

WELCOME TO (Y)OUR SECOND LIFE:

A PAPER BASED ON A WORKSHOP RUN AT THE LICK CONFERENCE 2008 ON PROVIDING PEER MENTORING AND TRANSITION SUPPORT WITHIN THE VIRTUAL WORLD OF SECOND LIFE AT GLASGOW CALEDONIAN UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Learning and teaching in virtual 3D worlds is still a relatively new field to be explored and as such is an exciting area to be involved in. Many consider 3D worlds to be playful spaces that are "...adaptable, creative, sociable and collaborative...". It has also, however, been described as an "*uncanny space*" that may function as "a learning environment which nurtures a creative sense of dissonance, troublesomeness and 'strangeness' in both learners and teachers". (Bayne, 2008).

Glasgow Caledonian University's 'C U There' initiative is currently developing a virtual campus on Second Life with the aim of providing student support as well as exploring ways of embedding the virtual campus in its learning and teaching strategy. It has also encouraged staff and students to become involved and create their own projects within the realms of Second Life.

To set the context, the paper will provide a brief overview of Second Life (SL) and discuss issues and challenges of successful transition support in general and within Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) in particular.

The main part of our paper will focus on two new projects:

1. **i-CAMPPUS** (internet **C**ollege **A**rticulation and **M**entoring **P**roject for **P**rospective **U**niversity **S**tudents)
2. Overcoming the barriers of asking for help: the feasibility of Second Life as a platform for students to access support from an Academic Development Tutor without feeling stigmatised.

We shall present a brief overview of both initiatives, portray the process of familiarisation with SL and share the experiences of the developers and future student mentors working within a virtual world. Both projects are in preliminary stages and should be viewed as 'in progress'. Part of the introduction to the projects aims to offer an insight into the virtual campus: its possibilities as well as its limitations.

Research has shown that students who need advice and support most will not actively seek help (Thomas 2002, 2005, Whittaker, 2008, Yorke & Longden 2004). So can a tool like Second Life reach out to those students who hesitate or abstain from asking for help by allowing them to retain their anonymity? On the one hand, it appears to be an ideal way of ensuring that all students have access to an alternative form of support. On the other hand, recent studies indicate that the uptake of so-called Web 2.0 tools and emerging technologies

has not been as successful and as widespread as the academic community would have hoped (Kennedy et al, 2007).

Against this background, we aim to discuss what lessons we can learn from using emerging technologies, social networking in general and SL in particular. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using SL for student support and mentoring? How can we encourage students to become involved in and use a virtual campus? Are there certain groups of students who are less likely to engage with such a medium than others? If yes, what can we do about that? Some of the outcomes of the workshop discussion will inform the final discussion of the paper.

SECOND LIFE - THE GCU CONTEXT

Second Life is a three-dimensional environment that exists on the internet. It is an extension of the World Wide Web, but instead of two-dimensional images, text, links etc, environments such as this render content in 3D. There are a few such environments in early stages of development from developers around the globe, but for our purposes we refer here to SL.

Second Life is a rich multi media space. It supports images and video, and, like Web 2.0, it has a range of tools that support communication such as text chat, audio chat, ability to send email, and functionality that allows data to flow both in and out of world. These services use many of the standard Web 2.0 tools that are already in existence.

As it extends content, it also extends interaction and communication. SL additionally has a feeling of presence, of 'being there', not available in flat Web 2.0 environments. SL uses what is known as an avatar – a virtual representation of the person who is logged in. The avatar is in effect an extension of the person, or of 'you'. The avatar is used to navigate around the world, and is used to communicate and interact with others in a way that is not possible in even a rich Web 2.0 environment. This richness of sensory data, the immersion and feeling of embodiment are what make 3D virtual worlds stand out as a different type of technology.

But how can we use this kind of environment to support learning? It is in the processes that SL supports that the potential lays. Wikipedia defines SL such:

*Residents can explore, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade items and services with one another.*¹

It is these affordances of SL to support socialisation and learning through collective creation, sharing and generation of knowledge and content that are potential key factors for education.

Exploration on the potential of SL in higher education is still in its early stages. As an extension of Web 2.0, it supports social-constructivist pedagogies; problem based learning; Inquiry based learning; authentic tasks; communication and interaction; group activity, collaboration and teamwork.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_life. Accessed 20/01/09

For example, we are currently developing a simulation on the GCU SL Islands to demonstrate complex algorithms that are used in artificial intelligence design. The algorithms are used to plot paths between waypoints to allow a robot to move from point to point. This is a difficult abstract theory for undergraduates to grasp. The development of this simulation is being undertaken by two MSc Computing students as part of their coursework. Not only are the two students working on this project collaboratively, they are building it as a learning tool for other students, using their own knowledge of the difficulties of understanding this process to inform the design.

Another simulation – Radiographic Expose Manipulation – is being developed to help students experiment safely when learning how to operate an X-Ray machine. This simulation allows for practice that cannot be achieved in the 'real' world, on 'real' patients.

Other universities around the UK are using Second Life in English, Philosophy, Psychology, and the Arts. It is used for science simulations, discussions, rapid development of ideas, for instance in architecture or, product design. Graphic design and multimedia students are learning to use SL as one of the many tools of their trade. Journalism is another field in which the use of SL is very popular, with organisations such as Reuters playing a prominent role. Moreover, students can learn business and management skills, while marketing skills can be practised by trading in-world products with little risk.

For the particular strand of this paper – mentoring and transition support – it is the feeling of 'being there' combined with social and personal interaction within a supportive community that are of greatest importance.

In addition to the pedagogical uses of SL and acknowledging the need to provide additional support for students and staff alike, GCU, through its 'CU There' project, aims to create a community of learners. Its philosophy, 'by the community for the community', as reflected by the title 'CU There', is proving successful, if slow to implement.

A weekly evening class is run, aimed to reach and gather a university-wide group of interested individuals, both students and staff, in an unofficial, non-formal setting, allowing for a self-paced discovery of the Virtual World and its possibilities.

This evening class has evolved and is now for the largest part conducted by the first group of participants, assisting and guiding new arrivals, if the need arises. The classes are usually attended by a mix of students, staff and others including participants from the local council, business, residents, and even 'virtual' Glaswegians. A genuine feel of community has developed with all helping each other, while traditional borders between students and staff gradually disappear and, last, but not least, people enjoy discovering the more outlandish elements the SL environment has to offer (Trinder, Francino & Littlejohn, 2008).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRANSITION AND PROGRESSION SUPPORT

As mentioned before, the philosophy of 'CU There' is to build an SL island, which is not just linked to teaching and learning at GCU, but is open to the wider community of Glasgow, to support community engagement, the widening

participation agenda, and links with employers. One of the aims is to encourage the participation of non-traditional learner groups in the GCU university experience, both real and virtual, as part of GCU's Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning strategy.

It has been widely acknowledged that students from a non-traditional background are more reluctant to actively seek advice and ask for support than their more traditional counterparts (Benske, 2006 & 2007; Thomas, 2002 & 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2007). This is particularly worrying for post-1992 universities that provide a wide range of support mechanisms, while still facing a relatively high drop-out rate, especially amongst first-year students (Thomas, 2002 & 2005).

Glasgow Caledonian University is a post-1992 institution and has a large number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds: it is significantly over its benchmark in this regard, with 37% of full time undergraduate entrants in 2005/06 coming from SN SEC classes 4-7 and 29% from low participation neighbourhoods against a benchmark of 32% and 16% respectively. GCU also has a very high percentage of students who enter the University after completing HNC/Ds in colleges. As a result, GCU has a highly heterogeneous student group and is adopting a strategy of enhancing transition support and the learning experience for all students in an attempt to steer away from a 'deficit' model and inadvertently stigmatising particular groups of students (Whittaker, 2007).

The increasing diversity of the student population and the mass nature of higher education is a critical issue in terms of transition support. Large student cohorts require creative thinking in terms of support processes and the curriculum and the more effective use of technology. In terms of transition support, lack of preparation and wrong choice of course (Ozga & Sukhandan, 1998, Yorke & Longden, 2007) can hinder successful integration (Tinto, 1987) as can lack of interaction (social and academic) with other students and academic staff (Krause, 2001). Informal learning networks and peer-support structures to support academic and social transition from the pre-entry stage and throughout the first year have been highlighted as essential in recent research and development work on transition and progression (Creanor et al, 2006; Harvey, et al, 2006; Whittaker, 2007).

One possible strategy to counterbalance the reluctance of students to ask for help and to enable more creative thinking in terms of support is to ensure anonymity. Against this background, SL appears to offer an ideal solution, enabling students and staff to remain completely anonymous throughout their virtual interaction within SL.

GCU's use of SL aims to encourage prospective and new students to explore the GCU learning environment, such as the Saltire Centre and a range of teaching and learning activities prior to entry as well as engaging in social activities both in the real and virtual environment. It will also enable students to meet other new students prior to arrival as well as mentors and programme staff and to encourage informal peer networking throughout the first year and beyond.

The exploration of 3D virtual worlds as a means of supporting students to develop the confidence and skills to prepare for, and succeed at, university forms part of a longitudinal induction process which will inform broader HE sector research and development in the area of transition. GCU's 'CU There' and other SL projects at GCU will enhance the understanding of HE and college sectors and will explore the ways in which new technologies (with which students may be comfortable, but which may be unfamiliar to college and university staff) can be used to develop the informal learning networks (Creanor et al, 2006, Trinder et al 2008). The models that will be developed will be transferable and adaptable across the HE sector, for different learner groups.

i-CAMPPUS (INTERNET COLLEGE ARTICULATION AND MENTORING PROJECT FOR PROSPECTIVE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS): SUPPORTING TRANSITION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS THROUGH SECOND LIFE

The i-CAMPPUS Project works within the framework of GCU's College Articulation Project (CAP), which aims to support and enhance the transitional experiences of students as they move from college to university. Transition is not viewed as a 'one-off' experience – we recognise that it begins before entry to university and continues once students have moved into their new institutions. Project support is therefore long-term and looks at pre-entry, point of entry and post entry issues for students.

Project strands include:

1. Subject-based transition: how can differences in teaching and learning approaches between college and university be better understood and students helped to adapt to the university approaches before making the transition
2. Mentoring: building on GCU Induction for HN entrants to provide a continuum of support pre- and post-entry using students who have made the transition as mentors and role models
3. Disability: evaluating the current arrangements for students with disabilities with a view to improving their experience
4. Research and evaluation: extending the University's Student Evaluation Project to gain a more systematic picture of students making the transition and their progress and also evaluating each strand with a view to identifying effective approaches for future development.

The project is engaged in continuous research and development to allow us to hear the student voice and to understand the differential impacts of the range of transitional challenges students can face when they move to university. A key component of the project is the development of Communities of Practice, which underpins the project by developing networks of people involved in supporting students.

The Mentoring Strand

The mentors who work for CAP provide peer support at a number of levels:

Pre-entry Support

Mentors assist project staff with Pre-UCAS and Pre-Exit sessions across 19 partner colleges. Mentors can provide powerful role models and a key source of information for students considering university. College students are given an

overview of transition issues and the differences they may experience between college and university. They are also given information on the support available to them. Students hear first hand from a mentor who has already made the transition – wherever possible this is a former student of the college. The session is supported by information packs and signposting to relevant websites including the Mentors web pages (www.gcal.ac.uk/mentoring/web).

Point of Entry (Induction) Support

Mentors provide support for new students at a number of induction activities including the HN Induction Programme (Co-ordinated by ELS for all new HN Students), the GCU Orientation Programme (co-ordinated by Learner Support for *all* new students), the International Welcome Programme, and Campus and Library tours. Mentors are also deployed across campus in highly visible t-shirts in the early weeks of the semester to take general orientation queries and to signpost new students to appropriate staff and support services.

Post Entry (On Programme) Support

New students can meet with mentors through a programme of weekly drop-in 'surgeries', which are advertised by mentors in their departments and across the university campus. The surgeries enable students to meet with mentors in their own departments and aim to help them adapt to university by offering reassurance, practical advice, informal support, and signposting to staff and services. Students can also e-mail the mentoring mailbase (mentors@gcal.ac.uk) with individual queries or to request a meeting with a mentor.

Mentors are also available to support a variety of departmental or central activities where requested.

Challenges

The process of registration and creating an avatar, coupled with the need to spend time familiarising yourself with the SL software and environment, requires a significant commitment from participants. This may be a hurdle that some are unwilling or unable to cross, particularly where other forms of 'distance' information and guidance such as telephone, e-mail or websites are already available and relatively quick and simple to access.

Low-income groups may not have access to a PC with a sufficiently high specification, or to a high-speed broadband connection, both of which are required to use SL. Some people, e.g. mature people, may not have the ICT skills to participate in SL or if they do, they may have a 'fear' of the environment if they are unsure of the culture. Also, certain groups of disabled students such as those who are blind or visually impaired, those with dexterity problems or perhaps even dyslexics, may be excluded by the nature of their disability?

However, initial reactions from both students and mentors are mainly positive:

Very informative. Easy going, fun and friendly. Things were made a lot clearer for me. Really liked listening to (the mentor's) personal stories relating to uni.

It was good to hear from an actual student who could tell us what it will 'really' be like.

Initially, I was concerned utilising [SL] because it was an area that I had no knowledge about. I was worried that I would not be able to understand [it] and therefore I would not be able to work through the sessions well. New technology is something that I do not regularly embrace very well, however [SL] was fairly straightforward to use [...]

The controls and navigation is somewhat demanding at first [...]. The concept is ambitious, innovative and ultimately, attainable. I think without a good overview of the controls though only technically minded students will be interested in making use of it.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS OF ASKING FOR HELP: THE FEASIBILITY OF SECOND LIFE AS A PLATFORM FOR STUDENTS TO ACCESS SUPPORT FROM AN ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT TUTOR WITHOUT FEELING STIGMATISED

Project context

The pilot project described below aims to explore the utility of Second Life (SL) as a mechanism through which to provide student support, and is being co-ordinated by one of the University's recently appointed Academic Development Tutors (ADTs). As part of its widening participation agenda, GCU has appointed a number of ADTs who work with a range of students, particularly those from non-traditional learner groups, to support learning and promote development of academic skills. Learner support takes place within the context of specific disciplines in this case health and social care, and embraces a developmental as opposed to remedial approach to learning via individual tuition, whole-class workshops and online guides.

While a high volume of students make use of the academic development service, staff acknowledge the challenge of promoting uptake among those who feel embarrassed or stigmatised; typically the very students who require the most support. Indeed, it has been well documented in the literature that those students who are most in need of academic support do not actively seek it (Thomas, 2002, 2005; Whittaker, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2004). The inspiration for this project lay in the creative properties of SL, which allow users to disguise their identities and construct their own appearances through an avatar. It was conceived that if students could access academic support through these disguised identities, social barriers to accessing support could be overcome.

Project description

The project has two phases: one which aims to provide one to one support (Phase 1) and another which aims to provide group support (Phase 2). At the time of writing, the construction of a learning and teaching area within SL is underway. The ADT has created an avatar and has familiarised herself with navigation, communication and other 'in world' activities. Phase 1 will involve the provision of a weekly drop-in in which students will be able to access advice from the ADT's avatar in a purpose built entry-restricted space, which will be 'invisible' to others. To protect anonymity, communication will take place via private messaging. Phase 2 will involve the provision of a series of scheduled academic skills workshops in a purpose built space. Workshops will be delivered

on a fortnightly basis and will cover topics such as critical thinking, academic writing, study skills, and exam preparation. The workshops will be delivered in real time by the ADT's avatar using sound and textures (e. g. notice boards), and the timing of workshops will be carefully planned in order to reach as many students as possible.

Evaluation

While a qualitative data collection method would be most appropriate to gain an insight into students' experiences of engaging with the project, the significance of preserving anonymity hinders such an approach. Evaluation will therefore take place in-world with the use of a brief questionnaire containing open and closed questions, designed to address issues such as the following:

- To what extent is the loss of face-to-face interaction a disadvantage?
- Is the space more engaging if it is imaginative or if it imitates familiar real life settings?
- Would students have been willing to make a face-to-face appointment if the SL project had not been available?

Early experiences

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of the ADT's initial experiences of familiarising herself with SL and so only a brief summary, capturing the key features of this process, is presented below.

Adapting to SL and creating an avatar

The ADT's early experience of using SL was largely positive. Despite initial concerns about the investment of time required to become acquainted with the software and develop communication and navigation skills, she found the processes to be surprisingly intuitive and user friendly. The software was generally easier to use than had been anticipated and the SL tutorials were found to be helpful. While the ADT encountered no difficulties adapting to the concept of a 3D world, she was struck by the range of multimedia experiences made possible by the technology, its immersive properties and the strong social nature of the environment. This was particularly evident during orientation when she was approached, in a seemingly arbitrary manner, by avatars who initiated text chat, while others could be heard conversing in different languages. When creating her avatar, the ADT was impressed with the degree to which SL makes it possible to alter avatar appearance. Although a significant amount of time was required to create her avatar, the ADT enjoyed, somewhat unexpectedly, the novelty of a virtual shopping experience involving the purchase of accessories such as avatar outfits, skin and hair. When the desired look was finally achieved, she felt a sense of satisfaction and affiliation with her new virtual creation.

Attitudinal changes

Interestingly, the ADT noticed some attitudinal changes during the first few weeks of engaging with SL. Initially, she approached the project with a rather neutral, perhaps sceptical, perspective on its ability to engage those who may not be considered "technology wizards". With a developing knowledge of SL, however, her enthusiasm for the software developed as she mastered new skills and gained a sense of curiosity in relation to exploring new SL islands. The ADT has also been quite surprised to find herself growing an attachment to and

becoming quite invested in her avatar, an experience, which is no doubt unique and raises interesting avenues for identity related research within virtual worlds.

Limitations

Despite these positive experiences, two significant drawbacks were encountered and should be noted. Firstly, the ADT's PC, despite having a reasonably up-to-date specification, did not fully support the SL software, which created frustration and a need to have additional software installed. Secondly, the ADT experienced mild abuse in the form of offensive text comments and avatar stalking while completing one of the SL orientation tutorials. While she did not find this particularly distressing, the potential for abusive behaviour should be taken into consideration when using SL in an educational context.

Perceived benefits and challenges

Benefits:

- Anonymity removes potential for social evaluation concerns, thereby offering a more inclusive service
- Reduction of traditional boundaries and power relationships between students and staff
- Opportunity for students in disparate locations to log in and participate, thus removing the necessity to be on campus to access support, although it is acknowledged that target groups may not have access to computers that support the SL software (see below)
- Potential for interactive and peer assisted learning (Phase 2)
- Potential to free up staff time by running annotated Powerpoint presentations and videos without the need for a tutor to be present (Phase 2)
- Development of IT and virtual learning skills which are of value in the modern workplace
- Potential to engage the more kinaesthetic and visual learners
- Potential to encourage subliminal learning through SL's game-like features

Challenges:

- The group of students that the project aims to target may be those with the lowest levels of IT literacy. This may cause apprehension and act as a barrier to their participation.
- An up-to-date PC with reasonably high spec is required to support the SL software. The group of students that the project aims to target may not have home access to computers that support SL, thus requiring them to be on campus to make use of the service. This access restriction could potentially act as a barrier.
- While the strength of the project lies in the facility for students to access support anonymously, there may be drawbacks associated with the loss of face to face interaction, especially where individualised support is sought in relation to highly sensitive issues.

- Future expansion of the project is dependent on staff buy-in but recent research suggests that this could be problematic; some staff are enthusiastic about 3D world technology while others may be deeply sceptical (Trinder, 2008).
- While measures would be taken to police the service, the opportunity to disguise one's identity could potentially entice misuse in the form of, for example, avatar harassment, unauthorised or dishonest use, and menacing.

FINAL DISCUSSION

The presentation of the two SL-based GCU projects in relation to transition support, and the use of SL in a HE context has shown that the reaction towards SL is mainly positive. While some staff and students may still be reluctant to use SL as a means of communicating with other staff and students at GCU, those who have engaged with it, are enjoying the possibilities of SL. Nevertheless, the fact that Web 2.0 technologies are not as popular as practitioners in universities would have hoped will need to be addressed.

The workshop discussion at the TESEP LICK Conference 2008, however, touched on two major concerns in relation to SL and other emerging technologies within higher education: firstly, concern was expressed over the potential reduction of face-to-face teaching by emerging technologies. Secondly, workshop participants discussed the potential drawback of identifying too closely with the avatar. In this case, staff and students could have difficulties distancing themselves from the SL context, leading to some of them feeling personally insulted, irritated, or harassed by other avatars. It was agreed that these concerns should be taken into account when planning the use of SL in learning and teaching.

The use of SL in higher education in general is in its early stages, and so are the two projects introduced in this paper. There will have to be further evaluation of the uptake of SL as well as the effectiveness of SL based pedagogies. Further reports on experiences of using SL at GCU will not only be discussed in reports, at conferences and other publications, but also on the GCU SL island, where all the projects mentioned above take place.

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