one could experience in a chat room or learning management system or other technologies.*
Educational Viability	*I was able to go to demonstration in SL of how YouTube can be displayed in SL. That was interesting, as it will allow the creation of videos to be displayed for training purposes* ************ *I had some time, so I went to another museum: Abyss Museum of Ocean Science. Really, I see the value in SL as educational in this way! A great museum for those who don't live near an aquarium!* ************ *I met this avatar who in RL works for the OSHU and has been involved in SL almost five years. They are currently exploring using SL to deliver training*

Table 1: Sample excerpts exemplifying the research themes

Technology Uptake: As indicated in the first column, the steep learning curve in SL was cited as one of the most common causes for participant frustration. SL is a complex environment and there are many features that take time to get accustomed to. It took significant support and mentoring to get participants set up and functioning in SL and numerous postings, such as the following, spoke to how important it was to have facilitators at hand: *Thank you to Robin for all her help yesterday. Dia, Dr. Code, Amy, Robin and I all met in the library and Robin ran around trying to help all of us- it was a big job but she was great. I managed to get into Sloog and even tagged a few places. I also learned about some of the tabs etc. that are on my SL screen but which I had not yet*

used. I must say I am not sure who decided to design SL the way they did but there are commands/tools all over the place, up, down, right clicking…it's hard to remember where things are.

Having said this, by the end of the course the majority had mastered the ability to walk, fly, communicate via chat, voice and notecards, change their appearance, and teleport to different locations in SL using Sloog or landmarks in their inventory folder. These 'skills' allowed for the ability to navigate SL reasonably competently. As once participant stated: *I have been impressed to say the least, and once the skills required to operate in SL are mastered (i.e. sitting, communicating in audio and text) this type of meeting has unlimited potential.*

Community: Our premise for this study was that community does exist in SL. Nonetheless, we were still hoping that the data would actually confirm this assumption. The examples in column two in the table are representative of some of the types of encounters that arose, such as: the ability to make personal connections, the feeling that the communities were legitimate, the interactive nature of the activities and communications, and a sense of communal place. These themes all meet criteria for virtual community as previously described by Dawson and others. In one of the in-world class meetings, community was also discussed with some guests who have been active residents in SL:

[16:47] Jung:What is your current assessment of the possibility of SL being used for collaboration and community building on the part of educators, people of faith and others?
[16:47] Lambo: in the Anglican community...very welcome
[16:47] Perplexity: Yes, they are very strong here
[16:48] Alynn: My experience has been that SL is great for enhancing existing community
[16:48] liljennilyn: I think it can be used, but I think for those new to SL a different format would lead to more discussion
[16:48] Lambo: yes...would agree alynn
[16:48] Alynn: meaning those one already knows
[16:48] Parx: u mean communities that exist in RL?
[16:48] Alynn: yes
[16:49] Inertial: hmm but I would think the greatest personal growth comes from interfacing with groups you do not understand or know.
[16:50] Lambo: we can learn from others...who may have different perspectives

Most of the course participants ventured outside of their religious communities to explore other aspects of SL. Analysis of the data indicate that participants visited well over a dozen various groups or places and engaged in a wide range of activities such as: role play, listening to music, dancing, shopping, attending social activist gatherings, sitting in on educational sessions, sightseeing, and taking trips to museums. Some of these visits occurred as informal class group outings while others explored on their own.

Experiential Learning: The very necessity of having to create an avatar for one's existence in-world creates an immediate palpable sense of direct first person experience and it was interesting to see how many postings related to issues of identity, self awareness and emotion or feelings. As one participant observed: *My thoughts have centered around why we are so concerned about how we are perceived by others even in second life. Actually perhaps we are MORE concerned on how others see us especially in second life. As I have been reading the blogs, I think that the "perception" theme or pattern has emerged. That theme is the interaction we have with others while in SL.*

There were a number of references to the impact of SL on personality: *Has anyone else noticed a change in his or her personality in 2L??? For me it seems to go in the opposite direction one might expect. In SL I am very SHY! This seems odd as I am very comfortable talking to people in reality, but put an animated me into an animated world and I clam up… Perhaps it is the difference in body language SL, or that I just don't know the social norms yet and it makes me uncomfortable. Not sure what it is…but it certainly is strange.*

This issue also came up in an in-world class meeting and also included issues of gender in SL:

[16:42] Seattle: I find I am a bit less shy in SL .. more so in RL
[16:43] Lambo: i found it difficult outside of groups u don't belong to strike convo's with the same sex avatars
[16:43] liljennilyn: For me it is the opposite, I am outgoing in RL and shy in SL
[16:43] Jung: personality issues or traits come into play
[16:43] Tonka: Lambo, I think being a strange (unfamiliar) male in SL is more difficult than for females
[16:43] Inertial: Yes, and interesting statement, I normally prefer talking to the opposite sex.

Most unexpected was an unique insight into the affordances of SL for authentic experiential learning as experienced by one participant, whose avatar is blue. In column 3 in the table, the posting describes the experience of being rejected because of skin colour after this participant accepted an invitation to visit a period role play where people dress and pretend to be living in the 1800's. As her final sentence states, this experience was as profound as if it had happened in real life and would not have been possible in a discussions board tool that is more commonly used in online learning.

The contrast between SL and RL was a significant theme in the data. One participant wrote:

I would like to reflect on the first time that I entered Second Life and spent more than ten seconds in this virtual world. It happened on a Saturday. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, it was going to be a nice day. I left in plenty of time to attend the class that I was attending that focused on Second Life. I had no problem and went about going to the places [in SL] that the instructor asked us to go to. We met a very distinguished colleague and had quite a delightful conversation with her. It was interesting to see how a conversation could be conducted in a virtual world…Anyway I erupted into boisterous laughter in the middle of the conversation with our very esteemed colleague and embarrassed myself for the third time in this session…Anyway, I was dismissed from the lecture and decided that I would change my appearance. After all, I really believe it is true that blondes have more fun. I was changing my clothes and was in underwear frantically running around the screen trying to figure out how to put clothes back on...Now, with all of this hoopla. I suddenly realized that this was not really a virtual world to me, but one where I could feel all of the emotions and frustrations that I do in the "real world."

Another stated: *Even though SL is an avenue to get to meet people, there is never any substitute for the physical presence of another human being.* And yet none of the postings suggest that the emotions that the participants experienced during their in-world encounters were considered to be anything but real: *It is interesting to reflect, we get out of life what we put into life. Time spent with friends in RL or SL is still time and an investment in lives.* And finally from another perspective: *SL allows us to connect and makes the world very small. It is interesting to see how RL social norms being acted on in the SL meeting. I felt we acted the same in SL as we do in RL. I like SL and see the potential in this tool.*

Educational Viability: Though only a few participants were able to make headway in exploring the possibilities of SL for education, the excerpts in column 4 of the table suggest that the general consensus was that there are a number of interesting possibilities in this area. The issue was also raised in the final in-world class session:

   [16:54] Parx: what's the likelihood of educators getting their students in here successfully?
   [16:55] Lambo: Parx...i think time is the critical piece to getting students in here successfully
   [16:55] Parx: unfortunately we don't always have much time with students
   [16:55] Arawn: SL is for those with Time, but similar may have been said of Study

Based on participant comments, activities, and experiences the following have been summarized as possible applications of SL in education: virtual field trips; participating in groups/communities that exist by sending students out to engage with others and be honest about what they have learned [experiential learning]; multimedia experiences; conferences; and professional and personal development. It was also suggested that SL can support different learning styles as it allows for creative expression and experiences.

Implications and Next Steps

Learning to be a successful resident in Second Life takes time and requires patience both with the steep learning curve and technology glitches that occur. Participants constantly referred to how enjoyable the class meetings and socials were as well as how much they valued and needed the mentorship and guidance of the more experienced SL'ers in the group. The timeline of the course, however, only allowed for a preliminary exploration of community. The more time spent in-world the easier it will be to develop skills, find communities and make meaningful connections to others.

Action Plan

1. Scale down expectations and make them realistic within the constraints of the course time and credit. A preliminary course that focuses on successfully navigating in SL is requisite and should include regularly

scheduled 'socials' to get together and give 'newbies' opportunities to practice basic skills such as walking, sitting, communication – via text or voice - and experiment with managing their appearance.

2. Regular events: such as tours to different sites, museums etc. will help those who feel too shy to explore alone a chance to see some of the possibilities in Second Life and learn how to get around more easily. Other community events in a safe environment will help 'newbies' learn to socialize with 'seasoned' residents and make meaningful connections.

3. Assigning authentic learning tasks such as studying religious community in SL contributes to rich learning. There are, however, many other communities and activities available in SL that can also support experiential learning.

4. Reflection Journals and in-world class meetings are an important part of sharing and making sense of experiences in Second Life and learning from the process.

Current Update

Since this study a follow up course has been implemented in the spring session 2009. *Introduction to Second Life for Educators* – is focused on creating a Second Life (SL) account and learning how to navigate, communicate and perform other basic SL skills necessary for exploring and investigating this virtual world. An emphasis is being placed on introducing students to examples of educational applications (via SL tours) as well as opportunities for networking and professional development."

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