

STAKE YOUR CLAIM IN THE LAND RUSH OF VIRTUAL WORLDS: INTEGRATING 'SECOND LIFE' INTO MARKETING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Today's undergraduate student population is part of the Millennial Generation; a generation (born after 1982) raised with a high reliance on Web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook, blogs, Myspace, and YouTube. A childhood filled with interactive video games has created similar expectations regarding interactive educational experiences (Drea, Tripp, & Stuenkel, 2005). These students are highly receptive to technology-based pedagogical experiences (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2002) and thrive in online environments (Childress & Braswell, 2006). A recent Harris Interactive survey revealed that 20 percent of tweens are interested in taking a virtual class before they graduate high school ("Tweens," 2007) and in K-12 schools, virtual and online learning is growing at an estimated 30 percent annually (North American Council for Online Learning, 2006). As these students proceed through the education system, they are likely to be drawn to colleges that offer learning environments that support their preferred learning style (Dede, 2005).

As a way of meeting the needs of this generation, many institutions are exploring the growing popularity of teaching in virtual worlds. To date, over 100 educational institutions from more than 20 countries are using a variety of virtual worlds as an instructional tool (Rzewnicki, 2007). For example, Whyville (www.whyville.com) is an example of a virtual world for middle school-aged children with over 1.7 million registered users and 20,000-25,000 unique daily visitors (Whyville Educational Outreach, 2007). Active Worlds (www.activeworlds.com), another education-based virtual world, is home to 80 educational institutions worldwide, the majority of which are colleges and universities (Active Worlds and Education, 2007).

At this point within this young field there is only a small body of research that examines the use of virtual worlds for instructional purposes. This literature largely originates from the arts and

sciences (for one notable exception see Wood, Solomon, & Allan, 2008; Peterson, 2006); and we can find ongoing dialogues in fields including medical and health education (Kamel, Boulos, & Hetherington, 2007; Scott, 2007; Skiba 2007), foreign languages (Svensson, 2003), English composition, education pedagogy ("Real Learning in a Virtual World," 2006), scientific research (Bainbridge, 2007), and library services (Swanson, 2007). Reports from these disparate fields strongly suggest that the game-based learning opportunities in virtual worlds offer great educational promise (Kamel, Boulos, & Hetherington 2007).

It is important to point out that virtual learning is not just confined to traditional educational programs. Fortune 500 companies such as IBM and GE utilize Second Life for staff training. As today's students move through the education system and enter the workforce, it is highly likely that at least some of their on-the-job training will be conducted in virtual environments. As educators we have a responsibility to not only satisfy the learning styles of our students but also to prepare them for what they are likely to experience in the workforce.

Despite the impressive statistics and the array of opportunities awaiting those willing to make the virtual leap, many educational institutions are still scrambling to identify the strategic benefits of participating and the best practices for virtual education. For instance, many universities feel pressure to be in-world – perhaps simply because a neighboring institution has announced its intention to be there. Unfortunately, these universities may have little idea about how to go about creating a campus and then what to do once they have planted their flag in this strange new land. The purpose of this session is to address these widespread concerns by offering recommendations to those intrigued with the concept of virtual world learning but who lack the knowledge, skills and firsthand experience to fully embrace this

technology. Through these three presentations, conference attendees were taken through the process of creating a campus, training faculty and students to use it and integrating virtual worlds into the marketing curriculum.

Our first group of presenters explored the process of creating a virtual educational facility. Drawing on their experience in building a virtual university campus they documented their attempts to construct a university-wide platform to maximize the use of scarce resources and to harmonize the university's branding architecture while retaining the freedom for each participating unit to innovate within the space. Next, our second presenter shared his experiences with motivating and training over 400 participants to utilize Second Life for pedagogical purposes. Finally, our third presenter discussed his efforts at incorporating Second Life into his marketing courses, offering practical advice for those wishing to venture in-world.

COLLEGE 2.0: CREATING YOUR VIRTUAL CAMPUS

Presented by Michael Solomon and Natalie Wood

What is the optimal point-of-entry for a university that wants to establish an online presence? We believe that most initiatives suffer from two crucial flaws. First, often the goal is to push the pedagogical envelope by integrating Second Life experiences into extant online learning programs. Second, most institutions construct their presence in an organic, bottom-up manner where one individual (or department) takes the initiative to enter the space. As interest grows, other departments then "pile on." As laudable as these approaches may be, they can also create a number of structural, functional, administrative and branding problems. Drawing on our experiences, we advocate and propose a top-down approach that begins with a holistic view of the campus at large and anticipates coordinated, long-term institutional growth in Second Life.

INSPIRING COMMITMENT: GENERATING USER MOMENTUM IN SECOND LIFE

Presented by Ken Hudson

The success of any educational project in Second Life hinges on the ability to convert ideas into action by engaging a community of users, and supporting their experience. There are four main stages to building a Second Life program from seeding initial interest through to project completion.

1. Cultivation: Inspiring potential users about the opportunities using Second Life for education;
2. Focus: Defining projects with specific timetables, requirements, technology assessments and outcomes;
3. Training: Providing adequate and ongoing training including orientation, standards, hands-on and in-world instruction leading to comfort level proficiency; and
4. Community: Supporting the social aspects of the experience.

From this presentation conference attendees learned strategies for effectively engaging a community of users in Second Life.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING: STUDENT ATTITUDES AND TECHNOLOGY READINESS FOR INTEGRATING A 'VIRTUAL WORLD' COMPONENT INTO MARKETING COURSE CURRICULUMS

Presented by Lyle Wetsch

Providing an interactive, immersive environment to study marketing efforts in real time can significantly enhance student learning. Integrating a virtual world component into a regular class delivery to provide an increasingly interactive experience has significant potential, but when is the right time to start? Based on the incorporation of the virtual world Second Life into both undergraduate and graduate "e-Marketing" courses, student blog entries, discussion group conversations, course evaluations, and exit interviews were used to assess student attitudes towards virtual world education and the technology readiness of institutions and students to maximize the benefit of the virtual world. Timing may be everything – too early and you risk high levels of frustration, too late and you are no longer on the cutting edge. Lessons learned from these courses provide insight into the timing of integrating a virtual world component with in-class teaching.

References Available on Request