Chapter 16
Learning and Teaching in Second Life: Educator and Student Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Formal off-campus flexible learning has been a feature of higher education since the 19th century. The introduction of various educational technologies over the years has provided additional opportunities for learners to undertake courses offered anytime and in any location, providing greater flexibility for the development of cost-effective learner-centred curricula. With the emergence of 3D virtual worlds such as Second Life in 2003, educators are quick to realise the potential of such immersive environments to extend the flexible learner-centred approaches that have been a feature of off-campus learning over the decades. However, the benefits of technology-enhanced learning can be contradictory and incompatible and can both widen and reduce access to education. Despite the proliferation of articles attesting to the benefits of teaching in virtual worlds such as Second Life, until relatively recently, there has been a lack of empirical evidence reporting on the learning outcomes for students participating in these virtual learning sessions. Good pedagogical practices must be taken into consideration when educating in a

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Off-campus learning has been a prominent means of educating students for decades (Bates, 1997; Harding, 1944; Kalinić, Arsovski, Milanović, I., & Ranković, 2010), however, the focus on the delivery of materials has changed considerably with the advent of the Internet, social computing tools and emerging technologies. Students who choose to study by distance have traditionally been provided with paper-based study materials through the postal system, often supported by phone, voice mail, and in later years, email correspondence (Willems, 2005; Kalinić et al, 2010). As we move to a more technologically savvy world, students are increasingly being provided with their study materials online through a learning management system (LMS) where they can retrieve and share documents, read through study materials, view multimedia learning objects, interact with each other through discussion boards and chat rooms, use a blog for reflection, wiki for interaction and collaboration, or a virtual world such as Second Life for all of the above and more. A virtual world is a software-based solution that enables users to experience a simulated environment through an avatar persona, a person’s 3D graphical presence.

The perspectives of educator and student experiences of learning and teaching in a virtual world from five higher education institutions are explored. Educators provide an overview of their perspectives of teaching in a virtual world, introduce their cohort of students and report on their students’ learning experiences.