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Second Life in didactics

The following interview was conducted via Skype on Wednesday, September 26, 2007 by Deb Antoine, Instructional Designer and lead Second Life developer for the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning, University of Illinois Springfield. She interviewed Sarah Robbins, the author of a book 'Second Life for Dummies'.

What about Second Life made you decide to use it for your class?

I've been teaching on and off line for about ten years in higher ed. I've used learning management systems like Blackboard and On Course and I've done Content management systems like [Drupal](#) to get the most engagement that I could in an online course. And none of those systems seemed to engage the students, there was always something about them they didn't like and what I figured out was that the systems we typically use in academia don't have much in common with the online communication systems students generally gravitate to voluntarily. Things like My Space and using Instant Messaging and Skype and video games and MMORPGs (Massive Multi-Player Online Role Playing Games), places where students would go on their own. So I thought, if we could find a learning tool that integrated the kinds of communication tools that students would use voluntarily, and put them to the use of education, we might actually be able to hold their attention and really foster some active learning.

So, when I started poking around Second Life and I realized it was all collaborative and participatory and that there were these great tools in the world to create things, and that there was all this self-expression with the avatars. It just seemed like a perfect fit. I got lucky in the class I teach is a required course so their learning requirements were set out for it already. So all I had to do was to look at that list and think of ways that I could accomplish those tasks using Second Life. And it wasn't hard to do at all. I think it took me two days to convince my department that I could do it. The next barrier was to get some land and find a place to teach, and I got really lucky there too, there's the Center for Media Design which does the Middletown Media studies at Ball State and they were already kind of interested in Second Life but hadn't done anything there yet, so they said we'll buy you an island, you teach, you let us know how it is going and we'll learn from you and then we'll take it from there. So that's how I managed to get in there and teach a class.

So you did have support from your institution then?

Yes. I was the only one on campus who had even heard of Second Life. I was the "techiest" person in my department and they looked to me for answers about how to integrate technology

into courses, and so they trusted me to know what I was doing. When we had 300 students sign up to get into the class, they figured I was doing something right.

If an instructor is interested in using Second Life in their curriculum, What advice would you give them in order to get started?

Well, certainly you want to be well-versed with the tools. This is not a tool you can learn one week and bring students in the next. There's more than just the mechanics of the environment, there's more than just knowing where to click. You've really got to understand the culture of the space. And you've got to understand what's possible in the space. How people use it, how people live there. And there's whole social conventions, really it's integrating yourself into a community. We would no more say, "I'm going to take my students and teach a class in Nigeria say without doing any research, then you should take students into Second Life." So you've really got to go in and understand it for yourself first, before you can expose students to it.

That's the first thing, the second thing is to make good use of the community that already exists. Like the SLED list and the SLRL list. Attend a lot of events, ask a lot of questions and draw on the resources that are there. Of all the communities I've been engaged with in education the Second Life Community is the most collaborative, the most helpful most nurturing community and it's multi-disciplinary, international, and you just can't ignore that resource if you want to teach in Second Life.

Also, the third thing I would say is be prepared for 'nay-sayers'. Those of us who are doing it and have been in it for a while, think of it as mainstream now. I can't imagine not teaching there, not using it for teaching. It's hard for me to imagine thinking that it wouldn't be great place to teach, but there still are people, especially administrators, who don't quite get the connection and you've got to be ready to really spell it out, really explain things, so that other people can understand it and see the connections between the way we teach traditionally and the way this can work, because I think there are really clear and easy connections, you've got to be willing to make them.

What do you see as the future for 3D virtual worlds in education?

I think the reason why virtual worlds are becoming such a hot topic in education is that we're dealing with a new generation coming in. They make very clear demands of education. We know that more of them are paying for their own school than ever before. They're demanding, plus they come from a very hyper-mediated lifestyle. Where they are used to writing a paper, listening to music and having the TV on all at the same time. We know that they are avid social networkers, they like to connect with people and utilize different communication tools to keep in touch with folks. We see all these trends in the way people voluntarily learn and the ways they voluntarily communicate. And we have to be aware of how those demands and those changes in lifestyle are going to effect education. Virtual worlds are just one symptom of that. The reason I like Second Life is that it has elements of games, it has elements of simulation, Sim City type things, it has instant messaging and inventory and chat, there's a lot of similarities to other tools and they're all mashed up into Second Life. So, in that sense I think we're going to see environments like Second Life that integrate even more, like being able to surf the web collaboratively from inside a virtual environment. Or being able to collaboratively edit marked up text verses just a notecard.

So if these environments are going to be successful, they're going to have to pull even more other sources into them so that they're sort of a one-stop shop rather than just a single-service space. The other thing that I think is exciting about it is I think it breaks down silos in education. When educators go into a virtual environment like this they are more likely to collaborate with people outside their department and disciplines and maybe even outside their schools and even outside their country. Students are more international now, they have friends all over the world and they are connecting with people they never would have met before and for education to stay in those very isolated silos of disciplines, is kind of counter-intuitive to that. So using a virtual environment we can kind of foster that lifestyle of learning rather than the privileged spaces of learning that is the classroom that we have access to only a few hours a week.

What about access to Second Life? It's a bit difficult for the typical student with their typical laptop to get access to Second Life. How do you feel about that and how can we justify using it if our students don't have the necessary equipment?

When we started integrating the internet into classes we had the same problems, we had slower internet connections on campuses, we had old DOS-based machines and we adapted. The technology gets cheaper and faster every day. Second Life requirements are not exponentially expanding.

I would anticipate that the technology hardware on campus is going to catch up to it, In the same vein I don't accept that as an excuse because the majority of my students already had machines that could run it, it was their personal machines. And true, our lab didn't work for it, because I'm in the English Department and our labs are for word processing and internet research, they don't even have graphics cards. But, when I talked with my students they said, "My machine runs it fine." What I did was switch the onus of the technology onto the students. Well if you're responsible for owning the textbook for the course, then you're responsible for maintaining your machine in a way that can support the software. And I have had many, many students who have come into Second Life and none of them have had an issue that they couldn't resolve or couldn't borrow a friend's computer for class time. And they managed to work around it. And I think the benefits of running Second Life are not the strongest when you have all the students in the same lab. If we're going to use it for distance education, if we're going to use it for distributed learning, then we don't need a lab to run it, we need students with machines that can run it, more and more students come to school with a machine that can run it.

Could you tell us how you took your class and refashioned it for Second Life?

My classes are hybrids, I teach one night a week on-campus and one night a week in Second Life. I did that because Second Life was new for me and in general. So, I wasn't ready to fully commit to all of the class being held in Second Life. I wanted that security of the face-to-face session, just in case we had problems. If I was teaching this semester, which I'm not, I'm finishing my dissertation, but if I was, I would teach solely in Second Life because I understand it well enough now, and I feel it's stable enough that that could be done. The class that I teach, teaches primary and secondary research for academic writing. So, there's about 90 sections of this course offered every year. And the students are required to do some research and write about the research and most classes send the students out into the community, to observe communities and interact and ethnographic and participatory observation studies. Well, Muncie is not a big town! And for 90 sections of this class, with 25 students each to be out and about in Muncie asking every non-

profit, asking every company, every community organization, 'Hey, can we come watch you, come interview you?' is kind of a burden on the community. It's too much. So I saw Second Life as a great feasible solution to that. So what we did instead, was we conducted our research in Second Life. We had access to communities in Second Life that would have never been represented in Muncie, where there is really no diversity at all. And where the communities were available to students when the students wanted to access them. A lot of the students on campus realized they had the time to conduct their interviews in the evenings when these organizations and companies were closed. So they couldn't do their work.

But, Second Life is available 24 hours a day and there are always people there. And the students really benefited from that level of access to people.

And I also think that a lot of the students in the traditional version of the course, make up their research because it's too much of a burden to overcome their fears of a face-to-face interview and have to talk to someone they have never met while they're trying to learn interview skills and research skills. The screen mitigates the risk just a little bit, my students were much braver about who they would approach and who they would talk to than their counterparts in the traditional classes. So overall the outcomes of the course were much better than the outcomes of the courses I taught just face-to-face, with the very same curriculum.

What was the most enriching part of your Second Life experience?

I would say handing power over to the students. It's easy when you're in a traditional brick and mortar classroom to be up front and be in charge all the time and not hand over the responsibility of learning over to your students.

And we all know that is not the way to teach, but it is habit and it is just so easy to fall into. And it's easy for the students to just sit back and be in receipt of the knowledge. It's an easy passive role for them to be in. But that model just doesn't work in Second Life. They can't just sit there. Their avatars will slump, visually they will slump. But, I was able to get them excited and actually get them to engage in their own learning. And then this great dialogue started happening. I would say 'Ok, we need to accomplish these three objectives in class today, how do you guys want to do it?' And they came up with ways to accomplish assignments I never would have thought of. So I learned to be a better teacher from them and they learned to be responsible for their own learning and that they could be responsible for their own learning. By the end of the semester, they were telling me, 'I'm going to keep my blog up and I'm going to keep doing this kind of work, because I'm really interested in this.' And consistently they had done work outside the classroom that I hadn't asked them to do. And that was so motivating for me to see that kind of engagement and that kind of community formation among the students, because they were doing work together outside of class, and I thought were on to something here...this is good. How can we keep this going?

You are co-authoring a book about Second Life. What is it called?

Second Life for Dummies, due out in December, they make wonderful Christmas gifts. We really tried to address the questions we saw over and over again on the SLED list . We were really lucky compared to authors of other Second Life books, because we're part of a community that regularly brings in new people. And not just new educators, but new students all the time. We dug through the SLED archives pretty hard to identify the most common problems and make sure

they were all addressed in the book. And to create something that would help people overcome the barriers. I see these numbers all the time, there are over 9 million accounts, but only 1.5 million regular users. What happens to the other 7.5 million people? Some of them might not be interested in it, but I'm guessing there are a lot of people who are just overwhelmed by the environment, by not having a set direction and there's no given goals or missions. And that becomes a hindrance to their use of the tools. So we're really hoping that the book helps that and helps people become more engaged in it and use it.

Thank you for the interview.