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Virtual Education:

Teaching Media Studies in Second Life

By David Kurt Herold, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract

Following the adoption of the virtual world Second Life by tertiary educational institutions worldwide, a limited study was conducted at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University to test the feasibility and desirability of employing a virtual environment to conduct classes. Thirty tutorials were held in Second Life over a period of five weeks in support of a course on Media Studies with sixty students. Feedback was gathered continuously from students and the lecturer via informal interviews, feedback forms, and participant observation. The results did not support most of the hypotheses, but supported the value of virtual teaching and learning in a well-supported institutional environment. The paper emphasizes the need to integrate virtual environments into the educational framework of courses and for a careful consideration of the educational aims and uses of virtual worlds within specific courses.

Keywords: Second Life; higher education; tutorials.

Virtual Education:

Teaching Media Studies in Second Life
By David Kurt Herold, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

This paper was written to report an attempt to use Second Life as a setting for university tutorials. As such, it does not intend to prove or disprove educational theories, but rather to provide feedback from students and lecturers on the suitability of Second Life for Higher Education courses.

During the past decade, educational institutions worldwide started employing serious games and simulations in training situations. Politicians, the mass media, as well as educationalists across Europe and North America presented the use of interactive technologies (e.g., online visualisations, virtual worlds, or simulations) as a way to better equip students within an increasingly market-driven educational setting.

Educational institutions were also repeatedly challenged to adjust the educational experiences of students to their increasingly digital lifestyles. Students entering universities after 2000 came to be labelled as "digital natives" and were portrayed as needing a more media and IT driven learning environment than the "digital immigrants" of earlier student (and educator) generations (see Prensky, 2007 or Van Eck, 2006). Educators at all levels were urged to embrace these new technologies, as they represented a more natural medium for the digital natives:

> We live in a world that is becoming more networked every day, and the Internet has grown into an essential medium for communication, socialization, and creative expression. Virtual worlds like Second Life represent the future of human interaction in a globally networked world, and students who have grown up with the Internet naturally swim in these waters. These "digital natives" eagerly embrace tools such as Instant Messaging, social networking spaces, and massively multiplayer online games (Zhu, Wang, & Jia, 2007, p. 201)

The interactive and networking aspects of new media, especially since the advent of Web 2.0 on the internet, have been praised in many publications and held up as models worth emulating in education (see Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Oblinger, 2003; Annetta, Murray, Laird, Bohr, & Park, 2006; and Kamel Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007). The online virtual world of Second Life in particular has been promoted as a highly effective learning and teaching environment in which students have the opportunity not only to learn from a teacher, but are also encouraged to learn independently through the use and exploration of the virtual environment (Childress & Braswell, 2006; Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2007).

Only very recently have researchers started to question this comprehensive approval of all learning activities within digital environments. Once the development of technology and the emergence of Web 2.0 had made the use of technology in education easier and more affordable in terms of time and money invested, educators were fast to discover that even with the use of new technology and in new virtual environments, teaching still had to be planned carefully and with a view to student needs (Van Eck, 2006). Research has started emerging that showed that

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[W]hile it is important to understand the structure and meaning of innovative approaches to learning such as those being influenced by information and communication technologies, the results of this study reinforce the importance of looking at well-established learning activities, such as face-to-face discussion, in ways that are likely to reinvigorate our approach to their use and, more importantly, to see how their benefits can be coupled with those of online discussions (Ellis, Goodyear, Calvo, & Prosser, 2008, p. 280).

It is in this context that a study was undertaken at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in early 2008 to test the feasibility and desirability of university-level teaching and learning within the 3-D virtual online world Second Life. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University was the first university in Hong Kong to enter Second Life and to explore its educational possibilities. The decision was based on the already established educational presence of other universities in the USA and Europe, including Harvard and Stanford, and the universities of Edinburgh and Nottingham in the UK.

When this study was originally planned in late 2007, there was surprisingly little data published on actual experiences of students and teachers with Second Life in a university setting. There were numerous websites and email lists dedicated to discussions about using Second Life in education. However, these lists and websites served mostly as an initial guide on how to start in Second Life or as a collection point for ideas on how to use Second Life in classroom settings. For the purpose of introducing Second Life or any other virtual environment as a venue for normal university teaching, these websites did not provide sufficient data. As a result, this study at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University was designed to provide some data on the use of Second Life in tutorials for a regular university course.

Initially, staff at the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) drove the involvement of the university in Second Life because they had previous experience designing a virtual hotel. They had used the virtual environment for role-playing purposes and were keen to explore the possibilities Second Life had to offer. Teaching and forms of learning other than role-playing had originally not been envisaged by the SHTM, but were quickly aimed for after a successful first use of Second Life in an orientation programme.

Teaching Media Studies in Second Life

Background

During September and October 2007, the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) and the School of Design (SD) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University had organised an orientation programme for interested secondary school and new university students in a specially designed campus within the virtual world Second Life. A total of 450 students and ten staff participated in a variety of activities held on a virtual island designed to look similar to the real life campus of the university.

The orientation program was built upon the experiences of the SHTM who had previously designed a virtual environment to allow students to become familiar with several aspects of the operations of a hotel through the use of role-play. Second Life was chosen for the

orientation instead of a more proprietary solution because of its development tools and possibilities and the presence of many other educational establishments in Second Life.

The program was well received by both staff and students, and the SHTM started to expand their plans for the virtual campus. Their revised plans included the creation of teaching areas for interested staff, and an appeal was made to staff at the university for ideas and proposals to use Second Life in undergraduate teaching. This was in addition to their efforts to use the virtual environment for hotel and tourism related role-playing scenarios within their own school and the continuing use of the space for student orientation programmes.

In November 2007, the Educational Development Center (EDC) of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University called for volunteers to submit proposals to use the SHTM-created virtual campus for their teaching, which lead to the decision to use the term two (January-April) course "Media and Everyday Life" taught by the department of Applied Social Sciences to test the feasibility of teaching student tutorials in Second Life. The SHTM made a part of their campus available for tutorial use, and the EDC supplied a technical support team to design the teaching area, to support the lecturer, and to adjust the teaching area and teaching facilities as necessary.

The course "Media and Everyday Life" was proposed by the lecturer to improve student motivation in this general education course. At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, students are required to pass at least two general education courses outside their own department in addition to their subject courses to obtain an undergraduate degree. Motivation of students is usually low and background knowledge about the general education subjects very limited.

This particular course was taken up by just over sixty students, and over the course of five weeks during a period of three months between mid-January and the end of March 2008. Thirty tutorials were held in Second Life for six groups of up to ten students each per week. The tutorials served to support the weekly lectures on Media Studies topics through discussions and virtual field trips, and students were required to complete a number of set tasks as part of their course assignments. This limited use of Second Life within a regular university course was designed to serve as a test for the virtual teaching of university courses that could then be evaluated and expanded upon.

Objectives and expectations for teaching in Second Life

While there had been a lot of discussion of the educational possibilities of virtual environments in general and of Second Life in particular, accounts of the experiences of teachers and students during actual teaching in Second Life were not easy to find in 2007. Beyond the occasional guest lecture or special event, there were only a few publicly accessible, regular education events in Second Life. Discussions of such activities in academic journals were limited to newly established journals or online reports. As a result, the teaching of tutorials in a virtual environment for an undergraduate course at the university had to contend with numerous problems and questions. Besides testing the general feasibility of holding classes on a virtual campus within Second Life, the study was supposed to test a set of hypotheses and expectations about such teaching before virtual teaching could even be considered for wider use at the university.

The first hypothesis to be tested,was the assertion that young people today, so-called 'digital natives' who have grown up surrounded by technology, would welcome any increased use of technology or media on the part of lecturers or teachers. This positive attitude of the students towards the increased use of technology and their ease in navigating a virtual environment was thought to bolster student motivation, and to provide additional learning incentives.

A second hypothesis was that the similarity of the virtual environment to the real world with the addition of the comparative safety of Second Life would lend itself to independent learning and exploration. Students were expected to be able to explore environments and situations similar to real life without exposing themselves to the dangers of the real world and without incurring the high expenses required for real world field trips.

A third hypothesis that is closely connected to the first two was that the similarity of Second Life to online games would encourage students to start exploring this world in their own. In this way, student learning could be supported but students would not need the external motivation of things like graded exercises to follow up on lecture topics and to learn more about life in a mediated world.

A final hypothesis was that the accessibility of Second Life from any computer connected to the internet would help promote space- and geography-independent student learning, thus obviating the need to book scarce room resources for tutorials. This was additionally seen as a first stepping-stone towards attempts to provide long-distance educational programmes via Second Life sessions to students living outside Hong Kong.

Results and Discussion

Students as digital natives

The expectation that students would have few problems with Second Life, as they are digital natives who have grown up with computers, could not be proven. Almost all of the students initially found it difficult to register for and to gain access to Second Life, and over 40 percent of the students continued to struggle with the virtual world throughout the tutorials. Almost 20 percent of the students were only able to start attending tutorials and to complete tasks after additional, individual tutoring by the lecturer during one-to-one sessions in the lecturer's office.

Despite the detailed step-by-step instructions that students had received both during the lecture as well as on a handout, most of the students struggled with elementary computer game specific tasks such as the movement of their avatar, the picking up of objects, and the chat interface. Over 15 percent of the students stated that they had never played a role-playing game on the computer before and as a result, needed to acquire basic gaming skills at the same time as they were struggling to attend tutorials on a subject that was new to them in an environment they had never before encountered. Even students who had previously played role-playing games on the computer commented on their difficulties in getting used to the Second Life interface which requires the use of the keyboard rather than the mouse for most movements.

These obstacles did not prove insurmountable, but they required additional time and effort on the part of the lecturer who had to provide far more support to the students than originally anticipated and planned for. For each fifty minutes of actual tutorial time the lecturer needed at least twice that time for set up and student support in addition to his own lesson preparation.

With both lecturers and students struggling to come to terms with Second Life as a teaching environment, the study demonstrated that any wider deployment of Second Life at university level would require the setting up of an adequate teaching and learning infrastructure before Second Life could become a viable alternative to classroom-based teaching.

Experiential and independent learning

Students did find some aspects of Second Life very similar to real world settings and were able to explore the virtual world without endangering themselves and without additional expenses. Throughout the duration of the course, students expressed surprise at the variety of places and people that could be found in Second Life when they encountered them during tutorials or lectures. In emails to and conversations with the lecturer, as well as in feedback questionnaires, the majority of students repeatedly expressed surprise at the complexity of the virtual world in Second Life. The following were some of the thoughts students provided in their direct feedback:

"*It [Second Life] is difficult to use*"

"*[T]he avatars were too realistic and most importantly, not CUTE!!!!*"

"*I have read some articles online and find out what people think SL is different with other online games--it is real money!!! The $L can be exchanged to USD!!! Together with a currency fluctuating everyday (OH MY GOD!!)*"

"*I felt amazed when I played the SL for the first time. The software is so interesting that the virtual world created by it is so similar to the real world. People can just do what they want there. We can live in the virtual with a total different identity and create the dream world for ourselves.*"

For a graded exercise, students explored a range of areas within Second Life, encountering a variety of Second Life users – called residents – and were able to both broaden their horizons as well as deepen their understanding of lecture topics. Despite the success of the graded exercises, though, students did not explore Second Life beyond what they had to do for their course work and over 90 percent of the students expressed disapproval of the residents of Second Life who "*wasted their time*" in this "*game*" designing such complex areas in a virtual world instead of living in the real world. Students commented:

"*Still, I'm not feeling it's a place that deserves people to pay so much time and effort.*"

"*I thought SL is boring and it is not very attractive. Besides, I am surprised that so many people all over the world enjoy playing SL.*"

"*I can hardly be interested in this unreal world to be honest.*"

When the students were shown a British documentary that portrayed how some people found love in Second Life and the effects this had on their real life, all the students on the course expressed a strong disapproval of the couples shown. In discussions, in emails, and in feedback questionnaires, students repeatedly stated that they had thought Second Life a game, and they could not understand why some people would engage with it to such an extent. They stated:

"*I was also stunned when I was first told in the lecture that SL players become lovers in the real world. […] It seems that the SL players take this social utility very seriously, taking it more than just a game. The game can really be the 'second life' of a serious player.*"

"[The] *lecturer has played a video that is the real case that talking about some people who are addicted on SL. It is a quite interesting topic that told us, although SL may brings us interesting stuff and fun, it may also gives us the some drawbacks such as affecting our real life.*"

"*I think Second Life is good if it acts as a game. However, when I knew there were real example[s] that some people are married in real life because of SL, I think the game is dangerous.*"

The strong, negative feelings students expressed about Second Life and its residents resulted in an unexpected emotional barrier to the use of Second Life in education. The lecturer had to carefully contextualize all Second Life activities within the framework set by the lectures and had to make many of the links between lecture ideas and Second Life examples explicit, instead of relying on students to learn independently through assigned, general tasks. The students preferred guided tours to specific locations and discussions at those locations in real-time to independent exploration or learning. During tutorials, the lecturer took groups of students to the SL sites maintained by the news organisations Reuters, CNN, and SkyNews to explore issues of representation, intended audiences, and audience (self-)perceptions, while during another tutorial students were asked to discuss the self-representation and interactive strategies employed by the companies Mercedes Benz and Sony-Ericsson:

"*I have never expected that companies would set the outlets in SL.*"

"*If I played this game by myself, I definitely will not know that some of the brands and news agency is using an online game to promote themselves. I discovered that it is not simply a game, but a communication tool-not only for human to human, but also organisation to human.*"

Independent exploration

As mentioned above, the students on the course did connect Second Life with 3-D games. However, this similarity did not have a beneficial influence on the tutorials in Second Life, due to a lack of actual first-hand experience of many of the students with such games and due to almost universal negative associations with 3D games among students. In student feedback forms, as well as during tutorials and in assigned tasks, students repeatedly expressed negative feelings for Second Life which they classified as "*only*" a game and for its inhabitants who were seen as "*wasting their time playing a game.*" They explained:

"*There are pros and cons of using SL as a teaching tool. I think it is quite funny to use an online game as a study tool and teaching aid. It somehow encourages to do assignment (as the assignment is playing game only~). On the other hand, as it is a game only, I may not take it so*

serious as other assignment...And when I was doing the SL task, I thought that I'm playing for my own entertainment rather than finishing school work."

"Actually I don't think it's very effective to use SL for teaching. Some of us are not familiar to this kind of virtual game and need long time to know about it and then control the person's movement and activities. [...] I wastes a lot of time connecting to SL. Of course, using SL for teaching can give us a better understanding of media presentation and virtual identity. However, I don't think it's quite justified to use SL."

"It takes time for students to adopt how to use the second life and it seems better for playing rather than teaching."

The articles mentioned in the introduction above interpreted Second Life in the context of social networking, interactivity, and connectivity similar to sites like Facebook, and they classified it as a "serious game" that lacks many game-specific features such as missions or tasks, goals, achievement, and competition. The students on the Media Studies course, though, did not make the same connection. While almost all of the students stated that they did use Facebook and some described themselves as very active users, frequently accessing or contributing to blogs on Xanga.com and Yahoo HK blogs, they did not see Second Life as a form of social networking. Even when confronted with networking situations, e.g. in the meeting of avatars from different parts of the world in a virtual bar in the virtual city of Dublin, they did not interpret this as a new form of social networking. The majority of students only discussed this meeting, which they observed and took part in during one of the tutorial sessions, in terms of its lack of entertainment value as a game. Several students in different tutorial groups expressed surprise that people would go to a virtual bar and a few students asked whether these people were students of other universities who had been told by their teachers to be there.

When asked directly about the social networking and interactive communication value of Second Life, all the students asked expressed the sentiment that they did not find Second Life interesting in that respect as *"nobody in Hong Kong uses Second Life"* and all their *"friends are on Facebook and Xanga."* They showed little interest in interacting with people from outside Hong Kong, and the lack of interest in Second Life within Hong Kong made the platform useless to them as a networking platform. They commented:

"I feel that SL is not very popular, usually very few people are in one place."

"It is not easy to meet friends there"

"I can ensure [=assure] that Second Life will not be popular in Hong Kong. First, Hong Kong people only like the violent online game. Second, they also require good quality of the interface which second life cannot provide. Third, if people want to construct building, they can play "SimCity". If they just want to chat with somebody, MSN or chat room can provide this kind of function. Finally, this game is not suit[able] for Hong Kong people because they just want excitement which Second life cannot provide."

"I think Second Life will become more popular but only in the foreign countries and attract adult[s] but not teenagers. It is because teenagers love exciting, interesting and etc, Second Life is providing some things that's similar to the real lives, the different is that you need not to have so much responsibilities in Second Life, but from my view, Hong Kong people and also the teenagers will like and want a online game that can fulfil their wants, exciting, interesting."

This lack of interest in Second Life within Hong Kong meant that students were not even familiar with Second Life as such, and only two students indicated they had previously heard or read about the virtual world. As a result, the lecturer had to motivate the students to use Second Life, instead of being able to rely on the attractiveness of the virtual environment. Students displayed no knowledge of any of the features Second Life offered, which meant they needed far more training in using the Second Life environment than originally envisaged. The lecturer had to design tasks for the students to introduce them to different areas and possibilities of the virtual world in addition to course-related activities. The lecturer took students to several places providing free clothes, accessories, and vehicles and challenged students to make full use of the offers to equip their avatars. This was later followed up with an assignment that asked students to critically examine the choices they had made for their avatar and to discuss the reasons for their choices and how they represented their avatar's personality. One of the coursework assignments for the course required students to find at least three to five strangers in Second Life and to engage them in conversation. Based on these conversations with strangers, students were then required to write a short paper about the relationship between audiences and media, focusing on media uses. At the same time, the assignment served to encourage students to explore Second Life further and to engage with people from different backgrounds, which resulted in noticeable improvements in student motivation.

A further disadvantage of the lack of competence the students displayed in using Second Life and in employing 3-D game-playing skills was the necessity of keeping tasks both short and simple, as can be seen in the above examples. Tasks had to be short, so that even slower students still managed to finish them within a reasonable timeframe. They had to be simple, as most students could not cope with complicated tasks in the virtual environment. During tutorials this meant that the lecturer was unable to ask the students to complete several comparative tasks on their own but had to pass a teleportation address to the students via the chat interface, wait for all the students to teleport to that destination, join the students at the new destination, ask the students to look around the new destination for a few minutes, gather the students together for a discussion of the features that were to be compared, and repeat the procedure for the next destination. The step-by-step teaching resulted in a need for a radical rethinking of the tutorials and in much additional planning by the lecturer to ensure that tutorials were both at a level the students could cope with and still useful as support for the lectures.

Easy accessibility of Second Life

One of the main advantages of teaching in Second Life for educational institutions is the independence from specific teaching locations. This is important both in the context of a small campus university with increasing student numbers, as well as for the purposes of long-distance or online education. Second Life allows for the design of teaching facilities within the virtual world that are accessible from any computer in the world through the freely downloadable software from Linden Labs. The high bandwidth and graphic card requirements of a 3-D world with the complexity of Second Life negate this advantage to a large extent, though. Even on a university network with comparatively high bandwidth, the high volume of online traffic, especially at peak times, often slowed down Second Life to the extent of making it almost unusable due to the lag between keyboard or mouse input and avatar reaction.

Additionally, the underlying assumption that students could log into Second Life using their own computers from their own homes, proved to be wrong as the majority of students either did not own computers with good enough graphic cards or did not have access to a fast enough internet connection. While the graphic card requirements of Second Life have been lowered over the course of its development through more efficient programming, Intel corporation's efforts to design more affordable motherboards for computers that included an integrated graphics processor meant that many of the computers targeted at the education market come equipped without an additional graphics card, making them almost unusable for Second Life. This proved to be the case even for the lecturer's notebook used for presentations during lectures, and any use of Second Life during the lectures had to be pre-recorded as either picture or video files that could then be used in class.

As many of the computers used by students were inadequate for Second Life as well, the tutorials would have failed completely, if it had not been possible to arrange two computer labs on campus for the use of students during tutorial times. To maintain the 'virtuality' of the tutorials, the lecturer still taught from his office, but many of the students began attending the virtual tutorials from the same physical location of the university's computer lab. When the lab was unavailable during one of the tutorials due to a prior booking, the lecturer ended up teaching a tutorial in his own office with six students and himself grouped around a single computer screen.

Conclusions

Lessons from the pilot

Throughout the pilot project, Second Life proved to be less of a cure to perceived educational difficulties and more a new teaching environment with teething problems. Second Life, and other virtual worlds are a relatively new development and not quite as well established as some of the mass media hype surrounding Second Life might suggest. Consequently, the virtual environments offer still lack the extensive support that less sophisticated computer users require and presuppose high levels of computing skills, great flexibility, and an acceptance of rough edges in their users. To employ virtual worlds in education requires that students and lecturers are provided with the necessary support within their educational setting. In Second Life such support is not available from the providers and designers of the virtual world, and therefore, educational institutions will have to develop and deploy their own support structures and materials.

While teaching in Second Life is possible and in some cases highly advantageous, educators wishing to employ Second Life for their teaching should ensure that Second Life is well integrated into their course planning and that the reasons and goals for the use of Second Life are made explicit and transparent for their students. Students can profit from the use of technology in education, but the use of technology does not equal education. Educators will have to be very aware of the students' use of the virtual environment and will have to be flexible enough to adapt their educational plans for the virtual environment to their students' actual experiences and needs.

In setting up an educational presence within a virtual environment, educational institutions will also need to be aware that their staff will require additional support and resources to manage the challenges of teaching, guiding, and supporting students in this new media use. While enthusiastic educators can and will develop their own individual strategies to cope in Second Life or similar worlds, institutional guidelines and support structures are necessary for such teaching to become incorporated fully into the educational setting, or even to be viable as a setting for externally verifiable student assessment.

Finally, the introduction of Second Life or similar virtual online worlds requires the existence of reliable, fast connections to the internet on computers with good graphics capabilities. To ensure that all students can access the facilities on offer within the virtual world, educational institutions will have to provide students with networked computers in the real world, such as through the installation of the Second Life software in computer rooms on the university campus. Only if students have guaranteed access to the virtual environment can the virtual environment be used to teach and to assess students without exposing a university to accusations of unfair evaluation practices. While this seems a trivial point to make, both the administration and IT departments will often have to be convinced of the educational value of installing a "computer game" on the computers of an institution. Given the often negative and highly sensationalist reports in the mass media about Second Life and its dangers, they may be reluctant to expose students to such an obviously dangerous environment filled with perverts and criminals (see Holahan, 2006; Lafsky, 2007; Hudson, 2008; and McNamara, 2008).

Why use Second Life in teaching at all?

Despite the challenges educators face in setting up the use of Second Life or similar virtual environments within their courses, there are definite benefits they offer that argue for their adoption in many courses. As mentioned above, the integration of Second Life into a course is important, though, and educators will have to conduct their own analysis of the costs and benefits of using a virtual environment for their specific course.

One of the more obvious advantages of virtual worlds is the ease with which role-playing scenarios can be set up. Not only are worlds like Second Life ideal for workplace simulations, but they are also ideal for the simple setting up of student role-play, for which the students can even easily change their own appearance to match the role they are playing. The very selling-point of virtual worlds that their users can become whoever they want to be means that role-playing is already built into the system and can be used for educational applications, such as in language learning, research methods training, and others. Within the tutorials for the Media Studies course above, the lecturer asked students to consciously change the appearance of their avatars, including the avatar's skin or hair colour, height, weight, and other attributes to discuss issues of representation and (self-) perception of identity.

A second advantage of a large virtual world like Second Life is the availability of many areas for students to explore. For the Media Studies course, students were able to visit the sites of Reuters, CNN, and Sky News in Second Life to study the way these media organizations presented themselves in the virtual world. Other areas of interest to different academic subjects include areas within Second Life that have recreated parts of ancient Rome, nineteenth century England, or the modern-day cities of Dublin, Berlin, Moscow, and others. While not being able

to offer a substitute for genuine visits to such places in the real world, the possibility of virtual field trips for educational programmes provide a valuable addition to courses on urban studies and tourism.

Of further advantage in this context is not only the easy access to faraway places, but also the possibility to invite guest lecturers to give their presentations without having to travel to the actual classroom. While this option was not attempted for the Media Studies course, the SHTM invited a guest lecturer to give a presentation to students during the same term, and the lecture proved a great success, even though the lecturer stayed in the USA and the students remained in Hong Kong. Such use of the virtual environment might improve the possibilities for educational exchanges, collaborations, and maybe even team teaching between educators living in different countries or different continents. Additionally, such long distance exchanges could enhance student learning through the creation of multi-national courses in which students from, for example, Japan, the USA, and Hong Kong follow the same course via Second Life and are able to exchange views, work on projects, or discuss issues with each other.

A final advantage that should be mentioned here is the mediated immediacy of virtual worlds. While communication between the avatars of students and lecturers are instant and direct, students and the lecturer themselves are only communicating indirectly and students can hide to a certain extent behind their avatar. This form of anonymity did help students on the Media Studies course to express themselves more freely than Asian students usually do in classroom situations. The lecturer who has taught in Asia for over eight years noticed on numerous occasions that students were more willing to express their opinions, ask questions, or even to disagree with the lecturer than Asian students usually are when facing a teacher in a classroom. Although this impression of the lecturer needs further research to confirm the findings of the study, it constitutes an additional and unexpected positive result of the tutorials that is worth mentioning. Other positive results students experienced are explained:

"What I really like about the SL teaching is that, all people are active to voice out their opinion and answer questions during the tutorials(including myself!) In the real lectures, no one want to answer questions even they know(including myself!). The most important factor is that even I am wrong in SL, no one knows who am I !!!!I think this is an really effective learning method."

"I love the tutorial. The places we visited are interesting and inspired. It helps student to think more about media and our daily life. As well, through the Second Life, students can feel more easy to express and discuss, although I'm not sure whether it's good or not, because seems students become to communicate better in front of computer."

"I think it is a good method for us to see different people and different media in this way. I also think that having class in second life is quite relaxing and free, as during class, I may not brave enough to ask many questions, and talk with other students freely, but in second life we can share our views, opinions freely."

Plans for the future

Within the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the attempt to hold Media Studies tutorials in Second Life has been evaluated as a qualified success. It produced a number of benefits that made further teaching in the virtual environment desirable, while highlighting a

number of steps the institution would have to take to support its students and staff in virtual learning.

In the summer of 2008 a new funded project was created at the university to expand the university's presence in Second Life and to further develop the necessary structures for a wider adoption of Second Life in university teaching. Besides the EDC and SHTM who continue to show an interest in Second Life, staff from the School of Design, the departments of Applied Social Sciences and Computing, as well as the University Library decided to become involved in developing Second Life for use within the university. The project hopes to create campus-like facilities within the virtual environment, to include teaching areas, resource rooms, a university library, a student area, and other areas to provide spaces for teaching and learning activities.

At the same time, the project wants to work on developing guidelines and easy access start-up-packs for students and staff wishing to use Second Life for teaching and learning purposes. As a first step, a booklet was designed and trialled with students during August and early September 2008 that contains detailed instructions on registering for, setting up, and entering Second Life, as well as a brief guide to the facilities available on the virtual campus.

During the two years of the project, it is planned to gradually expand the scope of educational provisions in Second Life by offering lecturers virtual facilities for embedding in their courses and by creating a structural and organisational interface between the virtual and the real world university. The goal is to make teaching and learning in Second Life easier and more accessible, so as to enable more educators and learners to benefit from the possibilities the virtual environment offers without having to deal with the difficulties of an emerging technology.

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