

November 2012

Second Life in the Classroom: Interacting with the Modern College Student

Stef Nicovich
Lynchburg College, nicovich@lynchburg.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj>



Part of the [Marketing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nicovich, Stef (2012) "Second Life in the Classroom: Interacting with the Modern College Student," *Atlantic Marketing Journal*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol1/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Atlantic Marketing Journal by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Second Life in the Classroom: Interacting with the Modern College Student

Stef Nicovich, Lynchburg College
nicovich@lynchburg.edu

Abstract - How do we engage our students to actively learn? That is a question that educators are asking more and more often. New techniques and philosophies are constantly being developed and tried in the classroom yet we still come back to the same observations. Students are generally unprepared for college level studies and often seem unwilling to put in the required effort needed to succeed. Perhaps one reason students seem disengaged is because they may not see the value of what they are learning. The connections between their studies and how they will benefit them later in life may not be clear. To this end I explore the use of Second Life in the classroom and how it can be used to clarify the links between what students learn and how these lessons can help them in their future. In this paper I explore the nature of education in Second Life and how it might best be employed based on lessons learned from using it in the classroom over the past six years.

Key Words - Pedagogy, Experiential Learning, Virtual Community, Second Life, Market Plan

Relevance to Marketing Educators - Our students are a product of their environment. As that environment changes new techniques are required to effectively facilitate their learning. Second Life as a form of experiential learning has proven effective in relating marketing concepts to actually running a business.

The Modern College Student

My observation of the modern college student is that while they are earnest they often lack the skills and temperament required to successfully approach college level inquiry. They often lack the inquisitiveness necessary to actively learn the material that is presented. While I am not so jaded as to claim that the modern college student is merely lazy I do see a lack of engagement and a great need for structure. I am not alone in my observations. Recently the Chronicle of Higher

Education conducted a study of high school student preparedness. The following are anonymous quotes from that study.

Students need to understand that they are responsible for their learning and must be taught how to do this and then be required to do it—long before they get to the post-secondary level. They must be active learners, not passive vessels. (Maguire Associates, 2008: pg. 5)

And

There seems to be a general apathy on the part of both student and parent about the work ethic (or lack thereof) when preparing for college. It has become more an entitlement than an incentive or reward for hard work. (Maguire Associates, 2008: pg. 12)

Perhaps the key finding of this study is that students are perceived as trying to just get by and that expectations are not high and that students are not meeting these lowered expectations. However it may not be just a lack of preparedness, what appears to also be lacking in our students is clear connection that the work they put in will result in the kind of life they desire. It appears that the message that it is the knowledge and skills learned that will benefit them (and not necessarily the diploma that says they have graduated) seems to be lost in translation. Those of us who teach in applied and professional areas have an easier task as the links are often clearer. However the question remains, how do we motivate our students to engage the class material and by extrapolation the world in which they live?

As a response to this question I have developed a course that employs the virtual world of Second Life as a form of experiential learning. Through this course Students develop a business and sell a product in a controlled virtual environment.

What is Second Life?

Oh the burden of expectations. When Second Life burst onto the scene about seven years ago it was supposed to revolutionize everything. Schools and businesses jumped into the water with both feet and expected it to deliver like the Internet had a decade before. Second Life was supposed to open up a new way to teach students. It was supposed to make the learning process more transparent and convenient for all. However it didn't quite work out the way people had envisioned. Schools found that leveraging a Second Life presence wasn't easy no matter how much a virtual classroom looked like a real one. Problems surfaced almost immediately. Technical glitches and a rather

cumbersome user interface took some of the shine off of this brave new (virtual) world (Second Life, 2010). Combine these issues with students who are perceived to be lazy, disengaged and unprepared for college, (Maguire Associates, 2008) let alone life, and you have a recipe for disaster. In this paper I will briefly explore the issues and promises of Second Life as experienced by educational institutions and follow that up with what I have found to be an effective approach to using Second Life to teach marketing to my students.

Second Life was first launched in June of 2003. It is the end product of approximately nine years in development by Linden Laboratories (Second Life Wiki, 2009). Second Life is a user generated virtual world. It looks and essentially reacts like a video game. While there are many aspects of Second Life that resemble a video game it is different in several distinct ways. First, Second Life has no pre determined super ordinate goal. There is no world to conquer, no aliens to destroy, no damsel to rescue. A video game depends on compelling game play complete with challenges and advancement. Second Life has none of these elements to it. Second, Second Life has a real currency and a built in economic engine. The currency trades on an open market with a floating exchange rate between \$Linden and \$US. (Second Life, 2010). Included in the economic engine is the ability to buy, sell and limit the ownership rights of virtual property. Second Life has rules that deal with intellectual property and a stated policy that anything that is developed in Second Life belongs to the developer and not Linden Labs. While many MMORPGS (Massive Multi Player Online Role Playing Games) have spawned “black markets” in which players buy sell and trade in game objects and currency (Happiness is Countless Gold, 2010), Second Life allows for commerce in world (Bell, 2009). Finally, Second Life’s reason for existence is to interact with others. A traditional video game may take advantage of group play but the primary purpose is to complete the challenge. Second Life, however, exists primarily to meet and interact with others.

The Reality of Second Life

Second Life, like most things in life didn’t pan out quite as expected. This is true mainly for two reasons. Second Life, like all computer programs, is vulnerable to glitches and problems. It is a massive undertaking to develop and present a virtual world that is constantly changing. As such, the world has been subject to frequent updates and glitches. Glitches include not being able to log in, losing inventory, getting stuck in places and not being able to get out, etc. Each of these issues gets in the way of interacting with the world. Also Second Life uses what is known as a traditional WSAD interface. This is an interface that has been adopted for computer based video games. A WSAD interface uses the computer keyboard to manipulate events in world. (One uses the W key to move forward, the S key to move backward and the A and D keys to move to the sides). This means that keystrokes must match gestures and motions. This approach while fairly easily learned does not present much mimesis to the environment and

often gets in the way (Laurel, 1993). So as a video game that isn't a video game the world of Second Life found that its promise and its delivery were at odds and didn't necessarily appeal to the same market.

As a result of the newness of the technology and the cumbersome interface the learning curve of interacting with Second Life turned out to be rather steep. Such a steep learning curve tends to limit the rate of adoption and Second Life appears to have reached a plateau of between forty and a hundred and twenty thousand residents on line at any one time. It is difficult to estimate how many total user there are, as Linden Labs does not publish figures, but it is estimated to be about seven hundred and fifty thousand residents (James, 2010).

So on the consumer side Second Life is a series of conflicting messages. It plays like a video game but it isn't and it is designed to be a community but it looks like a video game. This confusion was exacerbated by commercial organizations entering into the world. Large companies rushed to Second Life like they had to the Internet a decade before. And like the Internet before it these companies had absolutely no idea of how to use it. But unlike the Internet they didn't figure out a way to make it work. As a result many (if not most) of these companies have now left the marketplace. The basic disconnect was the nature of the market and the nature of the interaction. A web page is pretty much like a television ad or a magazine ad. People go to the Internet for information and entertainment. It is natural for us to expect some advertising in this guise as we have used these media to advertise for decades.

Second Life, however, is more like retreating to your den or family room, a place (when the television is off and the magazines are closed) that we use to avoid such interruptions. As a result a strong commercial presence in Second Life only served to annoy the residents who were not interested in being marketed to at that time. Also, the assumption that the impact of a message in second life would translate to behavior in Real Life appears to have been a false one. As a result businesses saw no positive impact on the bottom line and after a while they decided it was not worth the investment.

Similarly, many schools invested In Second Life as a means of pedagogical delivery. It seemed logical that since Second Life could look like a classroom it should be able to be used as a classroom. While Linden Labs have improved the ability of Second Life to facilitate a lecture it still takes quite a bit of prep work to make it happen. The dominant means of communication in Second Life is simple text messaging. People type whatever they have to say. This is fine for a casual conversation or a transaction but it doesn't work for an hour-long discussion. Linden Labs did add voice capabilities so that one could actually lecture but it has been buggy and one still has the feeling of talking into a black hole where no one is listening. Even if lecturing is usable presenting a slide show is not. Presenting a PowerPoint presentation requires that one make a separate JPEG image of each PPT slide and then load each individually into Second Life

(at 10\$L each) and then place them into a program that can present them in world. This added complication, plus the slow rate for slide changes, reduces the efficacy of presenting a Second Life lesson.

Second Life in the Classroom

So if Second Life doesn't work as a classroom how can one successfully use it? While businesses didn't understand the communal nature of Second Life, Schools didn't understand its practical nature. The lesson to be learned is that Second Life is not a classroom that is insulated from distractions but a playground where students can learn by doing.

The Beauty of (Virtual) Reality

In my course I use Second Life as a playground where students can practice their craft. We in business teach planning but we really don't focus much on doing. Second Life allows students to put a plan into action and see if it will work. Second Life has built into it all the elements necessary to allow students to start and run a business. First there is an actual market. While Second Life looks like a computer generated world (and it is) it is actually populated by real people controlling their own elements of that world. So unlike a computer simulation that runs on mathematical rules to determine market reactions to business decisions, Second Life is a real human market with real human needs and real human understandings. Second, there is a vibrant business community that already exists. This community tends to be quite forthcoming about the issues they have faced and the aspects of conducting business in Second Life that do, and don't, work. Third, Second Life has a communications mechanism built into it that allows for advertising and promotion to occur. Additionally there have been several user-devised methods of communication such as MGK advertising who rents space and time on billboards (Bingyi, 2009).

Finally there is the built in economics engine that is the cornerstone of the Second Life experience. This engine consists of two basic elements. The first is an adherence to intellectual property rights. Users who develop an offering own the rights to that offering. Linden Lab's role is more like the government in that it controls the playing field but it doesn't control the elements on that field. As such, anything that a resident creates is owned by the resident and not Linden Labs. These built in intellectual property rights subscribe to the rules governing the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (Public Law, 1998: pg. 105–304). When a resident creates something they have the option of selling it (and setting their own price), giving it away, making copies or keeping it as an original piece. Objects can be very simple or very complex with very complicated programs that allow them to do many things. The second economic element is an exchange system that has been set up through Pay Pal. Linden Labs has contracted with Pay Pal to run an exchange board between Linden dollars and US dollars. It is a floating exchange that reacts to the monetary supply within Second Life and the

demand for them. The transfer of funds through this exchange goes both ways so that one can not only buy Linden Dollars but cash out Linden dollars for US dollars as well.

How to use SL to Teach Marketing (and Business)

If Second Life is a playground the obvious thing to do is let your students play. The true beauty of Second Life is that it is structurally very similar to the real world. It uses real money, it has an arbitrary set of rules that need to be respected, there is no predefined market and there are very few imposed limits to the actions that can be taken. In other words it is the perfect playground that needs order imposed upon it as opposed to a simulation that is ordered from the beginning. And, of course, how do businesses impose order on the world, they research and they plan. This need for order crystallizes the true reason for planning.

The Market Plan

One of the lessons to be learned in Second Life is that the market does what it wants and you as a business owner need to figure out how to meet its needs. The market plan is designed to impart order onto an otherwise chaotic world and as such is a reference document. Perhaps, one of the hardest hurdles for students to overcome is the idea that they should use their plan to actually run their business. Until they actually have to run a business the plan has been an end unto itself and not a means of guiding them in running their business. It is important for students to know that every plan is deficient in its completeness. A plan written for Second Life is much like a plan written by a small business in Real Life in that there is very little data available and the market is largely unpredictable with the tools at hand. There are no tidy market reports to purchase (well there are but they are too expensive for the average business in Second Life including theirs) and there are no instructions on how to make a go of it. All they have is their plan to guide them. This puts an emphasis on logic and reasoning and what they perceive to be the connections between the market and their offering. Actual data is skimpy at best, however, Linden labs does publish basic economic reports that can be used in terms of cash flows and transaction amounts (Second Life, 2010). These are useful but not complete. Students then learn that one of the best ways to determine market opportunities is to look at what is already on the market. The competitive analysis aspect of the plan should be the most complete part as there is the most information available and it is relatively easy to obtain.

The Marketing Mix

Once the plan is in place students then need to tactically implement it. This brings us to the four P's. Decisions need to be made (and carried out) for each element of the mix.

Product

In many ways this is the easiest part to determine yet it is the hardest to develop. Learning the skills to develop a product in Second Life can easily take an entire semester. As such, I have tried several different approaches. Probably the best solution is if they can partner with another class, one that is learning how to program and design. A video game development class would be ideal for this. The programming language is not the same as is used in video game development however, so that is an issue. Last year I had my students partner with art students to market their artwork in Second Life. This lessened the need for programming and increased the need for collaboration and marketing. The wrinkle was that that I also had to cover arts marketing which is a semester long subject in and of itself. Next semester I intend to develop a tool kit of building materials that should allow them the freedom to develop without making the course simply a programming course.

Price

Pricing issues involve two major aspects. The value of their offering in Second Life and the exchange rate between \$Linden and \$US. How much capital will they need to start and run their business? How much do they think they can make back? As such they need to price their offering both in terms of cost structures and capital requirements as well as what they think the market will pay. Philosophically they usually resort to a competitive pricing model but, like in real life, pricing largely becomes a matter of trial and error as they try to hone in on the best compromise.

Place

Distribution in Second Life is pretty much a moot issue other than where they want to display and sell their wares. This decision requires finding a suitable place with which to set up shop. Places with more traffic have higher rental rates. Tied into this is the cost of production. In Second Life production costs are minimal in that they are essentially design costs. Once the offering is designed it can be mass-produced at no costs just by selling copies as opposed to the original.

Promotion

This decision is the most involved of the 4P's. In Second Life there are a number of services one can use to promote an offering. Built in to the world are the classifieds where students can list their wares. These are keyword searchable and are essentially on a bid system with the higher bids getting you farther up the searched list. In addition to this there are private companies that own billboards and will rent time to those who would like to advertise (Bingyi, 2009). The emphasis on promotion in Second Life means there is an emphasis on the message to entice potential buyers to your store.

Weekly Reports

If the marketing plan is one end of the strategic cycle then the weekly report is the other. In a weekly report, students need to state their goals for the week, whether or not they met those goals, and what they intend to do about it. They need to state their goals for next week as well and what they intend to do to meet those goals. The weekly report is designed to make them pause and assess their actions and whether or not they are working in a systematic manner. This report also contains financial data in terms of costs and revenues. At the very minimum a cash flow statement is necessary for them to track their transactions. Second Life has a very tidy means of accessing this information for reporting purposes by accessing one's merchant tools from the Second Life web site. Ideally the deliverables for a project would include the plan they started with, what happened during the running of the business and an addendum as to where the plan was deficient and what they would do differently.

What Do Students Learn?

The first question, actually, is how do students learn? Of the two competing methods of learning, experiential learning and didactic learning there are questions as to which method is the best (Richardson, 2008; Douglas Klein, 2008). However it is true that most of the learning a student receives is didactic in nature and a good dose of experiential active learning is a good thing. The process of developing an offering and actually forming a company to sell it is definitely an experiential process and as such the lessons that can be "learned by doing" are important.

Perhaps the most important lesson that is learned is that doing is different from planning. Students are so used to throwing out planning non sequiturs such as "We will partner with existing advertising companies" or "We will implement a personal selling process to boost sales" without thinking about actually what that will entail. And of course they run into time issues not realizing that their plans will take a lot longer to implement than they realize. The next lesson of doing is "Every good idea eventually deteriorates into hard work"(unknown). Students are often shocked at the amount of effort it takes to actually get a business up and running, even one in Second Life which has very few of the elements that a business in Real Life has. The last lesson I try to impart is that there are basically no rules. Students constantly ask me if it is ok to do this or that. And I answer the same way: Is it ethical? Is it legal? Is it beneficial? As long as it passes those requirements it is probably ok to try within the scope of their project. What I try to impress upon them is that a good idea as practiced in Second Life may very well be a good idea to continue on with and that it can lead to a new future endeavor.

Frustrations and Headaches

An experientially based class is basically an exercise in frustration, for both students and professor. For students the lack of structure of a class like this can be very frustrating. The students I have now have had very little time in their lives to play. I don't mean sports or other organized activities but unstructured investigative time. They appear to never have found where the creek in the back yard comes out or what happens if they cut a golf ball in half (a favorite of me and my friends growing up). As such the wonder of exploration has never been instilled in them. It is no coincidence that Albert Einstein was an avid daydreamer (or, as he would say, a thought experimenter). As such the open-ended nature of this type of experience often frustrates them and they will freeze like an animal in the headlights of your car. You as the professor must impart enough structure on to them to make them feel more comfortable and this is one of the purposes of the market plan, not just to impose structure onto the world but to give them enough structure to be able to handle the world. As alluded to above, students often get frustrated with the work load. This class will take substantial out of class time and many of them assume that all class work should be done in class and the idea of homework is rather foreign to them. While I give ample time in class to start working on their projects they will need to spend time in Second Life outside of class to really get a handle on the world that they are encountering. In the beginning students often get frustrated because they don't grasp why they are doing such a project anyway. In what way can it benefit them? This frustration is magnified if they do not meet a quick initial success when they put their offerings on the market.

The frustration for the professor mainly comes down to getting your students to put in their due diligence on learning the world in which they will be playing. The assumption that the rules are the same as what they experience in their day-to-day lives can be infuriating. Often students just don't attempt to do the exercises assigned. For example the easiest type of information to obtain in Second Life is competitor information. Determine who your competitors are, find them, see what they offer and compare it to what you want to do, easy. However it takes some time and effort to do this and students often just don't know how to start. Often it takes a jolt from the professor to get them to actually try. Smaller assignments (low stakes) along this line work well. I run scavenger hunts where they have to find a certain thing in Second Life and take a picture of it or I will assign them to make a friend in Second Life and send me a picture of them together with the other avatar's name. These types of assignments help to ease them into a new world.

Benefits of the Project

As stated above students often get frustrated because they don't grasp why they are doing such a project anyway. In what way can it benefit them? I address this

in two ways. The first is that I “sell” the project to them as a chance to make some money. While it is true that there are people who actually earn their living in Second Life it is also true that it is just as difficult to do this as it is in Real Life. However the idea that they can put their business skills to work in a practical way is very enticing to them. Secondly I stress the connection between the actions they take in Second Life and their transferability to Real Life. This is where the clear connection between school and work for professional degrees is an advantage. My students can easily see how the actions they take in Second Life are very similar to the kind of things they will be doing on the job once they graduate. The added bonus is the understanding that they are actually creating their own way in the (virtual) world and that the rewards come from their input.

Other benefits include a distinct attitude change from my students during the course of the semester. What starts off as just another project for the professor turns into a business where they have an emotional stake in the outcome. They move out of the realm of employee into the realm of owner and the realization that they have the responsibility (and the skills) to make a successful business. They meet people in Second Life and they become part of that community. Their first sale is a very important moment as it is validation for the work that they have put in. What makes this sale so important is that it is not an arbitrary grade from a professor but that someone in the community found their offering to be valuable. In essence their experience in Second Life is a maturing process, one that prospective employers notice.

Employers are interested for two reasons. The first is they understand the added maturity it takes to run a business and the second is the cutting edge nature of running an electronic business. Currently many employers are exploring social media and how to better employ the Internet as a means of competitive advantage and the Second Life project fits right into that interest. My students can discuss the realities of the electronic market place and the strategies they used to appeal to it. Not only does this project make them stand out when they are looking for a job it also gives them the kinds of skills that employers are looking for so they have a better chance of performing well and advancing in that position.

It is my assertion is that a project like this is the perfect approach to take with the current college student in light of their apparent preparatory deficiencies. Second life is a means of starting a business in a very controlled and safe manner. The monetary outlay to start a business is less than \$25 per person (I tend to make teams of four with a maximum budget of \$100 per team, this is less than their text book) and the workload is relative small with no employees or manufacturing to deal with. The practical nature of the project gives them the confidence to actually accomplish something that has value to others and they lean to deal with uncertainty. It is this last aspect that is the most critical. Today’s students have been raised on imposed structure and as a result seem to have a very passive approach to learning and life. By engaging in a project

where they have to impose their own structure to be successful they take the first steps in realizing that their life is their own to be managed as they see fit. It is a maturing process that never takes place unless they are allowed to make their own decisions for which they must take responsibility for the success or failure of those decisions

Recommendations and Conclusions

In order to make a class that essentially exists in Second Life there are several things that are pretty much necessary to ensure a successful course. The first is make it a senior level course in the fall. This will give you your most mature students before senioritis really sets in. The second is make sure you communicate that it is an entrepreneurial class more than a marketing or management class. If students come in with this understanding then they are more likely to respond well to the nature of the course. The last thing is make the course as structured as you can so that your students have the structure they need to lean on when the businesses actually start running. A detailed plan is a must. Weekly reports are also a must. Finally a chance to review and reflect on what they thought they were going to do and what they actually ended up doing is also very valuable. Also it is helpful to assign smaller tasks that will give them the skills needed to do other tasks such as the scavenger hunt to teach the skills of navigating the world and finding other businesses.

Running a class that uses Second Life as a playground takes a lot of work and preparation. For me it is my signature class and the one in which I spend the most time preparing. It is quite valuable in my opinion and the anecdotal evidence of its usefulness is quite rewarding. I have gotten emails from former students who say that the project is what got them the job or allowed them to perform at a level higher once they started working. But most rewarding to me are the emails I get that tell me that because of this course they have a better understanding of what they want to do with their life. I teach at a liberal arts college where we endeavor to prepare our students not just for their next job, but for the rest of their lives. The use of Second life in the classroom seems to fit that mission quite well.

Works Cited

- Bell, D. (2009) Learning from Second Life. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 40 (3), 515-525.
- Bingyi, D. (2009) *Second Life Wiki*. Available at: http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/User:DAD_Bingyi. Accessed: 4/21/2010
- DIGITAL MILLENNIUM COPYRIGHT ACT (1998). United States Government, United States Congress. Washington D.C.: U.S. Copyright office. Available at: copyright.gov/legislation/hr2281.pdf
- Douglas Klein, B. M. (2008) Evaluation of the Strongest Link: Interactive Continuing Education. *Medical Education* , 42 (5), 542-543.
- Happiness is Countless Gold*. (2010) Available at: <http://www.mmogoldservice.com/The-Business-of-Gold-Selling-MMORPG-Black-Market-news.html>. Accessed: 4/23/2010
- James, W. (2010, January 19) *New World Notes*. Available at: <http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2010/01/sl-reaches-769k-monthlies.html>. Accessed: 4/21/2010
- Laurel, B. (1993) *Computers as Theatre*. Reading, Ma, USA: Addison-Wesley.
- Maguire Associates (2008) "How well are Students Prepared for College?" Council of Independent Colleges Conference, Marco Island, Fl. Available at: http://www.cic.edu/conferences_events/presidents//2008PI_maguire.pdf
- Richardson, D. (2008). Don't Dump the Didactic lecture; Fix it. *Advances in Physiology Education* , 32 (1), 23-24.
- Second Life. (2010, April 22). *Economic Statistics*. Available at: <http://secondlife.com/statistics/economy-data.php>. Accessed: 4/27/2010
- Second Life. (2010, April 28). *Economy and market*. Available at: <http://secondlife.com/statistics/economy-market.php>. Accessed: 4/22/2010