Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life

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Judith Molka-Danielson & Mats Deutschmann

Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life
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Educational applications of virtual worlds are growing in popularity and used in pursuit of a wider diversity of learning outcomes as platforms proliferate and experimentation continues. According to this book, “the primary factor (lending to Second Life’s growing acceptance by educators) is that it represents an innovative way for both learners and educators to participate in the world in general, and to control the learning activities in particular” (p. 188). While there is definitely a considerable amount of activity and effort being invested in the use of virtual worlds to achieve real world learning outcomes, the development of documentation on “what works” and “why” in the emerging field of Virtual Learning Environments is less prevalent and its usefulness often quite dubious.

This book represents the experiences of participants in a state-funded Scandinavian project to create virtual education for adult learners on “Kamimo Education Island” and other experienced educators in Second Life. Offered as a “roadmap on issues of: instructional design, learner modeling, building simulations, exploring alternatives to design and integrating tools in education with other learning systems” (p. 7), the book is generally – though not completely - comprised of narratives generated by expert-situated case perspectives using descriptive methods. While a quick perusal reveals some noticeable flaws, a close reading of the book nevertheless reveals a wealth of insights and recommendations germane to developing and engaging learning experiences within the Second Life virtual environment.

Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life comprises two parts; Chapters 1-4 is a section devoted to the pedagogic design and management of learning experiences in Second Life and, the second section, Chapters 5-12, describes examples of Second Life projects and the pedagogic wisdom revealed through these contexts.

By easing the reader into the idea of teaching and learning in a virtual environment and offering a provocative list of possible educational uses of Second Life, co-editor Judith Molka-Danielsen provides an introduction and lens through which the reader is invited
to conceptualize the remainder of the book. In Chapter One, The New Learning and Teaching Environment, Molka-Danielsen suggests that this book is perhaps most appropriate for those not yet active within the virtual platform. She prepares the uninitiated Second Life educator by describing ways that universities are using Second Life, posing a number of well-known learning and teaching theories as complimentary to such experiences, and uses these learning theories (e.g. Bloom’s Taxonomy, Social Constructivism) to frame the context of learning in Second Life. The author contends that virtual educators need to attend to the affective domains of motivation, attention, and perception, as these are paramount for quality learning to occur.

Chapter 2, Instructional Design, Teacher Practice and Learner Autonomy, written by co-editor Mats Deutschmann and author Luisa Panichi addresses virtual teaching through the lens of the authors’ personal experiences teaching in Second Life. The authors outline a number of maxims useful for Second Life educators, including details regarding: (1) thinking about how Second Life might help or detract from student learning; (2) familiarizing oneself with the interface and the particular learning space in Second Life; (3) preparing content suitable for Second Life; (4) Providing explicit instruction on using the Second Life technical interface; (5) Providing student time to learn the technical interface and to explore through social events within the medium; and (6) Assessing attitudes and expectations of Second Life prior to beginning course design tasks. A discussion of relevant task designs suitable for learning content-based outcomes through cognitive, social, communicative, affective/creative, or spatial/physical activities, by making use of the Second Life interface concludes the chapter.

Chapter 3, Assessing Student Performance by David Richardson and Judith Molka-Danielsen outlines issues relevant to the verification of the identity of virtual students, and the objectivity, reliability, or validity of assessments in Second Life. The bulk of the chapter however, delves into assessing student learning in Second Life by considering what students are learning and the way Second Life is used to engage students. The authors distinguish, for example, between the use of Second Life as a “place of study” and as an “object of study” - as the medium or the topic. They use this frame and others to explicate the issues presented at the beginning of the chapter to present illustrations of student assessment in Second Life.

Chapter 4, Sim Creation and Management for Learning Environments by Judith Molka-Danielsen and Linn-Cecile Linneman is a guide for administrators of islands and other land in Second Life. Topics such as ordering land from Linden Lab, budgetary decisions, initial design considerations, and sharing knowledge gained from contextual experience developing Second Life projects for newcomers to the medium are concisely described before a more thorough treatment of the use and configuration of tools, groups, parcels, and permissions to support learning and teaching are covered. The chapter concludes with considerations for preparing faculty and students to use Second Life in their courses.

Chapter 6, Action Learning in a Virtual World by Lindy McKeown is perhaps one of the most useful chapters for educational researchers investigating virtual worlds within Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life. Describing a research method potentially useful for carrying out systematic inquiry within these milieu, McKeown outlines ways that exploring content and reflective dialogue within Second Life may be used to affect positive outcomes for students. The author’s structured treatment of approaches that may be used to conduct courses using Action Learning techniques in Second Life as location, context, content, community, material, or in combinations of these is a useful lens through which to examine virtual worlds education in its many permutations.

Chapter 7, Enhancing Virtual Environments by Bryan W. Carter is a thought-provoking piece about the use of two techniques with potential for teaching and learning in Second Life. Carter proposes that the purposeful use of performance
taking advantage of the configurable nature of avatars and immersive qualities that users experience be used to provide “conscious and unconscious” perspective for members of different members of social groups (p. 105). Using virtual worlds as a means for people to transcend the confines of their normal socially constructed role through role-playing or other performative means is illustrated. By combining the use of performance and AI Bot technologies within Second Life, Carter sketches the possibility that virtual learning may advance in compelling and substantive ways.

Chapters 5 and 8-11 each detail examples of design and pedagogy in Second Life: (a) teams role playing purchase management decision-making with tacit, embedded knowledge as a key objective and outcome, (b) the creation of historical buildings in interdisciplinary, geodistributed teams, (c) exploring the many ways that the performing arts flourish in Second Life, and (d) exploring issues of “holiness” in a digital humanities project are respectively developed by the authors. Each chapter author provides insights and principles for the conduct of virtual learning within their fields.

Chapter 12, Future Directions for Learning in Virtual Worlds by Mats Deutschmann and Judith Molka-Danielsen is the final chapter of Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life. Tracing common themes from the text and posing a design methodology quite complementary to the Action Learning Theory outlined by McKeown in chapter six, the book concludes with the authors’ recognition of a number of active organizations and projects in Second Life and a series of open questions about the future of the virtual world and the metaverse, at large. The one thing that that authors do leave as a certainty is that these immersive 3D environments are special, revolutionizing the way education and learning are discussed, designed, and engaged in.

Taken together, the chapters in this book represent one of the best resources that I have found that details the issues that educators need to consider to effectively design and manage learning experiences – as well as how they can be “managed” - in Second Life. While other introductions to SL have done well at introducing the interface and some have addressed instructional design and research, this is the first that integrates the interaction between the two well, covering both the vantage points of “what you’ll get out of it” and “what you’re in for” from the professional educational perspective. While there are definitely things that could be better framed in terms of educational research – including a more rigorous treatment of the research methods, data collection, and results, and a more systematic discussion of the constraints of Second Life, rather than simply the affordances – this book stands as one of the few to really get at that deeper contextual knowledge that many educators experimenting and teaching in Second Life have been so earnestly in search of. I will be using this book this summer when introducing high school teachers to Second Life for our in-world game development program sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

Of course there are a few things that could have been done to improve this book. The authors might have added considerable strength to this otherwise fine text by using a more systematic frame for the work. If the editors had communicated that each author clearly articulate their respective research methods and procedures, this book would stand up as a virtual world research text much better. This lack of rigorous procedural reporting is perhaps the biggest flaw of this book. Though the mix of methods and approaches demonstrated by the book make it a fine contribution to this emerging field, it would have been further strengthened through reference to Design Based Research (Hoadley, 2004).

Indeed a recurring theme encountered throughout the book is a learning and design process common to many student inquiry methods: posing a question, collaboratively designing a solution, trying it out, and performing a redesign based on the new feedback and evaluation. This “iterative design meme” is encountered in several places in the book – particularly the Action Learning theory outlined in Chapter 6.
or the design methodology developed by Jane Vella (2001) described in Chapter 12. The common features between these approaches may be worth aligning, possibly highlighting a way to meaningfully explore and collaborate with students. Such a common methodological strategy – if indeed it is agreed that there is a common fundamental essence amongst and between these approaches – would help to bring these chapters together under a common design rubric, as it were – and crystallize for the reader a strong lesson for teaching and learning in these highly plastic and complex environments: iterative design processes with open student inquiry are a fundamentally sound approach to learning and teaching in the virtual world of Second Life. Combined with an increased transparency of the results, the conclusions of the work could be viewed with better clarity and confidence. As it is, though much of the advice certainly sounds good, the researcher is left with many questions as to the plausibility, validity and direction to take with the many approaches – unable in most cases to reconstruct the process that the authors used in the creation of their projects.

Despite a few substantive ways that this book could be improved, I would highly recommend it to researchers, educators, and designers of virtual worlds and of Second Life, in particular. With such promise as virtual worlds appear to hold for educators across the disciplines, this book represents a strong, solid contribution towards identifying the conditions and contexts under which Second Life may be used to achieve real learning objectives for real learners, everywhere.

REFERENCES


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BOOK REVIEW

Assessing the Online Learner: Resources and Strategies for Faculty

Reviewed by Jessica Knott, Michigan State University, USA

Rena M. Palloff & Keith Pratt
Assessing the Online Learner: Resources and Strategies for Faculty
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Are your online students really learning what you are teaching them, or are you simply throwing information into the vast and cavernous unknown of cyberspace? Are ideas and intents connecting with the intended or are the hours you’ve spent developing your online offering coming up short? Strategic assessment strategies are crucial to make sure you are hitting the mark in online education, and Assessing the Online Learner: Resources and Strategies for Faculty by Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt offers an excellent resource for instructors, instructional designers and technologists involved in the creation of online or blended offerings.

The preface begins with a description of the book’s organization map, which follows that of others in the Jossey-Bass Guides to Online Teaching and Learning series (two parts: basics and a toolkit), and establishes that the book is intended for higher education professionals engaged in online teaching or the facilitation of online courses.

The explanations contained within Part I of this book are well-served by the writing style of Palloff and Pratt, though some of the lengthier passages became muddled and hard to follow, leaving me wishing they had been condensed or divided into more manageable sub-sections. Thankfully, these passages are relatively few and the book remains, overall, an excellent resource for readers of all pedagogical experience levels.

The first chapter begins solidly with the simple question “how do we know they know?” From here they build, moving through the cycle of course design, through outcomes, objectives, assessments, retention and the alignment of activities and assessment. This introductory chapter provides many ideas to consider, and much to do. For the well-seasoned instructor, this may prove to be a welcome kick-start to processes already being developed. To researchers in the field, unfamiliar with the basic tenets of pedagogy, teaching technique, online learning and course design, the amount of information provided and the potential laid forth may prove daunting.

Chapter two begins the real meat of the content, moving forward from introductory pedagogical concepts into online assessment. This is where Palloff and Pratt shine, providing
concrete, applicable heuristics such as, questionnaires, rubrics and checklists appropriate for immediate implementation into the course environment as well as justifications as to their importance.

The inclusion in chapter three of a competency assessment further increases the value of this resource for administrators and instructors alike, highlighting its potential not only for student learning assessment, but also course and program assessment. With many universities shifting their focuses from local to global interests, the number of online programs offered at accredited institutions is growing by the year, making program assessment increasingly critical in the changing face of the knowledge economy. This book offers simple, yet concrete solutions to getting a program started in assessing its effectiveness in the online realm.

Part II, the Assessment and Evaluation Toolkit, consisting mostly of questions, bulleted lists of things to consider, sample guidelines, rubrics and point scales, even e-mails that can be changed and sent to students enrolled in classes taught by the readers. If readers followed the information laid out in the first three chapters comprising Part I, the tools provided in Part II pay for the book. However, for those who found themselves lost in Part I, or who did not agree with the ideas Paloff and Pratt put forth, the toolkit will be nothing but a series of bulleted lists and rubrics that cannot be implemented. The authors may have relied a bit too heavily on the notion that the concepts and ideas presented in the first three chapters were understood and adopted when creating the toolkit, though they do an excellent job of explaining what each component is, how they use it and any caveats that may be associated with it.

The book’s layout uses varied fonts and type sizes, bulleted lists and graphical elements to differentiate types of content. For the most part this works very well in offering the reader an at-a-glance feel for what they are viewing. The reference value of this book is very high.

Paloff and Pratt do not provide their data methodology, though it appears they scoured web and print resources to provide ample references and further readings. This encompasses both strengths and limitations, as it provides a wealth of additional resources for readers. However, upon review some resources were quite old or out-of-date. While referring to some of their own research, the authors did not appear to do any research for this particular publication as to whether or not the heuristics they provided offered added benefit to instructors or designers implementing them. Their arguments would have been greatly strengthened by this; however the resources they did provide lend enough credence to their claims to make them more than adequate. The vast majority of their references were current, and both authors have hands-on experience in the field of education and distance learning. To me, this hands-on knowledge speaks as loudly as any other reference.

This book’s malleability and universal framework is its greatest strength. The rubric format covered extensively by this book is applicable to non-traditional learning environments, and the communications guidelines provided can be applied to any number of educational situations. However, the book’s greatest weakness is that it largely ignores alternative learning environments such as Second Life or Ning, leaving practitioners to make these connections themselves.

The most innovative assessment idea broached for faculty and student alike is the portfolio, and the only social media technologies discussed are blogs and wikis. While it is understandable that technology is constantly influx, this dearth is rather glaring to those looking for cutting edge innovation or emerging technologies as an answer to their assessment needs. This weakness is far from cataclysmic to the book’s overall value, as instructors well versed in these environments will find useful information to apply to their teaching as well.

As a reference, I highly recommend this book be a staple in the reference bookcase of any practitioner in the field of online or blended higher education.
Jessica Knott is a producer for Michigan State University’s Virtual University Design and Technology department, helping professors learn to effectively integrate technology into their teaching. She holds a BA in journalism with a specialization in public relations and a MA in education, focusing on educational technology and K-16 leadership. She has worked in higher education information technology for nine years and her educational interests include student engagement and literacy in the online realm and the potential of social networking in higher education.