

Experiential learning in the virtual world

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Introduction

The interest in the use of the virtual world to provide experiential learning activities in Higher Education has grown rapidly over the last few years. This paper discusses how the use of “Second Life” is to be integrated within a practically orientated module in the Event Management Undergraduate degree course at London Metropolitan University, to provide students with the kind of experience that would be difficult – for a variety of reasons - to replicate in the real world. The aim is to afford ALL students with the opportunity to apply acquired knowledge and to develop and practice relevant employability skills by planning, designing and delivering “events” in the virtual world.

By simulating a realistic environment, Virtual World (VW) applications such as Second Life (SL), defined as “*persistent virtual environments. [...] enabling people represented by avatars (a personal representation in 3-D form), to create, play and interact in real time*” (Penfold, 2008) can be used as a means of enhancing learning in operational aspects of Events Management.

Context

The original module, an intermediate level, core module of 30 credits, has been taught to approximately 130 students each year. The requirements are for students to work through the Event Management Process of research, design, planning, coordination and evaluation (Goldblatt, 1997). This is done by undertaking a role-play activity in which students acted as groups of professional event organisers to develop a proposal for an event. Actually running the planned live event is not compulsory, nor assessed, instead, students have the option of entering into a competition for the funding required to stage it. Hence, for most students, experience in the project is limited to the planning stage of their event and so they are unable to demonstrate the knowledge and skills that would be necessary to actually execute their plan.

For that reason, a redesign of the module was planned with the intention of affording ALL students the opportunity of applying acquired event planning and management techniques together with theoretical knowledge. Then, by using Web-based information technology applications, module participants could go on to develop and practice, in a 'virtual world', relevant employability skills, including teamwork, time management, organisation, problem solving and decision-making. So in this way – through technology - they would not only be planning and designing events, but also delivering and managing them..

Experiential learning and the virtual world

'Learning by doing' strategies, including methods such as problem solving, role-play, gaming and simulations, whose rationale is underpinned by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, are clearly pertinent to the teaching and learning of Events Management in general. Not only are experiential learning activities advocated as encouraging attitudes consistent with deep learning by enhancing students' interests, motivation and participation, but they may also be utilised to overcome one of the main challenges in Events Management education, namely, that of bridging the divide between theory and practice (Anthinisz and Carmouche, 2007; Robinson, Barron and Solnet, 2008; Ruhanen, 2005).

Indeed, given their specialist and vocational nature, Event Management curricula are expected to, both by the students themselves and by the industry within which they hope to become employed, provide graduates with theoretical knowledge and conceptual understanding of the subject and related disciplines. The curricula are also expected, to offer learning and assessment opportunities for the application of the knowledge gained and for the development of the skills required for employment (Bowdin, 2007; Ruhanen, 2005). Notwithstanding the specialist nature of Events Management, preparing students for the workplace is an important consideration for today's Universities in general as they are expected to develop, in their students, 'graduateness' or, "the quality that graduates have that prepares them for graduate-level work, or even for work as such" (Hager and Holland, 2006 and Glover, Law, and Youngman, 2002, cited in Walsh & Kotzee, 2010).

There is a large body of literature on experiential learning approaches in events related fields, including, in addition to studies by McDonald and McDonald (2000), research by Armstrong (2003) which demonstrated the benefits of using role play in tourism and hospitality teaching and by Moscardo and Norris (2003) on the positive outcomes of providing students in a conference management class with opportunities to stage live events. Building on a pedagogical approach rooted in constructivism whereby "learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge" (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996 cited in Dass, Dabbagh and Clark, 2011), it seems clear that the learning spaces afforded by the Virtual World might have something to offer - an appropriate resource, which might allow combining the

principles of more traditional experiential learning with the new possibilities offered by Virtual Worlds.

Stoerger (2010) believes that “virtual worlds such as Second Life are powerful in that they enable students to learn through seeing, knowing and doing within visually rich and mentally engaging spaces”. Students can learn new practices while engaging in active experimentation in a risk-free environment (Shiller, 2009). Therefore, It is no surprise that, in recent years, interest in the educational uses of virtual worlds has grown and hundreds of educational institutions have established their presence and integrated VVs in their curricula (Stoerger 2010). While a range of platforms exist, including ActiveWorlds, OpenSim, and Olive, the most widely used virtual world application with over nineteen million registered users is Second Life (SL), SL provides a platform that encourage participants to create their own virtual content, interact, play, do business, and communicate within a virtual space sectored into regions which are then divided into islands (Molke-Danielsen and Deutschmann, 2009 cited in Wesner, 2011).

London Metropolitan University owns a number of regions in SL, which would support the practicability of the intervention. In fact a similar type of project to the one proposed in this paper has already been conducted within LondonMet and an evaluation concluded that SL provided a valuable and engaging learning alternative as it allowed for the planning, implementation and evaluation of projects “from start to finish” and with limited funding, in addition to offering a close match with real-life experience also leading to likelihood of skill transfer (Wesner, 2011; Ferdinand and Kitchin, 2012).

A major conceptual influence on the design of the modified module has been the “articulated curriculum” model of Hussey and Smith (2003). This model acknowledges that: “events and activities both within and outside of the classroom act to shift the balance and more readily reflects what happens in classrooms - a mess of intentions, ambiguities and interactions” (Sadler-Smith, 1996 cited in Hussey and Smith, 2003). Correspondingly, Forest (1997) cited in Hussey and Smith (2003), point out that while the teacher might attempt to establish an environment that directs attentions and activities towards an outcome or outcomes, in effect, the results depend on what happens between the students, tutors, subject matter and setting. In other words, there is a need to recognise that not all learning outcomes can be pre-specified, and that some may emerge from activities within the classroom - as it is especially the case for experiential learning activities.

Similarly, outcomes may emerge in VW when students explore and interact with other users and the virtual environment both with and without supervision (Bonfield et al 2012). Indeed according to Bonfield et al (2012) “many of the learning gains in immersive worlds occur when there is less prescription from the part of the teacher”. As a consequence it has both been necessary to reconsider the role of the

stated learning outcome in this curriculum redesign and to acknowledge the impossibility of making predictions about the occurrence of emergent learning. This last point is corroborated by the fact that, while through experience and understanding of the subject we can predict a number of familiar scenarios that students may encounter, this project uses technology of which I, as the curriculum designer and as one of the future instructors, have little or no experience.

In view of these considerations, the learning sessions involving SL needed to be designed in order to encourage the engagement of students' interests, insights and reflections as suggested by Hussey and Smith (2003), with a view at ensuring that it is the direct experience of the alternative reality, which will lead to construction of knowledge and to learning (Cocking, 2011). Hence, the redesigned module attempts not merely to recreate the traditional classroom in the virtual world but consist of a series of guided activities, independent exploration of the virtual environment and social interaction through which students can learn by doing, observe their outcomes and reflect on their own learning (Cocking, 2011). Meanwhile, it will be through the reflective process that the experience will be translated into learning and that emergent learning will be identified and assessed.

In practice...

The assessment strategy for the module currently based around two case studies. provided by Barnardo's, the children's charity, and Upper Street Events, a creative event agency specialised in producing consumers and trade shows. Students select a case study and work in groups to develop an idea for an event to be staged on behalf of either of these organisations. Based on the events they have conceptualised, researched, planned and designed for their chosen case study, students then complete three types of assessment: coursework consisting of a number of event planning and business documents (a feasibility study, an event manual and a proposal); an oral presentation of the event proposal; and a reflective paper analysing what has been learned and experienced during the module.

The Second Life Project provides a third, elective, option that students can choose to undertake for their assessment. However, no matter whether students choose to undertake one of the two case studies or to carry out an event in SL, the existing program of lectures and seminars remains valid in building students' knowledge and understanding of the theories and techniques that are relevant to the planning of events as per current module syllabus.

Importantly, adding the SL case study to the existing module offering means that, in line with this project's main aim, ALL students are given the option of choosing to undertake a case study that leads directly to the actual staging of an event. The SL project affords students the opportunity, through the preparation and delivery of their assignment in the virtual world, of applying what they have learned theoretically to a practical situation while developing and practicing relevant skills

and abilities (teamwork, time management, organisation, problem solving and decision-making), not only by planning and designing events as it has been the case until now for this module, but also by delivering and managing them, albeit in the alternative setting of the virtual world.

The enhanced authenticity of the SL project assessment is in itself a factor supporting its validity. Besides, research has highlighted the many benefits of the use of VVs in education. For example, the result of research carried out by Penfold (2008), reported that the students felt that using Second Life “improved collaboration”, “improved cooperation” and “aroused their learning interest”. Involvement and a high level of interest are both factors leading to intrinsic motivations and a deep approach to learning (Fry et al, 2009).

It should nonetheless be acknowledged that there are issues associated with the use of virtual world as teaching and learning tools. There seems to be consensus in the literature about the need for fairly advanced technical infrastructure (hardware and bandwidth) and for ongoing IT support in order for virtual world project to be carried out effectively (Baker et al, 2009; Holden et al, 2011). There is also recognition that the digital literacy of faculty members can pose implementation issues and delays. Meanwhile, it is essential that students, who are usually more confident users of technologies, are still given time to familiarise themselves with the means of functioning in the virtual world (Dass et al, 2011). Threats to students’ safety should be also very carefully considered although they are generally assessed as not being greater than on other World Wide Web applications (Penfold, 2008; Schiller, 2009).

While time needs to be dedicated to translating the conceptual idea of the integration of VW learning and assessment activities into the already well established and run module I feel I have nonetheless attempted to demonstrate that the redesign is practicable and that it would be adding value to the current module offering as per original aim of this project.

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Appendix

Second Life Project - The Brief

Working in teams of 4-6 students are required to develop an event idea and to create the framework for turning it into a live event to be hosted in the Nordstar Gallery space at London Metropolitan University's Collier Island in Second Life. You are then expected to stage the event in the virtual world between February and April 2014.

The event must be free to attend but you are allowed to decide on the type of event you want to host (for example, but not limited to a concert, an art exhibition, or an educational conference). The event aim is to showcase London Metropolitan University to (selected) virtual world audiences. Groups can add a charity component to their events if they wish.

Planning for the cost effectiveness of your event is essential. Where possible you should aim for the event to run at £0 cost to the University but you can identify and utilise alternative sources of income/support. Cover for up to the SL equivalent of £100 will be provided where necessary but you may not, under any circumstances, exceed this budget. To this end you should make your event so attractive to enable you to source performers and participants willing to get involved for free. Paying particular attention to targeting the right audience groups for your event should be helpful in this respect. You are encouraged to procure any necessary physical requirements (e.g. equipment and marketing material) in-kind or develop your own objects (including decorations) using the relevant tools available on the SL software.

As with a real life event you will work according to this event brief to conceptualise your event, develop a mission and objectives and decide on an appropriate strategy for the planning and implementation of your event. It is expected that relevant planning tools and techniques introduced during the lectures will be utilised, for instance, in order to assign roles and responsibilities, allocate resources, devise a schedule for the whole planning process and for the event day, and to design and implement the marketing and financial plans.

While this means that many tasks necessary as part of your event planning process will have to be carried out outside of the virtual environment (in seminars and group meetings), most of the research and design tasks and, of course, the delivery of the event itself will have to be undertaken in SL. Therefore, you are required to work within the parameter of the Experiential Learning Framework, which follows four stages: foundation (avatar creation, familiarization with the virtual world and means of navigation, attending generic SL tutorials) participation (field trips, extensive communication with other event organisers, suppliers, artists/performers/speakers and audiences; attending lectures and tutor-led sessions), creation (design and delivery of the events) and multiplication (event debriefing and evaluation, self reflective exercises, tutor and peer assessment, and exchange of experience and data with your tutor and the other students in your class).*

- N.B. Guidance and instructions will be provided in the seminars and will be also found in the information area of the Nordstar Gallery.