Second Life first hand: A teacher perspective

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Abstract

The professional landscape in public relations is changing as new communication and social networking technologies are integrated into day-to-day professional practice. Whilst adoption of such technologies by public relations practitioners is certainly on the increase, their use can still be regarded as limited and application experimental to some degree. However, few could argue that these technologies will be increasingly important to public relations practice in coming years. In this context, public relations educators must strive to deliver a contemporary curriculum reflective of industry expectations and best practice principles but which also provides students with exposure to new communication contexts and technologies.

The advent of persistent virtual worlds generated by Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and Collaborative Virtual Environments (CVEs) offer new realms for public relations practitioners and educators alike. Virtual worlds potentially provide public relations educators with novel but relevant training grounds for their students. These 3D worlds offer dynamic and authentic learning environments which have the capability to foster deep learning and engender a sense of community within a student cohort in a way that many computer-mediated classrooms sadly lack.

This paper will present the experiences of two tertiary educators’ journey towards a conceptual understanding of the persistent virtual world, Second Life, from a teacher perspective. The paper argues that the successful adoption of new online technologies like Second Life need not be inhibited by preferences for technology or prior ICT skills as long as teaching staff are given the necessary support and training by their institutions coupled with opportunity for familiarisation and experimentation.

Key words: Second Life, public relations, online teaching, virtual worlds
The project

In 2007, two public relations educators at Deakin University gained internal funding to explore the virtual world Second Life (SL) as a potential educational platform. As part of the project, the unit Public Relations Campaigns and Practice was identified as being suitable for trialling SL in the public relations 'classroom'. It was proposed that a group of four Public Relations Campaigns and Practice students be identified and invited to work on a campaign proposal for a real world client. One of the authors of this paper is one of the initial recipients of internal funding, the other is the unit chair of Public Relations Campaigns and Practice.

In educating students for the public relations profession, tertiary educators need to deliver courses built on strong theoretical foundations that are relevant and reflective of industry expectations and which develop vocational skills. Public relations teaching must necessarily evolve to keep pace with social, commercial and technological changes in contemporary practice in order to produce graduates who are valuable to employers.

Foster (1999, p. 82) determines industry specific experience to be a key decision factor for public relations employers in the recruitment process and says this desired attribute encompasses ‘... contacts, experience, knowledge, skills’ and an understanding of the industry’s language. Kirby’s research revealed an expectation of public relations employers that public relations graduates be ready to ‘hit the ground running’ (2005, p. 90), building their workplace skills through work experience outside of, but linked to, their tertiary study. Experiential learning fosters the development of ‘employability’ skills and engages students, enhancing the quality of their educational experience. Experiential learning aligns with constructivist educational values through providing opportunities for collaboration, personal autonomy, generativity, reflectivity, active engagement, and personal relevance (Savery & Duffy, 1995, p. 57). Such learning exposes students to industry-specific employer expectations and affords valuable opportunities for workplace skills acquisition. Importantly the student is supported as a learner whilst developing ownership over tasks, problems and opportunities.

Of particular relevance to this paper is the fact that the Public Relations Campaigns and Practice unit is offered to both on campus and off campus students. The authors were especially interested in SL as a teaching platform in terms of how it would impact on their teaching practice and their ability to engage students wherever they are located. There is justification for taking this approach. Trigwell and Prosser (2004, p. 411) write ‘[a]n important part of what may be needed to change actual teaching and perceptions of teaching is knowledge of what the teachers themselves see as their own approaches to teaching, and how these approaches are experienced by students’. According to Vygotsky (cited in Stacey, 1999) humans are social creatures and learning is a social process.
However, it is well documented that distance education students can miss out on aspects of this collaborative, social process. For Schwier (2002) the answer is a Virtual Learning Community, a learning environment where learners are able to engage intentionally and collectively in the ‘…transaction and transformation of knowledge’ (2002, para. 3). Garrison and Anderson describe a community of learners as ‘…one composed of teachers and students transacting with the specific purposes of facilitating, constructing, and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that will lead to further learning’ (2003, p. 23).

The SL project would see a group of students identify a client and design a public relations campaign proposal and kit to meet that client’s goals within the persistent virtual world of SL. Throughout the Public Relations Campaigns and Practice unit student groups spend a significant time in face-to-face meetings with both teaching staff and their clients. From the outset it was recognised the SL project would alter the dynamics of the relationships between student group members, students and teaching staff, and students and their clients.

Public relations campaigns and practice—the unit

Public Relations Campaigns and Practice is the capstone unit for the public relations degree offered at Deakin University at the third year level. The unit is designed to provide rich experiential learning and networking opportunities for students. As the capstone unit, curriculum and assessment are structured in such a way that students employ and apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired during the three years of their public relations degree. Assessment consists of a series of scaffolded tasks which culminates in a public relations campaign proposal for a ‘real’ organisation. Students work in groups of four and are encouraged to source their organisations strategically, choosing clients from sectors which are of interest to them as potential career paths. When students are unsure of the professional sector they wish to work within they are encouraged to approach local not-for-profit organisations as clients.

The assessment requires students to research their client to uncover either a public relations problem which needs to be solved or an opportunity which can be capitalised upon. During this stage student groups liaise with their clients for the purpose of completing key tasks such as situation analysis, problem and opportunity identification, objectives identification, and target public identification. They are then required to ‘pitch’ (the first piece of assessment) their campaign ideas to the client before gaining approval to formalise their strategy into a professionally presented campaign proposal (the second piece of assessment). Whilst students are encouraged to pitch their campaign ideas to the client (and most do) the formal part of the assessment takes place in the controlled setting of the classroom. Students present their pitch in front of a cohort of student peers and assessment is conducted by teaching staff and industry representatives. The third piece of assessment is a campaign kit which must include draft examples of tactical devices (for example, media releases,
advertisements, posters, event running sheets, speeches and so on). The completed campaign proposal is a valuable professional document which public relations students are able to use as part of their portfolio for presentation to future employers upon graduation.

A teacher focus

When the project was first proposed the goal was to determine the potential of SL to foster deep learning opportunities for Deakin University’s public relations students. SL has received significant attention from educators (Delwiche 2006, p. 160; Quinn-Allan 2006, p. 240) However, it soon became apparent that focussing on the pedagogy and student perspectives was too narrow. Given that computer-mediated communication alters the communication context and role of the teacher in the classroom (Baglione & Nastanski 2007, p. 141) this project also needed to consider the impact on teaching staff who may be asked to teach within SL. Specifically we wanted to investigate the training and support requirements and the associated workload impact for teachers. Thus it is not the intention of this paper to document student experiences—that is for another forum. Rather the authors felt it was important to treat themselves as research subjects to gain insight into how new technologies can impact on teacher experience from two perspectives: that of the ‘technophobe’ and the ‘technophile.’ A technophile is not afraid of technology which makes him or her, an enthusiastic advocate for technology adoption (demonstrating more tolerance perhaps for problems or limitations of technologies). The authors would argue that many teachers are not ‘technophiles’ and we describe such teachers as ‘technophobes’. These are educators with a preference for face-to-face teaching or a resistance to online or computer-mediated teaching as a result of imposed environmental factors—for the latter technophobia may be a state of survival in a pressured workplace.

The writers have differing technological capabilities and attitudes towards online technology adoption for teaching. The first might be described as a ‘technophile’, an early adopter who embraces technology and enthusiastically integrates it into her teaching pedagogies. The other, a ‘technophobe’, demonstrates a natural dislike of technology preferring conventional face-to-face teaching modes. When she integrates online technologies it is as a result of top-down directives or other external imperatives rather than internal motivation. It is not really helpful to think of the technophile and technophobe as discrete or fixed identities but rather as points on a continuum of preference. Thus educators may shift positions depending on external influences.

McShane (2004, p. 3) holds that social expectations, pressures from the professions, and new university management practices, ‘…designed to align the university with the external world, are placing particular demands on academics’. Decisions about new teaching platforms are governed as much by economic and strategic imperatives as they are by pedagogy and teaching staff needs. This is
understandable given the level of competition in the higher education sector around the world. Management and IT staff are charged with ensuring the roll out of new technologies is as smooth and seamless as possible and technology-related teething problems are likely to take up a considerable amount of their energy and focus. Within such a context the needs of teachers may not receive an optimal level of attention.

The cost to universities of ‘getting it wrong’ in terms of the selection of online teaching platforms is significant both in terms of potential damage to reputation as well as the financial costs; the introduction of online teaching platforms is not cheap. However, the benefits of a successful online learning system cannot be ignored despite the challenges; imagine the creation of a virtual learning community which would fully allow students isolated by geography or other limiting factors to join. The writers argue that gaining educator support for, and understanding about, selected technologies can be improved with input from those who will be required to use the same. Thus teaching staff who are less than enthusiastic about new technologies should not be quarantined or isolated from technology trials or adoption decisions.

Russell et al. (2005, cited in Hedberg 2006, p. 173), make the point that teacher attitudes develop out of multiple factors. Samarawickrema and Stacey present a similar view from a different perspective, that ‘…technology adoption has less to do with academic teachers’ technology skills and their preference to use technology and more to do with the difference in their motivations’ (2007, p. 330). Understanding how technophobic teachers’ trial and experiment with new technology cannot be isolated from pedagogy, curriculum development and, ultimately, student experience. So the factors that universities ought to seek out and understand are those factors which contribute to the development of negative teacher attitudes and motivations in relation to online teaching technology adoption. Failure in this regard has the potential to hamper new technology adoption and prevent the technophobe from moving towards a technophile position. The writers believe that computer-mediated communication technologies are a fact of life in the classroom as they are beyond it. Teachers must therefore develop the requisite skills to adapt: to some degree technophobic teachers will have to become technophiles.

Research suggests that workload implications are a significant factor in decreased teacher motivation to trial and adopt technologies. Teaching online is more work (Kearsley, 2000, cited in Keramidas et al. 2007, p. 34; Samarawickrema & Stacey, 2007, p. 322). This fact coupled with a lack of institutional professional development and adequate ongoing support (Vrasidas & Glass, 2005, cited in Hedberg 2006, p. 173) increases the likelihood of teachers adopting a technophobic stance. Harris (2005, p. 5) writes ‘…if the instructor has little interest [in online teaching], time spent developing online teaching skills can seem like a waste of time or a distraction from other tasks….’ Also when such matters appear to receive little attention, or even recognition, from
the institution it is hardly surprising that teaching staff view communication and information technologies with a degree of suspicion and trepidation. Thus when an announcement is made about the latest new online teaching platform, despite the positive framing heralding new opportunities for curriculum delivery and student engagement, one can hear the groans.

It was for such reasons that the unit chair of Public Relations Campaigns and Practice was asked to become involved in the project. She was an educator who was proficient in using the University’s existing online teaching environment—Blackboard (Vista) which the University brands as Deakin Studies Online—and competent with common computer tasks (for example word processing and email). However she was also known to be ambivalent about online teaching because of technology problems she’d encountered and was reticent about embracing new online technologies (for teaching or otherwise) as a result of her experience with Blackboard.

The project spanned 15 weeks commencing two weeks before the start of the teaching semester and during this period the authors met several times a week in face-to-face planning and debriefing sessions. During these meetings the authors compared notes on their experiences with SL to discuss any curriculum and assessment issues. It was recognised that these needed to be monitored closely to ensure participating students were not disadvantaged in terms of achieving the unit’s learning outcomes and that comparability of assessment could be demonstrated. Both staff also kept written journals to record resources and reflections.

What is second life?

SL is a social synthetic world where users, or residents, entertain themselves with ‘whatever activities, conversations, and toys they can come up with’ (Castronova 2005, p. 103.). Thus SL primarily exists for people to meet and engage with others. During 2007 SL users numbered more than 1.5 million. However, SL resident statistics need to be used with caution because some writers quote active users whereas others quote the number of account holders which tends to be higher but includes inactive accounts.

SL residents experience the virtual world as a 3D interactive environment which is both attractive and highly imaginative. The built environment in SL is a mixture of the fantastical and the familiar; landscaped with buildings, gardens, mountains, waterways, beaches and mythical creatures. It is an internet-based community where residents interact with each other through avatars— their virtual personas. As Quinn-Allan (2006, p. 236) reports ‘…a player’s avatar may bear little resemblance to their real world self’, which affords anonymity to SL residents. Avatars can walk, run, fly or teleport to any unrestricted destination of their choice in this vast new world.

Designed to foster communication and creative endeavour through collaboration, SL also allows players to retain intellectual property protection
for their digital creations (Klang, 2004, cited in Quinn-Allan 2006, p. 236; Moltenbray, 2004). The advantage of SL over other more adversarial or goal-oriented role-playing games, such as World of Warcraft, is that SL offers an environment which echoes many of the characteristics of the real world including social and economic structures, making it an ideal learning environment for public relations students. In addition it is possible that public relations graduates with experience in, and knowledge of, synthetic worlds and their applications may have an edge in the job market.

New generation online role-playing games and Collaborative Virtual Environments (CVEs) like SL provide fresh opportunities for experiential learning. Role-playing games are not new in the classroom and the pedagogical justification for their use is well documented in academic literature (Fanderclai, 1995). Within the virtual worlds created by online role-playing games we are seeing significant cross-over between virtual and real world organisational and commercial activity which cannot be ignored (Castronova 2005, p. 3), and certainly not by academics charged with providing authentic learning environments.

Reflections on the second life project

In the first half of the project the authors spent many of hours together in SL familiarising themselves with both the technology and the environment. We were unable to gain access to SL at our office workstations because of the University’s firewall; a problem we encountered from the outset and which continued for the life of the project. Our only option was to work from home—both authors had access to broadband which is essential for successful use of SL. Downloading the SL client (the application program needed to run SL) to our computers at home was not difficult but optimising it and keeping it up to date with constant SL client updates from Linden Labs, the company which developed SL, was time consuming.

When we first logged into SL we both found it difficult to control and manipulate our avatars. Walking was difficult and running, flying and teleporting were near impossible. What we assumed to be our inexperience coupled with poor hand-eye coordination (using the mouse to manipulate our avatars) turned out to be a problem with our graphics drivers which needed to be updated. This simple problem alerted us to the fact that we needed to pay more, and regular, attention to the technical specifications and online support provided by Linden Labs to ensure SL continued to run smoothly. For the ‘technophile’ this was acceptable but for the ‘technophobe’ it was frustrating and was cited as an example of a technology problem that could prove alienating (if, for example, she was responsible for managing or resolving such issues).

The instigator of the project, the ‘technophile’, first came across SL in 2006. At that point there were already more than 60 educational institutions around the world with a presence in SL. These institutions ranged from primary through to tertiary. Some were more advanced with high-tech virtual campuses developed to engage their own students in online teaching whilst also encouraging
external educators and SL residents to come in and look around. Others were in the embryonic stage of their engagement with SL—they did not host a campus but were a cohort of interested teaching staff and educational developers keen to explore, share ideas and consider the possibilities of SL. The potential for teaching seemed obvious. She enjoyed the immediacy of interaction through real-time access to other educators and public relations practitioners around the world. Whilst she does have access to a Blackboard-based staff forum at her University, SL offers networking and collaborative opportunities on a much larger, global scale.

The background of the ‘technophobe’ was somewhat different. She was an ex-public relations practitioner with 18 years’ experience prior to moving into academia. Rather than embrace technological advancements, they had been thrust upon her through various workplaces. She had learned Word Perfect as a graduate in 1985, then adapted to Microsoft word processing, email, the internet and, in academia, online teaching platforms. Whilst she always kept up with what has been expected of her, it was with a degree of resistance or trepidation, although she acknowledges that she couldn’t survive without email, her mobile phone, and the internet; all examples of technology.

For the ‘technophile’ technology and teaching have gone hand-in-hand and she enjoys online teaching as much as face-to-face teaching. The ‘technophobe’, on the other hand, has sometimes found the use of technology in her teaching to be a source of tension. She has kept up-to-date with developments through literature, rather than being a self-adopter. She has never sat on an IT committee: her university has never personally approached her to join such a committee and she has certainly avoided global requests for membership. Thus when approached with the notion of sending a group of her third year students into a virtual world to complete their assessments for the unit Public Relations Campaigns and Practice, she was hesitant. Much of this hesitation was due to her concern that her students would be more adept within the SL environment than she was, and how this would impact on the teacher/student relationship. She was also anxious about how long it would take her to adapt to the technology with an already heavy workload.

Her commitment to take part in the project and experiment with SL was confirmed when she learned about the existing public relations activities taking place within SL and reaching out to a diverse range of target publics. Innumerable not-for-profit organisations are using SL for both fundraising and awareness-raising. For instance a US-based not-for-profit organisation reinforces its messages of environmentally responsible recycling behaviours through its SL homestead, offering interactive activities that engage whilst educating. Commercial and not-for-profit enterprises provide opportunities for sustained professional public relations practice in SL. The American Cancer Society raised $40,000 through a virtual Relay For Life event in 2006.
In another example, within days of the disappearance of British child Madeleine McCann in Portugal, her image was displayed on billboards around SL, the scale and reach of its online community being utilised as part of an international awareness-raising campaign. Furthermore, as reported in The Age newspaper, ‘Having identified a lucrative market, real corporations [were] flocking to SL to promote their brands and to sell their products online’ (Associated Foreign Press, April 12, 2007) providing abundant potential work opportunities for public relations practitioners.

The introduction to SL proved to be fun for both the authors who enjoyed stepping through the process of creating their avatars, naming themselves and altering their appearances until they were comfortable with the outcome. Apparently this need to create an appropriate avatar extends throughout all synthetic worlds. Castronova (citing Reeves & Nass, 1996; 2005, p. 32) suggests users think of their avatars actually as themselves rather than as representations of themselves, and both authors found this to be true. The authors believe this is one of the advantages of SL. Users feel they are actually in the virtual environment not merely spectators looking in from the outside. So even somewhat laboured text chat can engender a richness of communication and sense of immediacy found in real world face-to-face communication. SL seems to humanise the online experience.

Not surprisingly the ‘technophile’ felt at ease in SL more quickly than the ‘technophobe’ who took some weeks to feel completely comfortable interacting in the virtual environment (she was shy and felt the need to have command of rudimentary skills before interacting with others). After the basic orientation period the authors were able to arrange ‘in-world’ meetings, in a variety of places (in a bar, on a beach, in a rain forest, underwater at a coral reef). What was interesting is that, unlike 2D teaching environments, there was a sense of adventure about sessions in SL. Clear session goals did not detract from the sense of adventure which the authors believe is another advantage of the SL environment which can foster participant engagement.

The ‘technophobe’s’ in-world meetings with the students were productive, if time consuming due to the need to physically type conversations and the inevitable overlap of conversations. Her initial fears were allayed and replaced by respect for the perceived relationship she was able to form with the students based on empathy, trust and understanding. According to Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004, p. 295), these qualities enhance the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student. At all times the students remained respectful of the teacher/student relationship—even when, in one amusing instance, the ‘technophobe’s’ avatar began uncontrollably dancing on top of a table.

Early on it became apparent that networking, which is important in the real world, was just as important within SL. The authors made many valuable contacts as the following example illustrates. ‘Pennie Incognito’ (not her real name) was an avatar met in the early days. They first met Pennie in an idyllic
setting on her virtual deck which extended over a vast blue sea. Birds chirped and flowers bloomed, and it turned out Pennie had created it all that morning (‘Well, I only planted the seeds, they flowered by themselves’ she explained modestly). Pennie explained she was earning real money from SL clients through building digital creations and was also interested in the notion of fundraising in SL. She was willing to act as a mentor to both the authors and the student group, whose client had nominated fundraising as a goal for its public relations campaign. By the end of the second in-world meeting with Pennie she had added the authors to her ‘friends’ list, and advised interesting places to visit in terms of fundraising research. Her advice was invaluable and the authors met with Pennie (and other willing mentors) on many occasions. For time-starved teachers this opportunity to network, share ideas and collaborate in a virtual environment was identified as a real advantage.

By the end of the 15 weeks, both authors came to believe that SL offers real benefits for public relations students. Whilst working in SL students can reap the benefits of practice-based learning through ongoing liaison with real clients. Certainly working in SL will allow them to develop ownership over tasks, identify problems and opportunities and propose actions in line with the experiences of students who choose more traditional public relations campaigns in the real world. The authors envisage that teaching in SL could complement, not replace, curriculum delivery via the existing learning platform, DSO.

But it’s not all good news, there were frustrations as well. Simply gaining access to SL from the workplace was problematic due to the university’s firewall. The need to continually download updates in SL will make breaking through the firewall an ongoing issue for the University. This problem would need to be resolved and IT support allocated in order for the integration of SL into the curriculum to be viable. Both students and the teaching staff involved in the project were forced to use their own home computers because of the University’s firewall—this had both hardware and broadband connection implications. One of the students needed to go through the costly exercise of upgrading her laptop as her original was not powerful enough. The cost to students for broadband internet access at home is also a consideration. Another problem arises with the need to use home computers; the lines between work and home becoming more blurred for teaching staff. Synchronous communication brings with it its own problems which do not exist with platforms such as DSO that operate effectively on asynchronous communication. Teaching staff and students would need to be online at the same time to run classes in SL effectively. Such limitations would need to be taken into account before teaching in SL could ever be considered on any scale.

Griefing attacks are also a problem. A griefing attack is the virtual hijacking of avatars or events; a form of virtual vandalism. During one session, one of the authors (the ‘technophile’) experienced a griefing attack on her avatar. One minute she was building a seat and the next minute her avatar went
haywire—arms and legs grew elongated and distorted making simple movement impossible. It was a bizarre experience and the only way to remedy the situation was to log out and log back into SL. In this instance the consequences were minor and the episode amusing. However, had she been teaching or with students such an attack would have been unacceptable. Whilst restricting students to a university’s virtual campus may overcome such problems, one does not want to see students cloistered in a virtual classroom, denied the benefits of engagement with the broader SL community and consequent experiential opportunity.

Conclusion

The authors contend that online and computer-mediated learning systems are now a cornerstone of higher education. Such systems meet the needs of distance or isolated students but are also widely used by universities to manage and deliver curriculum to students regardless of their mode of study. It is not the aim of this paper to take a position on the benefits or otherwise of online learning systems from the higher education perspective. Rather, the authors recognise that public relations students need exposure to and experience with new communication and social networking technologies in their tertiary studies if they are to understand the role the impact these technologies will have on the practice of public relations.

SL was chosen for the project because initial investigation revealed a broad array of possible public relations applications in the synthetic world. SL also showed promise in terms of teaching application with interesting opportunities evident in terms of user engagement, relationship building and the ability to quickly build a sense community in which collaborative experiential learning could flourish. Despite such benefits it was recognised early in the project that the successful adoption of SL as a teaching platform needed to be considered from the perspective of educators described in the paper as technophobes; teachers who do not demonstrate a natural affinity with or liking for online teaching technologies. It was posited that technophobe teachers may be created by circumstance; such teachers adopt a technophobic attitude to online teaching platforms as a means of survival rather than possessing an innate dislike of online teaching technologies.

The problems with SL identified in this paper proved both annoying and distracting to the authors and could hinder the use of SL as an effective teaching platform. However, both authors found that having control over the timing, exploration and experimentation in SL shifted their focus from the technology problems to the pedagogical and communication benefits and applications of the SL environment. For the ‘technophobe’ this approach was empowering when compared with their previous experience with online teaching platforms. Given the opportunity to experiment with platforms like SL and control over how and when this takes place the writers argue that the adoption of online technologies for teaching need not be inhibited by a preference for technology or prior ICT skills.
References