

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste

Practice Papers

Incorporating Second Life into online hospitality and tourism education: A case study



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Second Life
Online learning
E-learning
Synchronous learning
Multi-User Virtual Environment

ABSTRACT

Second Life (SL) is a virtual world that can be used for educational purposes. This Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project investigated the use of SL in online hospitality education as an integral learning tool, not as a nominal feature. Findings indicated that SL provides students and instructors with interesting learning opportunities and allows students to effectively engage with each other and work together on group projects. Challenges that need to be conquered were also identified, such as the sometimes cumbersome nature of the SL program and the time commitment involved with its use.

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1. Introduction

Distance education, often called “e-learning” or “online education,” is taking center stage around the globe (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Hospitality and tourism education are part of this trend, with the number and variety of courses continuing to increase, typically provided by four sources: academic institutions, corporate entities, destination management organizations, or independent third party associates (Cantoni, Kalbaska, & Inversini, 2009). According to researchers who investigated the types of online courses offered in hospitality and tourism, the primary target group for these courses includes young people who would like to “receive interactive educational materials” and engage with instructors in ways that offer them flexibility allowing them to pursue part-time employment, while the second important student group includes hospitality and tourism employees who are “looking for long-life learning opportunities, in order to enhance and deepen their professional skills with a theoretical background” (Cantoni et al., 2009, p. 152).

In online education in general, researchers have found that students learn content equally well in face-to-face and online (or e-learning) courses (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry 2002; Bernard et al., 2004; Leasure, Davis, & Theivon, 2000; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Neuhauser, 2002; Reisetter, LaPointe and Korcuska, 2007), and that students embrace the flexibility that online education offers (Allen et al., 2002; Howland & Moore, 2002). However, researchers have also observed that online students may lack a sense of community online (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008) and experience problems connecting in meaningful ways with their peers and instructors (Kanuka, Collett, & Caswell, 2002). In addition, researchers note that synchronous learning opportunities are needed in online education (McBrien, Jones, & Cheng, 2009; West & Jones, 2007), so that “debates and critical discourse are possible in real time” (Desena, 2011, p. 22). Synchronous learning opportunities include the use of such tools as live chats and discussions, video conferencing, and 3-D learning environments, among others (Meloni, 2010).

So then just how does a hospitality management student in an online course make a live presentation to peers in a hotel setting, interact with industry professionals, or redesign a hotel or hospitality-related business outlet in a virtual setting?

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One answer may perhaps be found in Second Life (SL), an online platform that is a Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE) reminiscent of the older Sims game whereby players assume online identities and interact in a synchronous online environment. However, unlike Sims, SL can be readily expanded beyond recreational activities for use in educational experiences. While tools such as live chat options are available to instructors and students, SL may provide an interesting, perhaps more entertaining alternative and therefore, was the method selected for the project described in this paper.

This case study of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project involved the implementation of SL in online hospitality classes to determine how SL could be effectively used in hospitality and tourism education, not as an added item or as an introduction to the SL environment, but as an integral part of a course experience. The use of SL in this project journeyed beyond the use of the virtual tool as a place to go, focusing on how students could interact with SL itself to meet with others and to design, create, and change their virtual environment related to the hospitality industry. This paper does not emphasize the theoretical basis of SL or a brief introduction to the SL environment, instead it centers on how SL might be integrated into semester-long courses as a teaching and learning tool and as the basis of class projects.

2. Background

“Experiential learning has always been an important feature of hospitality education in higher education (Breiter, Cargill, & Fried-Kline, 1995, p. 75), and that often refers to the need for internships and work experience combined with classroom work (Brieter et al., 1995) and role plays (Ruhanen, 2006), but experiential learning also has benefits within the classroom milieu itself (Kolb, 1984). The theory of experiential learning has its roots in work such as that by Dewey (1938) that focused on education as developing the entire person for participation in a community, Lewin (1948), that focused on cooperative learning, Friere (1973), that focused on social change, and more recently that of Kolb (1984), focused on the experiential learning process. As Kolb noted, experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984, p. 41), and involves a four-step cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb et al., 2002). While experiential learning theory had its basis in face-to-face educational opportunities, with the growth of online education and virtual environments, “open virtual worlds like SL provide an environment supportive of learning activities such as experimentation, exploration, task selection, creation, and dynamic feedback; and this supportive platform suggests that virtual worlds are likely to accommodate project-based experiential learning (Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrath, & Trivedi, 2009, p. 170).

According to its website, SL “is a 3-D world where everyone you see is a real person and every place you visit is built by people just like you” (Second Life, 2013) and it “is a free 3-D virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create using free voice and text chat” (Second Life Marketplace, 2013). SL environments include buildings, landscapes, and businesses that recreate actual places or that are imagined and created only in the virtual domain.

SL debuted in 2003 with approximately 100 dedicated users (Rymaszewski et al., 2006) and by 2008 it was used by millions (Boellstorff, 2008) and over 500 post-secondary institutions, museums, and libraries had created SL environments (Penfold, 2008). Researchers observed that SL enabled educators to be innovative in their teaching through extended or rich interactions, visualization and contextualization, authentic content and culture, simulation, community presences, and content production (Warburton & Perez-Garcia, 2009), and SL rapidly became the most commonly used MUVE in education, receiving accolades for its technical, immersive, and social capabilities as a learning tool (Warburton, 2009). However, SL users such as schools and libraries, have to pay for the creation and use of virtual spaces and in recent years, coincidentally at the same time that the U.S. real estate market declined, SL has seen a large decrease in its use, sadly making SL look a bit like a virtual Detroit, Michigan (Au, 2013). Many SL users have abandoned their virtual lands, leaving huge tracts of SL vacant; a major reason for this appears to be the high rental fees, called “tiers,” charged by the parent company of SL (Public Works Blog, 2013), although SL can also pose technical problems for individuals (Second Life, Update, n.d.). Nevertheless, in spite of this apparent deterioration of the current SL model, numerous colleges and universities still maintain virtual campuses on SL.

According to Jennings and Collins (2007), two models have been used for campus SL environments. They include “working campus” and “reflective campus” SL models. A “working campus” is designed such that learning, teaching, research, and communication occur in the virtual environment in ways that are not possible in the non-virtual world. A “working campus” provides functional spaces for events and activities, using open-air auditoriums and buildings without walls that do not look like those on the real campus, whereas the “reflective campus” is one where the SL design tries to replicate the actual physical campus facilities (Jennings & Collins, 2007).

In the virtual world of SL, users create an avatar, a virtual self that is an online movable three-dimensional image used to represent the person in cyberspace and then teleport online to visit various sites in a virtual world that may include cities or sites such as schools and hotels. Initially this may have seemed novel, but as Bruns (2008) pointed out, virtual tools, including blogs, wikis, and virtual worlds like SL, are becoming collaborative online communities where the move is from production to produsage as users create their virtual worlds as they use them. According to Boellstorff (2008), a researcher who completed an ethnography of SL users, millions of people spend part of their lives online (p. 4); many are online communicating on Facebook, on other social networking sites, and on SL. In a study specifically of virtual world participation, Mitham (2008) discovered that 238 million people had registered accounts in virtual worlds.

Rather than investigating SL as a social tool, Boellstorff (2008) completed interviews and observations of SL users online and followed educational institutional review board guidelines to obtain permission to do so. Boellstorff (2008) and other researchers investigated the use of SL avatars as mediators (Jensen, 2008), for use as a source of biography in the form of self-narratives (Rak, 2009), and in museums (Urban, 2007). In a study of the use of SL in computer and information systems

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