A SECOND LIFE FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Many professionals in instructional education have experienced a relatively new potential virtual learning environment, called Second Life (SL). This article will connect the virtual world to the essential next step in our learning and communicating approach, electracy. Initially, humans utilized an oral mode to communicate, followed by literacy which enabled written information. These modes in concert with an electronic medium, has produced an electracy mode of communicating. Attending to the medium as well as the method in which people now process information can assist in maximizing the power of virtual learning environments such as Second Life.

Keywords: Second life; distance learning; electracy; virtual world.

INTRODUCTION

"Throughout time, humans have utilized different technological tools to enhance both basic communication and learning. For instance, humans have gone from cave drawings to web sites; from petroglyphics to blogging; from conversations to instant messaging; and from story telling to podcasting." (Hargis & Rakita, 2005).

This phrase provides an insight to the evolution from oral to literacy to electracy modes of transmission. "Electracy describes the kind of "literacy" or skill and facility necessary to exploit the full communicative potential of new electronic media such as multimedia, hypermedia, social software, and virtual worlds" (Wikipedia, 2007). I would like to share thoughts on the potential to expand attributes and connections of electracy through a new learning environment.

Although most of us struggle with living one life, creating a *second life* may be an answer to some of the challenges relating to learning outside of the formal classroom. The literature has provided many labels out of classroom learning – distance learning, distributed learning, correspondence classes, asynchronous, hybrid, online, electronic, e-learning, etc., but for the purposes of this paper, I will use an umbrella term, simply called informal learning. Informal learning settings are typically museums, zoological parks, aquaria, science and technology centers, etc... They are also characterized as places where motivation is internal, the content is variable and possibly un-sequenced, attendance is voluntary, displays and objects are provided, learners are of all ages, and there is more diversity in the learners' backgrounds (Koran & Koran, 1988).

Koran and Koran (1986) suggested that besides learning, curiosity, interest, appreciation, motivation, and generalization all could be considered among the 57 desired outcomes of a visit to an informal setting.

I would like to briefly share a modern informal setting and how I believe pedagogically it can address many of the same positive attributes of an informal setting as well as minimize weaknesses previously identified for learning at a distance.

GET A [SECOND] LIFE...

Typical challenges which have been historically identified for informal settings are low quality, lack of personal attention, unstructured, high cost, distractions, logistics, need for training and maintenance, differential learning styles, instructor bias, and possibly gender/ethnic preference. However, a new world has recently been created which can possibly minimize many of these challenges. Welcome to Second Life (Second Life, 2007). Second Life (SL) is a three dimensional virtual world entirely built and owned by its residents, which has become a trend with the Web 2.0 electronic social approach. Other social mechanism include collaboration tools (Skype, Google Tools); Meeting Services (Dim Dim, Web huddle); Social Networks (myspace (with 217 million users); facebook; flickr); Social News Communities (digg; NooZ; Wordsy); and Social Bookmarks (del.icio.us; stumbleUpon). In 2003, approximately 64 virtual acres made up the SL real estate, which has grown to more than 65,000 acres in early 2008. About four million virtual residents have gained citizenship since 2003 and at any given time at least 50,000 people are active in their second life. Although technology has seen rapid growth in many areas, the type of participation SL is experiencing has recalibrated the growth curve.

It is very difficult to try and explain SL verbally or in text, one has to really see the dynamics in action in order to fully understand the potential. If I say that each SL citizen creates a 'cartoon-like' character (called avatars), which represents themselves, many people might perceive this environment as juvenile or pretend. However, once you enter SL and interact with others and the surrounding, its potential for community building, networking, socialization, and life-long learning become evident. Yes, learning can be and is a viable activity in SL, as the structure lends itself well to contextual, relevant education.

SECOND LIFE EDUCATION

The SL website shares its philosophy on education,

> *"Second Life provides a unique and flexible environment for educators interested in distance learning, computer supported cooperative work, simulation, new media studies, and corporate training. SL provides an opportunity to use simulation in a safe environment to enhance experiential learning, allowing individuals to practice skills, try new ideas, and learn from their mistakes. The ability to prepare for similar real-world experiences by using SL as a simulation has unlimited potential. Students and educators can work together in SL from anywhere in the world as part of a globally networked virtual classroom environment."(Second Life, 2007)*

Using SL as a supplement to traditional classroom environments also provides new opportunities for enriching an existing curriculum. Major universities already using SL include California State University, Columbia University, Harvard University, Indiana University, New York University, North Carolina State University, Ohio State University, Stanford University, Texas State University, University of Connecticut,[58] University of Florida, University of Massachusetts, and Virginia Tech.

As of late 2007, there were 119 universities listed as having a presence in SL (http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Institutions_and_Organizations_in_SL#To_sort_list_from_Home_Page), although it is both difficult to accurate count and track. The presence of institutions working in SL varies broadly, from a dedicated, active island to using or borrowing space and even simply some faculty teaching in common areas.

Academically, Linden Lab, the company that created and operates SL, has sold more than one hundred islands for educational purposes. The islands could be viewed as an online campus for that institution – a place where avatars would meet, hold class, engage in active learning and other academic activities.

Universities who own and operate their campus island can implement additional controls over their virtual property beyond what normal SL citizens can do.
The universities can open their campuses to everyone or just to students who have paid for the course. As with many web-based ventures, there are list-serv-like groups which allow people to meet and interact with others who have similar interest. For instance, there is a group called 'Real Life Education in SL' which is made up of individuals who are interested in education. These education groups create environments where teachers, students and other educators can interact, collaborate and work on projects. There is also a dedicated site for graduate students and researchers.

In early 2007, the New York Times reported that SL is "The Ultimate Distance Learning". In this article, the Times identify higher education institutions capitalizing on SL and how they are using this dynamic environment.

> ➢ A Ball State University English class sends students to interact with others to get them thinking and writing — "about our own identity, and respecting the identities of others, and exploring the look of our own avatar."
> ➢ In the fall of 2006, Harvard Law School offers "CyberOne: Law in the Court of Public Opinion," which explores public expression and new media where the public are able to observe from a gallery
> ➢ Pepperdine University graduate students convene on sandy Malibu Island, sometimes in a tree house, or in a coffee shop.
> ➢ New York University students take a ride on a magic carpet as they build the polygon rendition of the Washington Square arch.

These universities are on the leading edge of offering innovative technology to provide a flexible environment for student engagement and learning. In addition, the universities using SL seem to be able to help address many of the educational landmines identified by educators over the past several decades.

Currently, there are many learning environments, tools and activities in SL. An active SL Educators listserv provides a venue for discussions, questions and answers, as well as a resource depository. Their website includes a list for Educational Uses for SL (http://sleducation.wikispaces.com/educationaluses). The list includes uses such as distance and flexible education; role-plays and simulations; language teaching and immersion; anthropological research; architectural design; literature, composition[59] and creative writing; machinima; and living and immersive archeology.

Second Life is progressing so rapidly that it is difficult to write about it, without both leaving out information and material becomes outdated. For example, here are a few of the news articles written about SL, which they maintain in a Press Archive on their main page (http://secondlife.com).

- NEC Corporation connects real world phones to the "Second Life" world with their IP Voice and Media Solution – TMC Net, February 11, 2008.
- The Job Interview, Starring Your Avatar – New York Times, February 10, 2008.
- Machinima Goes Mainstream – School Library Journal, February 1, 2008.
- IBM Introduces Business Center in Second Life – IBN News, January 28, 2008.
- Universities Use Second Life to Teach Complex Concepts – Texas Technology, January 28, 2008.
- How 'Second Life' Therapy Helps Asperger's Patients – WFAA, January 11, 2008.
- Creating Life Size Molecules in Second Life – Campus Technology, January 9, 2008.
- Second Life as a Simulation Tool – OC Register, December 17, 2007.
- You're Not in the USSR Any More: Estonia Opens an Embassy In Second Life – TechCrunch, December 5, 2007.
- Professors Learn in Virtual World – ABC News, December 5, 2007.
- CPA's Find an Island on Second Life – WebCPA, November 21, 2007.
- Students Look to Second Life – Petone Herald, November 14, 2007.
- Making a Living in Virtual World – The Baltimore Sun, October 25, 2007.
- Second Life: A Virtual Universe for Real Engineering – Design News, October 12, 2007.
- Missouri Education Office Recruits IT Staff from Second Life – Government Technology, October 4, 2007.
- MIT and Princeton Face Off in Second Life – The Chronicle of Higher Education, October 2, 2007.
- Learning Architecture in a Virtual World – CBS News, September 18, 2007.
- Virtual Worlds: The Next Facebook? – CNN.com, August 8, 2007.
- Teachers, College Students Lead a Second Life – USA Today, August 2, 2007.
- University of New Orleans Opens Virtual Classroom in Second Life – Campus Technology, July 24, 2007.
- A Library Makes it Debut, in Second Life – Chronicle of Higher Learning, June 8, 2007.
- Gartner Says 80% of Internet Users Will Have a Second Life in the Virtual World by 2011 – Business Wire, April 24, 2007.
- Second Life, Darwin and God – MIT Technology Review, February 1, 2007.
- College Class Turns to Virtual World – University Business, January 31, 2007.
- I Got My Job Through Second Life – Fortune, January 23, 2007.
- The Ultimate Distance Learning – New York Time, January 7, 2007.

HOW CAN SECOND LIFE MINIMIZE ELECTRACY CHALLENGES

"The electracy mode has the potential to be both anonymous, and yet also assert the authority of authorship. It can be, and often is, linear and hierarchical, but it also has the potential to be fluid. It is at once immediate, and yet distant; ephemeral and concrete. Because of its electronic nature it is eminently variable, and yet, it can be archived, and thereby achieve permanency." (Hargis and Rakita, 2005). Using an electronic venue can be a powerful approach, although every yin has its yang.

A few of the challenges that seem to permeate instructional technology over the years include low quality; high cost; poor attitude; misperceptions; unintentional bias; bandwidth (although now 42% of Americans have a high-speed connection– essential for high graphic applications such as SL, Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005) ; interactivity; and active learning. Interestingly enough many of these challenges are also observed in the informal learning setting, which makes sense since many people simply view online as another informal setting (Hargis 2001). Second Life does not eliminate these challenges, although they can minimize these historically troublesome online drawbacks, especially in the area of active learning.

Active learning, sometimes referred to as experiential learning, is usually contrasted with a straight lecture method and involves carefully constructed activities such as role-playing, case studies, group projects, simulations micro teaches, practical's, etc. Active learning in SL epitomizes dynamic, active engagement. "In Second Life you can create anything you can imagine with powerful, highly flexible building tools, using geometric primitives and a simple, intuitive interface. Building is easy to learn, yet robust enough to inspire creativity." (Second Life, 2007). Examples include working with life size molecules, navigating through the body, rendering water treatment plants and graphic organizers such as concept maps. All of these capitalize on integrating students as part of the physical content-specific process. The ability to develop these three dimensional objects and subsequently empowering students is to 'play' with them, creating their own meaning, as well as connecting their prior knowledge epitomizes a constructivist environment. The power of constructivism has been used by the earliest of teachers – Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, who created learning opportunities where students could interact, make connections and ultimately create meaning in their own terms. For certain learning styles, SL has the potential to provide similar opportunities and in much more efficient ways. When learners actively construct new information onto their existing framework, the potential for meaningful, contextual learning is enhanced as well as retention, retrieval and usability of the information is maximized. A true constructivist learning environment engages students in authentic tasks, knowledge bases that promote the application of information, and diversity of thought; builds learning communities linking students and promotes substantial, applicable learning (Brandt, 1992).

THE NEXT LIFE

Although much has been developed, and quickly in SL, there are still many issues yet unresolved. To date, there have been limited efforts in actual learning objects which attend to foundational learning theories and best practices, which we currently use in Real Life. In addition, subsequent and correlating authentic assessment modules have not been developed, especially in forms which could efficiently be implemented by the non-SL expert, those whom we idealize in teaching broadly in this new learning environment, ultimately. Developing linear, didactic-centered instruction may work in SL, however, in order to maximize the power of this interactive learning environment, focusing on the electracy stage in how we conceptually consider material, an intentional effort to push the boundaries outside of normal information transfer. Ideally, we should try to break as many laws of physics as possible, when interacting in SL. In Real Life, we need to consider classroom space, desks, tables, chairs, whiteboards, etc., however in SL we can hold classes in the air, using chair programs that add one when one is used, so you always have sufficient chairs; or posting text in the air instead of on a board; and as often as possible create and share dynamic objects – movable, adaptable and transferable to multiple disciplines.

In Hargis and Rakita (2005) the authors' final thoughts are that "Meaningful, useful functionality will need to be clearly demonstrated as well as a connection and alignment to educational standards, foundational learning theories and proven pedagogical methodologies." It seems that albeit a ubiquitous statement, these are still the prevailing efforts that should be addressed when considering using any form of electronic approach to enhancing instruction.

Maintaining the horse ahead of the cart is essential and the primary method to ensure this is to fully understand and appreciate how we learn and develop electronic opportunities that align with the various perspectives of learning. If we can address this philosophy, then there is hope for a second life for distance learning.

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