

New Practices in Flexible Learning

Virtual Worlds – Real Learning!

Pedagogical reflections

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Introduction

In recent times, *virtual worlds* have aroused a lot of interest in academic and educational circles. In many different places, for many different educational reasons, *virtual worlds* are being explored, examined and evaluated. This interest continues to grow. Educators in a wide range of contexts are asking:

- What are the special, if not unique, characteristics of *virtual worlds* as a learning environment?
- What are the benefits for learners?
- What are the implications for educators?

These pedagogical reflections will consider each of these questions, drawing on the lessons learnt in the project trials and on studies and articles from around the world.

As author of this report, I am writing from the point of view of someone who has been ‘a critical friend’ to the action research project, ***Virtual Worlds – Real Learning!***¹. I have followed its development with admiration and avid interest. I write also from the perspective of an adult educator who, for many years, has been a student of the intimate relationship between theory and practice in adult education. Reflecting on the educational significance of *virtual worlds* offers a wonderful chance to identify their specific place in the ever-expanding repertoire of educational media and modes, all of which are competing for teachers’ attention and allegiance.

It is important to state at the outset that the main focus of this report, though not of all the quotations, is Second Life[®], the *virtual world* at the heart of the 2006 New Practices in Flexible Learning project, ***Virtual Worlds – Real Learning!***

¹ This project and its findings are described in detail in other parts of the project resource.

Characteristics of Second Life

Virtual worlds mean different things to different people. This section will introduce a range of voices and perspectives highlighting the special educational features of *virtual worlds* in general and Second Life in particular. Let us begin with some very general comments.

‘What can you do better in Second Life (SL) than in real life (RL)?’ That is a question often asked by educators, learners, researchers and administrators. It is also the title of a thread in the *SLED (Second Life Educators) Forum*. In his post on 13 June 2006, Pete Border answers this question with:

I think education in Second Life needs to not just duplicate what’s available in RL, but go beyond it ... SL has capabilities beyond RL and we should be using them.

In a *Christian Science Monitor* article written in October 2006, Gregory M Lamb quotes two Harvard academics sharing their vision of Second Life’s capability:

‘The typical experience in a distance-education class is to go to a website, watch a video, [and] correspond by e-mail’, says Rebecca Nesson, a Harvard law school graduate who is teaching the class along with her father, law school professor Charles Nesson. ‘Second Life gives us the capability to really have a classroom experience with the students.’

Lamb, later in this same article, also quotes John Lester, community and education manager at Linden Lab, the San Francisco-based company that owns and operates Second Life. He characterises Second Life as follows:

SL is a middle ground between the familiar and the fanciful, where imaginations can blossom.

One of the ‘painting and decorating’ teachers involved in GippsTAFE’s trials characterises the special power of Second Life this way:

The learning that is happening is very real, even though it is happening in an unreal world. What I saw happening, the interactions with the clients, was the same as if the client was in the real world.

With this ‘broad brush’ sketch setting the scene, it is now time to consider some particular aspects of Second Life’s educational attractions.

Engagement

There is no doubt that teachers and learners alike find Second Life extremely engaging. Participants comment regularly on its visual appeal, the attraction of inhabiting an animated world and the sense of adventure in discovering new places and new people. They love the way they can move around and express themselves with a wide range of gestures. Time and again, visitors would rave: ‘It feels so real’. The ease and frequency of interactions with others make it emotionally compelling, fostering active involvement and quick identification with the world and its people.

Many comment on the great scope of Second Life, with its vast array of choices that prompt continuous curiosity about what will be encountered next – and after that. This multiplicity of tempting (apparently infinite) pathways generates a keen desire to explore further and longer.

In her blog, *Second Life Education Research*, Sarah 'Intellagirl' Robbins heads one post: 'Second Life Education in the News: Finally Getting Taken Seriously'. Sarah is an American PhD candidate studying rhetoric and composition, who meets with her English-composition undergrads in real life one day a week and in Second Life on another day. Highlighting the *virtual world's* educational value, she says:

... they (my students) are learning valuable lessons about community, identity and ethnographic research ... In nine years of teaching in higher ed, I've never seen a class as enthusiastic, excited or engaged as the one I'm teaching this semester.

A 24/7 global online meeting place

Being able to meet and move around familiar places online holds a very strong appeal for both teachers and learners. Participants appreciate being able to come together in a three-dimensional meeting place with visible reference points and shared common ground. They also appreciate not being restricted by time or distance. The educational reasons for meeting in Second Life are endless. For example, some meet to confer with clients, others to plan and build, others to join or initiate specialist communities.

People applaud this meeting facility in different ways and for different reasons. Here are some examples from around the world.

Another big advantage for Second Life is collaboration. It's open 24/7 and available from the whole world.

(Pete Border, *SLED Forum*)

Having the avatars meet, Ms Nesson says, 'really changes the way the classroom conversation proceeds because you have a sense of all of these people being there participating in one way or another.'

(Gregory M Lamb, *Christian Science Monitor*)

I know that they (my company) are using it (Second Life) for serious customer facing meetings where they can display slide shows, documents and the likes and have an online discussion ... and the results have shown it to be far more useful than video or telephone conferencing.

(Kelly, comment [13/10/2006] in *Mashup*)

Nesson chose to offer her course in Second Life 'to make a distance-education experience feel like a more substantial, more connected experience so that they would have someplace where they could come and actually get to interact directly with each other and with the instructors.'

(Kate Cohen, *The Phoenix*)

Creativity

Time and again, participants and researchers comment on the way Second Life encourages and showcases creativity. This might take the form of designing, constructing and/or renovating people, properties and/or places. The scope and scale of possibilities has great educational appeal. The following quotes capture this.

The growing appeal ... reflects a new model for media entertainment that the Web first kicked off: Don't just watch – do something. 'They all feel like they're creating a new world, which they are,' says Linden Lab Chief Executive Philip Rosedale ...

(Robert Hof, *BusinessWeek online*)

Unlike role-playing games, Linden Labs has not provided a 'story' for residents to experience ... the residents create all of what they find inside SL, Mr Lester says. (Gregory M Lamb, Christian Science Monitor)

For example, teachers of architecture bring their students to SL to build things that would either be too expensive or physically impossible to create in the real world. (Gregory M Lamb, Christian Science Monitor)

Experimentation

A feature closely related to creativity is the freedom and capacity to experiment in Second Life – physically, socially, culturally, in fact, endlessly. This experimentation often leads to powerful lessons, as is illustrated in the testimony below.

Second Life is one of the very few places where you can seriously alter your appearance and be someone else for a while, which can be a HUGE learning experience. (Pete Border, SLED Forum)

Strong claims are made about Second Life's capacity to 'push boundaries' – as illustrated by the two excerpts below:

Henry Jenkins, a professor of media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, thinks that Second Life deserves credit as 'a world of hypotheticals and thought experiments.' ... Overall, says Jaron Lanier, the veteran of virtual-reality experiments, Second Life 'unquestionably has the potential to improve life outside.' (Living a Second Life', Economist.com)

'I think this is a real Petri dish for teaching and learning experimentation,' says Jeremy Kemp, a doctoral student at Fielding Graduate University and the proprietor of <http://simteach.com>, a resource center for educators using MUVES (Multi-User Virtual Environments) ... 'There's a fine balance there between offering the learning experience that students expect and utilizing the flexibility of the environment.' (Kate Cohen, The Phoenix)

Simulations/observations

Another feature of Second Life that is praised time and again is the ability it gives participants to simulate – relatively easily – an infinite array of social and physical situations while they are simultaneously in a position to study and learn from these simulations. Consider the following two comments.

My partner and I have been using Secondlife for the past few weeks as a way of testing out house designs that we would like to build ... What I'm trying to get across is that it doesn't have to be seen as being just a game; it really can be useful for so many other things. (Kelly, comment [13/10/2006] in Mashup)

Others, such as psychologists and sociologists, study what people choose to do in SL and why they're doing it, he (Lester) says ... (Gregory M Lamb, Christian Science Monitor)

Observing simulated situations can result in many benefits for learners. There are the benefits mentioned above – testing designs and studying behaviours – and there is also the potential for a better understanding of cause and effect. This aspect is highlighted in the SimTeach² wiki. In answer to the question ‘Why Second Life?’, the *Second Life Education Wiki* page replies:

Second Life provides an opportunity to use simulation in a safe environment to enhance experiential learning, allowing individuals to practise skills, try new ideas and learn from their mistakes. The ability to prepare for similar real-world experiences by using Second Life as a simulation has unlimited potential!

Having considered the characteristics of Second Life with educational appeal, it is now time to concentrate on Second Life more from the point of view of learners.

² SimTeach is a place for university instructional designers, teachers and administrators to find information and to share their experiences in designing, teaching and administering classes in immersive environments.

Benefits for learners

As stated elsewhere in this report, Second Life offers a world of learning opportunities. These are summarised particularly succinctly as follows:

In virtual worlds learners can experiment, plan, problem-solve, negotiate, collaborate, evaluate, learn and risk-take while acquiring a wide range of life skills, employability skills, improved self-esteem and learning in a real way.
(GippsTAFE trials co-manager Glenda McPherson)

As evidence of its growing popularity as a learning environment, Second Life has been the focus of several EDUCAUSE³ regional conferences in the United States. The title given to these educational gatherings has been: 'Second Life: The Educational Possibilities of a Massively Multiplayer Virtual World (MMVW)'. The following quote from a 2005 presentation by David M Antonacci and Nellie Modares highlights the constructivist learning potential of *virtual worlds*:

Students engaged in educational games and simulations are interpreting, analysing, discovering, evaluating, acting and problem solving. This approach to learning is much more consistent with constructivist learning, where knowledge is constructed by the learners as they are actively problem solving in an authentic context, than with traditional instruction ... In constructivist learning, collaboration is important, as knowledge is socially constructed ...

The benefits most noted by learners are listed below.

Immediacy

Possibly, the most common initial response to Second Life concerns its inherent power to captivate and convince immediately. Typical of such comments are:

It was weird. It seemed so real.
(VCAL student, GippsTAFE)

Even though you are in a virtual world, you can still be affected by it. Before my interview in there, I was really nervous, my hands were sweating.
(VCAL student, GippsTAFE)

The animation and good visual images were very important in its appeal to students.
(‘Painting and decorating’ teacher, GippsTAFE)

³ EDUCAUSE is a non-profit association whose mission is to advance higher education by promoting the intelligent use of information technology. Further information can be found at: http://www.educause.edu/content.asp?section_id=6

Expanded horizons

Equally popular, as observed by teachers, is the way in which Second Life extends learners' worlds and world views, their sense and understanding of themselves and their sense and understanding of others. A GippsTAFE VCAL teacher describes it this way:

... they wanted to start straight away and create their own avatars! They loved the idea of being able to recreate themselves as someone with a totally different life to them ... Therefore the opportunity to be someone else, even if only virtually, was a real chance for them to prove to themselves that being a young mum is not who they are but what they are ...

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Day 2)

Regarding the students' adoption of roles for the resort, the same teacher says:

Once their avatars have been chosen, they will have to decide the most appropriate way to dress, dependent on their role within the resort. They will also have to think about the personality that may go with the avatar so that they can totally immerse themselves in their individual role.

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Non-teaching day)

An aside: cautions for travellers

As with any journey into unknown terrain, there are unexpected twists and turns along the way. Students and teachers alike warn prospective travellers to Second Life of the dangers and pitfalls they might encounter. This is poignantly captured in the following pithy statement:

Like life, there is a dark side.
(VCAL student, GippsTAFE)

Megan Conklin, in *101 Uses for Second Life in the College Classroom*, has a section called 'Unsafe, mature, PG', in which she discusses the unsafe, mature and PG areas with Second Life and the precautions she takes based on the educational choice she makes. She concludes that section by advising that the SL community standards document should be read and understood by all students.

Educators and learners alike see facing and overcoming these obstacles as important learning experiences, lessons that will stand them in good stead in the wider world. This is articulated quite explicitly by Intellagirl in her July 2006 *SLED Forum* post on the topic, 'Comparing Instructional Strategies for Best SL Practices':

... I'd also like to point out that, although the learning curve seems rather steep for SL skills, the struggle to master them (in my opinion anyhow) seems incredibly important to any discussion about learning in general. I don't want my students stuck in walls or hijacked by grievers but, in a way, both circumstances can be turned into valuable learning experiences about adapting to an environment, its tools and its customs ...

Self-awareness

One potential consequence of expanded horizons and the associated risks is the change in self-perception that can result from regular and explicit reflection about those experiences. Part of a growth in self-awareness may be distinguishing between online selves and everyday selves outside Second Life. This exploration of self begins with choosing an avatar name/identity.

In *101 Uses for Second Life in the College Classroom*, Megan Conklin devotes a part of 'Getting Started' to 'Choosing first names'. She explains:

I usually give students at least overnight to think of a name ... I encourage these students to write about this experience of naming themselves as part of their 'online identity' and 'avatar identity' assignment.

Antonacci and Modaress refer to the personal insights gained from moving between 'avatar' and 'real-life' identities:

I've kept a reflective journal as I've played Second Life and I've learned many things about my real-life by reflecting on my Second Life experiences. I've found that some things are just different enough in Second Life that I notice them, though they remained hidden to me in real life.

The GippsTAFE VCAL teacher charted, amongst other things, the development of self-awareness in students in her project diary. The following two extracts illustrate this well:

... other students had jumped in and told her that we were not our true selves in Second Life and that we needed to be careful of what we elected to talk about when we were avatars. There was no need to disclose personal information and we needed to look at it from the perspective of our avatar and not our real selves. It is not a lie. It is our avatar speaking, not ourselves. I have decided that now that everyone has had some experience with the 'real' Second Life that we need to regroup and discuss in more detail what our avatar roles are and how they are different from who we are.

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Day 5)

They are getting better at being the avatar and not being themselves. These skills will be invaluable once they enter the island (in their work roles). They are creating more of a role-playing environment and are really enjoying the idea of creating a totally new personality without any ties to who they really are.

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Day 5)

At the end of the project, one VCAL student compared being a learner in Second Life and living her life in the wider world in this very definite way:

Now that our project is finished, I don't want to go in there any more. I'm not interested in just socialising. I'd rather do that in 'real life'.

(VCAL student, GippsTAFE)

Personal and social capacities

While self-awareness is regularly mentioned as a key learning outcome, other personal and social educational benefits are also named. For example, participants in Second Life regularly highlight increased ability in forming and sustaining relationships, in working cooperatively, in communicating effectively and in working under pressure. The following quotes illustrate the different ways in which people talk about the educational benefits of *virtual worlds*.

'Even though it's (World of Warcraft) not real, I've made some good friends with the people I slay dragons with,' the professor (Hunter) says. 'The game may be a fantasy but the teamwork and the shared experience are very real.'
(Greg Bearup, *The Age*)

... I ask if he (Storey) has formed proper friendships in the game. 'Oh, definitely,' he replies. '... I feel much more comfortable in the virtual world; people accept me there.'
(Greg Bearup, *The Age*)

In SL, students were forced to think more about their communication and, in particular, their responses to their clients. Having to type gave them more time to do this than when face-to-face. They learnt they had to be very careful to be clear, to avoid misinterpretation, especially as they did not know who their client was. Being 'strangers', clients they only knew as the avatar, they did not want to risk offending or alienating them. This improved their communication skills enormously. In some ways, the typing, the invisibility and the anonymity gave the students greater freedom. The combination of these factors created a distance, giving them time to consider, without the urgency and pressure of the spoken word expected from someone standing directly in front of them.
(*'Painting and decorating' teacher, GippsTAFE*)

At the resort, I learnt how to handle the pressure, to think on my feet, to deal with the unexpected.
(VICAL student, GippsTAFE)

Personal and social development, as suggested in these quotes and in the post-trial evaluations, brings benefits well beyond the classroom. What is learnt about self and others – understanding and dealing with difference, coping with unexpected challenges, adapting to different personalities and communication styles – are lessons for life.

Two questions

In discussions and observations about learning and learners in *virtual worlds*, two questions recur.

One is: are there desirable prerequisites for learners to ensure a valuable learning experience? When asked, one student answered with:

You need lots of perseverance and practice to move and manoeuvre. Mastery of these basic skills is vital. It makes such a difference when there are 'experts' on hand to give tips, someone standing next to you to help.
(VICAL student, GippsTAFE)

The post-project student evaluation suggests a willingness to learn new things and a supportive environment in which to do this are key prerequisites. The latter will be explored further in the next section, 'Implications for educators'.

The other common question is: what are the limitations of Second Life, that is, from the learners' point of view? One VCAL student's response to this was: *Second Life is not so good for people, like me, who are 'hands-on'*. This suggests that Second Life may not appeal to kinesthetic learners as much as to those who thrive in visual environments. The lack of physical sensation raises questions about the incompleteness or limitations of the world and whether, in the absence of tangible encounters, experiences in Second Life might be more psychologically intense.

Other students commented on the frustrations generated by being poor and/or slow typists. This limited their ability and desire to communicate through the popular mode of instant messaging. If they were looking at the keyboard, they were missing what was happening on the screen.

Having considered some of the key benefits for learners, it is now time to consider Second Life from the point of view of teachers.

Implications for educators

This section will explore some of the implications for educators in choosing Second Life as a learning environment.

Roles

Much is being said and written about the role of the teacher in Second Life. A move into *virtual worlds* seems to inevitably involve educators in reflections on who they are, what they do, how they do it and why. In other words, moving into a virtual domain demands a review, a re-evaluation, of what it means to be ‘a good teacher’.

A common thread in these discussions about ‘Second Life educators’ is that it is not sufficient, or even possible, to simply replicate traditional classroom habits. The nature of SL as a learning environment – fluid, adventurous, unpredictable, risky, non-linear, wide-ranging, multi-modal and multilayered – requires deliberate thinking about identity, methodology and rationale. For educators, this complex and compelling world highlights the issues of: *who am I and what will I do in here – and why?*

Here is an example of what is being said:

We see the role of the teacher as continuing to change. The teacher is no longer the font of all knowledge but rather a facilitator/moderator. Acting in this role, the teacher must draw upon their life skills and product knowledge to monitor situations and influence the virtual world experience to ensure the learning experience is rich and engaging. The multiplicity of roles for the teacher makes it a very intense experience.

(Project co-manager, GippsTAFE)

This multiplicity of roles is mentioned often. Some of the names given to this array of roles include facilitator, guide, mediator, designer, coach, moderator, mentor, co-explorer and co-creator. It is not that these roles are new in adult education – in fact, they have been championed for many decades – but rather that they come to the fore in, and seem to be especially suited to, a learning environment such as Second Life.

Much of the discussion around the teacher’s role centres on definitions (and the significance) of ‘teacher as authority’.

In the *SLED Forum* in July 2006, under the topic heading, ‘Teaching Roles – Conflicts and Changes?’, ‘Intellagirl’ asks quite directly:

How do you change the typical conventions of authority in SL ... for example, standing in the front of a class? Have you done anything special with your avatar to make you ‘look’ more like the teacher?

A response, made by audio in the same month, continued the theme:

Personally I go out of my way not to appear as the authority in SL ... Typically my SL sessions will be very social, a social gathering where dialogue takes place in a very friendly and informal manner to create social constructing of the students’ knowledge.

The next post in the same blog thread, made by 'MariAsturias' just over a month later, extends the theme, reassuring those who might think that Second Life might increase the teacher's 'instructional authority':

My opinion: SL doesn't, in and of itself, create instructional authority. I think face2face, email and website communication with clearly spelled-out goals, expectations and instructor/student roles really do much of that work.
(MariAsturias, 'Teaching Roles – Conflicts and Changes?', SLED)

These last two quotes highlight some teachers' fears about a 'new' role that might be expected of them if they venture into Second Life. This issue of 'who' we are, as educators, comes to the fore when choosing an avatar.

In the literature and project discussions, much attention is given to the way teachers represent and name themselves. It is clearly understood that these choices embody the way teachers perceive their role/identity in Second Life and that this representation, in turn, influences how they are perceived by learners.

As a VCAL teacher put it quite simply:

I clicked on the Register button and created my first avatar. Surprisingly, coming up with a first name was difficult because you had to think about what perception you were giving off with the name.
(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Day 1, 9 pm)

Choosing a name confronts teachers with the question: 'Do I want to remain anonymous or do I want to signal my presence to my students?' During the course of this project, the two project co-mangers created several avatars for themselves. When they were in Second Life 'officially', they chose the avatar that bore their own first names so that students recognised them and could turn to them for assistance. At other times, when wanting to be 'one of the group', they visited anonymously as avatars with names that did not signal their identity.

Choice of name is one way teachers characterise their identity (and, therefore, their role) in Second Life; choice of appearance is obviously another. Common consensus is that these choices, given their consequences in how they are perceived, cannot be made lightly. As these choices imply, role cannot be considered separate from responsibilities.

Responsibilities

With an extended role come extended responsibilities.

Perhaps, the most frequently raised issue is that of ensuring the safety of learners in Second Life. It is mentioned by teachers time and again. This area of the teacher's responsibility – online safety – is sometimes approached in terms of 'duty of care'. A GippsTAFE teacher shines new light on this debate by contrasting this concept with 'dignity of risk'. Here is what she recorded in her project diary:

In order to know how to act appropriately, we need to experience situations in order to truly understand them. In my role as a teacher I think there is a very fine line between duty of care and dignity of risk. I walk that line regularly and I believe it is because of this that my students are truly able to immerse themselves in this project. I have allowed them to explore areas where other teachers may have backed up. I truly believe in experiential learning and these students were at no physical risk. In relation to mental risk, I ensured that we debriefed after our session today.

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Day 5)

During post-trial evaluations, it became quite clear that the most crucial factor in sustaining a safe and healthy learning environment is the strength of relationship between teacher and students. As one VCAL teacher cast it:

It is your knowledge of your students, and a well-established relationship with the group, that is critical in your support role and the navigation of potential risks.

The VCAL teacher knew her student group well; the class had been together for a year-and-a-half before this project began. The community of trust that had developed over that time provided a sound foundation for the educational journey they took together in Second Life. Features of this teacher's success in travelling with her students, ones that struck all who observed her, included her openness, her modelling of adventurousness, her respect for her students and her ardent passion for democratic action learning.

As well as these professional attributes, especially given the 'newness' of *virtual worlds* and the technical as well as psychological fortitude required, one other attribute regularly comes to the fore in discussions about prerequisites for teachers. When asked what advice she would give teachers contemplating using Second Life, a 'painting and decorating' teacher replied without hesitation:

Understand the frustrations students might have using computers and with SL connections. There are problems all the time. As a teacher, you have to be very PATIENT!!

Other responsibilities, predominantly pedagogical ones, will now be surveyed. Of primary concern to all educators encountered during the life of this project was that teachers display a strong and explicit educational rationale.

Educational purpose

All teachers, when discussing Second Life, stressed the central importance of a clear educational purpose for going or being in there. The following comments from teachers involved in the trials capture this succinctly:

I did not want the students to get bored with just roaming Second Life with no purpose.

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Day 12)

You need teachers who are 'into' online learning. It's not a novelty act. Understanding it's about engaging in learning is vital.

(‘Painting and decorating’ teacher, GippsTAFE)

For me, as a teacher, it is obvious that Second Life is ‘real learning’ but the students don’t always feel or perceive it this way. For some, it can be seen as interference, a distraction from ‘real work’. In this situation, it is a good idea to make educational markers along the way, making explicit links between the SL experiences and desired/required learning outcomes.

(VICAL teacher, GippsTAFE)

In one sense, the whole **Virtual Worlds – Real Learning!** resource is an extended educational rationale. It articulates, in great detail, the educational purposes that guided the GippsTAFE teachers’ reasons for choosing Second Life as a learning environment. It aligns learning activities with desired learning outcomes. It spells out the reasons for the different stages of facilitation. In *Tracey's Diary*, it tracks one teacher’s evolving thoughts about ‘what’ and ‘why’. It documents the educational goals that were fulfilled in and around Second Life. Throughout all this documentation is a clearly evident pedagogical commitment to ensuring that involvement in Second Life is thoroughly grounded in named, justifiable educational purposes.

These purposes, as the case studies in this resource demonstrate, can be simultaneously multi-faceted in nature. While focussing on a specific subject or task (setting up an island resort or interpreting and responding to a client brief), activities can also be achieving more general educational purposes such as personal and social development – of the life skills and capacities identified in the previous section, ‘Benefits for learners’.

As well as validating the critical first step of deciding why to use a *virtual world*, all of the sources also emphasise the importance of preparation in maintaining an explicit educational focus.

Preparation

First, there is the thinking preparation that teachers need to do. This is well exemplified by the decision that the Warragul VCAL class set up and run an island resort, one to which chosen guests would be invited. The following excerpt, from the beginning of a planning document for turning this idea/scenario into action, reveals the thinking preparation behind the chosen activities.

Matching learning outcomes to scenario

Learning outcomes	Activities	
	Real life	Second Life
<p>VCAL Work-related Skills Unit 1 (Senior)</p> <p>Learning Outcome 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research information about the career pathways, functions and layout of a specific industry or workplace. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorming of staff roles needed to manage and operate a tourist resort is undertaken. • Staff role is selected by each student and research undertaken into career pathways, functions and the specific industry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using specifications regarding resort appearance and functionality from students, a tourist resort is created in SL. • The tourist resort is to have a number of workplace activity areas as specified by the students.

Next, there is the preparation for life in a new culture; that is, teachers familiarising themselves with Second Life – its geography, facilities, norms, values and other socio-cultural features. This goes well beyond the introduction provided on *Orientation Island*. It means roaming and roving and exploring this *virtual world* first-hand so teachers can brief students well and authentically before both go exploring together.

Then, there is the technical preparation. The Warragul ('young mothers') VCAL group teacher reminds us of the time that can be taken before students are actually accessing the Second Life site:

I have found that it takes a lot of time just to set up the laptops and get the students logged on to Second Life. In between sorting out the kids etc, we are probably wasting 30–45 minutes at the beginning of every class just to get ourselves organised and then we need to allow around 30 mins at the end of the day to pack up.

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, Day 4)

As well, there is the issue of preparing students, technically as well as conceptually, for life in Second Life. In *101 Uses for Second Life in the College Classroom*, Megan Conklin offers some advice about 'SL handbooks, faqs and wikis' as part of the 'Getting Started' section:

Most students preferred to just jump right in and start clicking around ... One negative thing about the 'jump right in approach' is that many students still asked a million questions of me that would have been better answered by a quick RTFM ('read the fine manual') before starting their play.

The project resource offers a lot of practical advice on alternative ways for teachers to prepare themselves for living and learning in Second Life. It cannot be stated strongly enough how vital it is that, before launching into Second Life with their students, teachers allocate plenty of time for these different types of preparation. To repeat what MariAsturias says in the blog post quoted earlier, above all, this means paying close attention to *clearly spelled-out goals, expectations and instructor/student roles*.

As well as *why* and *how* to use Second Life, the other vital question is *what* to use it for.

Educational range

The scope of subject areas and topics that can be covered in Second Life seems almost limitless.

In *101 Uses for Second Life in the College Classroom*, Megan Conklin lists the following subject areas under 'Classroom Objectives': economics, maths, computer science, natural sciences, humanities, language, fine arts and social sciences. For each of these subject areas, Megan provides topics, suggested activities and a myriad of links to other educational examples. To illustrate the range of her teaching and learning suggestions, consider the topics she lists under just one subject area, social sciences – class and status, subcultures, religion, terrorism, marriage and relationships, death and dying, race, gender issues, criminal justice, punishment, avatar and identity, nascent democracies, legal rights, ethnographic studies, mental illness, disability support groups, gambling, psychology, geography and political science.

Like Megan, teachers all over the world are designing activities, tasks and scenarios for a wide range of educational and vocational purposes, finding Second Life the perfect world for their explorations. The generosity with which they share their ideas is remarkable, affirming a worldwide community of Second Life educators and educational projects.

Megan points readers to reports first-hand from inside Second Life, *New World Notes*:

<http://nwn.blogs.com/> is the blog about Second Life by 'embedded journalist' Hamlet Linden. This is my 'number one' recommended site for quickly learning about the culture within Second Life [and] is a must-read for faculty interested in using this software in your classroom.

The attention of this report now turns to the educator's responsibilities in making meaning of the diversity of experiences available in Second Life.

Action/reflection cycle

Given the immediacy and the intensity of experiences inside Second Life, all the educators involved stressed the primacy, once outside the *virtual world*, of regularly standing back, taking stock and reflecting on incidents and discoveries – in other words, of explicitly ‘surfacing’ the lessons learnt. Often, the term ‘debriefing’ is used in this regard. The psychologist’s report will attend to those times, especially if strong emotions have been aroused, when there may be a need for psychological debriefing. This report focuses on the educational aspects of ‘debriefing’, or more accurately ‘reflectiveness’, a key aspect that is a feature of all good educational practice.

Second Life is similar to any other educational activity in terms of the pedagogical significance of the planning/action/reflection cycle. This is comparable to the time and attention given to preparing and reviewing camps and excursions. As in these cases, discussion before, during and after immersion proves to be both fruitful and essential. Principles enumerated by *The World Café*, an online community devoted to enabling conversations on questions that matter, are relevant in this context. The principles *The World Café* recommends to those responsible for encouraging generative dialogue are that they:

- *clarify the context*
- *create hospitable space*
- *explore questions that matter*
- *connect diverse perspectives*
- *encourage each person's contribution*
- *listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions*
- *share collective discoveries.*

The value of the introduction/immersion/reflection/immersion/reflection cycle is largely determined by the quality of questions asked. Questions that generate rich or deep or ‘sticky’ learning are described in the 2005 publication, *Learning conversations in learning networks*. It defines good, open-ended questions as ones that:

- *elicit facts*
- *promote analysis*
- *help delve into the centre of problems or issues*
- *prompt reflection upon actions, decisions and beliefs.*

There seems to be no doubt that it is this according of a key role to reflection that makes the difference between a novel experience and a learning experience, between an entertaining experience and an educationally meaningful one. The Warragul VCAL teacher records some of her own reflections on this:

When students got in today I decided it was time to have a bit of a chat about 'stuff'. I think my weekend's experience (in SL) was starting to concern me a little and I thought it was an appropriate time to revisit the whole Second Life thing and make sure students were still coping with the rigours of Second Life and that no-one was feeling overwhelmed. I wanted to chat more about the safety of our avatars and to ensure that students were not getting themselves into bad situations.

It was nice to just chat for a while. I was amazed that they were all really keen to chat and to talk more about their experiences out aloud. As a number of them have avatars at home, they spend quite a lot of time in SL and have experienced many things. We talked about many things, some important, some not. It was a nice debrief for us all. For a while we were getting so tangled up with the requirements of SL and the written work of preparing resumes and interviews, to write up their job roles etc that we had really not stopped to smell the roses. All in all it was very productive and I think that everyone now has a renewed vigour for Second Life. (Tracey Taylor, Tracey's Diary, Day 21)

Giving a pre-eminent place to the action/reflection cycle has long been advocated by educators around the world. Martha Nussbaum is an American philosopher, lawyer, educator and ethicist. Some of her inspiring words, published in *Lingua Franca* in 1997, are equally relevant, if not more so, today. What she said then can be applied directly to online educational initiatives such as Second Life:

It would be catastrophic to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves and to respect the humanity and diversity of others ... It is therefore very urgent right now to support curricula efforts aimed at producing citizens who can take charge of their own reasoning, who can see the different and foreign not as a threat to be resisted but an invitation to explore and understand, expanding their own minds and their capacity for citizenship.

The 'curricular efforts' described in this resource are living testimony to both the desirability and the possibility of these educational ideals.

Professional development opportunities

While teachers are enthusiastic about the educational opportunities for their students, they also speak of the benefits for themselves and the professional development opportunities opened up by Second Life. A 'painting and decorating' teacher welcomes the capacity Second Life gives her to *interact with people from all over the world and, in particular, to connect up with other 'industry people', like-minded souls, in subject-related forums.*

As with all educational environments, there are issues specifically related to working and learning in Second Life. It is now time to consider them.

Issues

Issues that have been covered elsewhere (in the project resource) will simply be named and followed by a short commentary incorporating the key research findings. New issues will be covered in more detail.

Privacy

All concerned go to great lengths to underline the imperative that students should be warned not to put any personal information into their avatar profile and interactions when in Second Life.

Harassment/abuse

Another basic life skill for students inhabiting Second Life, highlighted by all concerned, is knowing how to deal with, including how to report, abusive situations.

Research

If students are doing research in Second Life, there are issues around disclosure of intention. As Antonacci and Modaress (2005) warn under 'Potential Barriers':

Student encounters with other Second Life users can be problematic. Some student groups have upset other users by not fully disclosing the purpose of their visit and not obtaining consent from the other users before using information from their visit.

Time

There are legal, ethical and industrial issues around 'out-of-class time'. For example, time is needed to become familiar with new software and sites, to research and prepare content, to negotiate facilities and to set up rooms and equipment.

Some teachers see this as part of professional growth:

Does the teacher have to put in lots of time at the beginning? For sure!! But is it all worth it for the results you get at the end? Of course it's worth it!! With every new teaching method or enhancement to your teaching practice comes a concerted effort to obtain all the information you think you need to do the job properly. All new methodologies require more effort at the beginning. This should not put you off if you have a desire to use SL in the classroom. Think about the last new technology you implemented in the classroom ... The more effort you put in, the better the results you will get.

(Tracey Taylor, *Tracey's Diary*, 12 October)

Some are concerned about 24/7 access becoming, if not a requirement, an expectation.

Boundaries

Many articles comment on the powerful psychological effects and after-effects of particular episodes in Second Life. In an August 2006 article in *The Age*, Chris Johnston comments on such a time:

The longer you live through an avatar, the clearer his or her personality becomes. It's an elaborate, confusing lie.

In *Mashup*, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* technological blog, Dave warns:

Once you get hooked and have been playing for so long, you're not really there for the fun any more. You're there because you have to be, you have to gear up, you have to meet raiding commitments, you have to help a buddy, you have to keep making potions for the guild etc.

These comments spotlight the role, responsibilities and adequacy of educators in recognising and responding to situations such as these, especially when there are negative consequences. Therapeutic counselling is quite clearly beyond the responsibilities of teachers. What, then, are appropriate and justifiable professional expectations in this grey area? Put more bluntly: where is the borderline between the role of the educator, the role of the psychologist and the role of the social worker?

‘Reality’

While life inside Second Life is ‘real’ in that it is being experienced as part of a human life, there are significant differences between life inside *virtual worlds* and life outside. For example, there are no children in SL or, if there are, they are adults with ‘child’ avatars. However, the ‘reality’ is that some visitors to Second Life feel more ‘at home’ there than in the outside world. As a computer programmer from Brisbane asserted to Greg Bearup when interviewed for an October 2006 article for *The Age*:

There’s an argument that Second Life detracts from social interaction, or if the social interaction is as valid and meaningful in real life. What does it really matter how social interaction takes place?

In the same article, something similar was said by a computer scientist from Sydney:

‘I don’t go out much in the real world’, Storey says ... He spends most of his spare time in this fantasy world and says he’s even made real friends, even though he’s never met any of them in person ...

Many would see such withdrawal from the wider world not as harmless escapism but as a worrisome, bordering on dangerous, phenomenon. Many would see it as the teacher’s responsibility to include issues such as these in their regular reflections on ‘Second Life’ and ‘Real Life’. That said, the last word goes to one young VCAL student who could not take Second Life seriously at all: *I saw it as a game, not an educational thing.*

Wider society

There is much discussion about the future of *virtual worlds* and if/when they will become an integral part of people’s lives and, if so, what the social consequences will be. Apart from the educational implications, people point to the need to examine the legal, moral, political and social issues being foreshadowed by this extremely popular, fast-growing trend. Robert Hof, in a May 2006 *BusinessWeek online* article, muses:

Beyond business, virtual worlds raise sticky social issues ... Will that draw fire from law enforcement or, at least, publicity-seeking politicians?

This project has provided some ‘good answers’ but, relatively speaking, the realm of *virtual worlds* is still a very new human enterprise. The work involved in examining its educational significance has only just begun.

Conclusions

A striking conclusion from these pedagogical reflections is the validation of the central role of the teacher. It is tempting to say that the role of the teacher has never been more important. It is simply impossible to imagine the teacher ushering learners into Second Life and then stepping back or withdrawing. Quite the opposite is the case: at every stage, the teacher needs to be fully present, engaged and alert.

If teachers and learners are to achieve the educational wealth inherent in Second Life, there seem to be three key factors that are vital.

The first is the provision of TIME for teachers to prepare themselves for inhabiting Second Life as a broad and deep learning environment. This means not only time to become technically proficient, although that is obviously mandatory, but also time to accustom themselves to this vast online world. Sufficient time is an essential requirement for the cognitive and practical pedagogical preparation teachers need to undertake.

The second factor is according a clear central role to continuous, integrated REFLECTIVENESS. This means incorporating guided dialogues before and after immersion. These are dialogues that prompt learners to think more about the meaning of their Second Life experiences and of the new world – its strengths and weaknesses, its attractions and dangers – that it is opening up to them. For significant learning to occur, it also means enabling learners to connect what they have seen, felt and learnt in a *virtual world* to their own conceptual and everyday worlds.

The third factor, without which it is difficult to imagine any progress, is PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT. Not only will almost all teachers be venturing forth into ‘terra incognita’ but they will also be acting as educational guides, responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their students. The orientation and ongoing support teachers need is comparable to what is mandatory for any educational travel, for any educational exploration of new places.

Future possibilities in Second Life seem limitless. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education: Information Technology*, Andrea Foster refers to the potential of Second Life for creating *the structure and content of a new public discourse space*. Perhaps, the last word should go to Linden Lab’s community manager, John Lester, known as ‘Pathfinder Linden’ in-world in Second Life. In an October 2006 article by Kate Cohen in *The Phoenix*, she refers to the Linden vision *to let the educators run with it*. ‘We would love to see Second Life ... used for things we haven’t dreamed of,’ he (Lester) says, ‘for instructors to use it to teach things that could not possibly be taught in the physical world.’ ...

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