

# **A Cross Examination of Teachers and Students' Perspectives on Using Second Life for TESOL in Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a follow up of a case study (Li, Wong, Gui & Au Yeung, 2010) presented at EdMedia Conference 2010 on how 3D Second Life (SL) is used to enhance collaborative learning in higher education. The focus of this study expands from student feedback to a more teacher oriented exploration to improve the virtual learning experience for students taking the same subject, English for web-based and technical writing. With the new establishment of a virtual department of English modeled on a learning tree design, the teachers and designers shared their expectations and perspectives on nurturing a collaborative and relaxing online platform for collaborative learning and peer assessment. In addition to an i-Feedback survey with a cohort of 75 students, individual interviews with two students were conducted to collect their responses to the virtual department of English. It is found there is still mismatching between students' needs and teachers/designers' expectations on using SL for a TESOL classroom, the paper attempts to seek possible solutions to such discrepancies based on Salmon's Five stage model in SL (2010).

Key words: Second Life, collaborative learning, virtual campus

## **Introduction**

Second Life (SL) has become more popular among educational institutions in the last five years. It is by far the most widely used 3D multi-user virtual environment for teaching and learning (Warburton, 2009) and many universities worldwide have a presence in SL. Salmon (2009) argues SL is a social environment, not a game. It forms "the complex marriage of the technological application with the challenging pedagogical drivers that result in appropriate support and learning design" (p535-6) In addition, SL provides "pedagogical drivers" with a platform to produce good teaching and learning. Twining (2009) concluded that SL helps to create "a good vehicle for providing people with 'lived experiences' of radically different models of education".

Collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000) is recorded and encouraged when learners are invited to make use of the virtual community. Peer comments posted on the virtual wall and responses to the feedback posted offer a two way communication between owners of the assignment and peer reviewers. The teacher, in this context, acts as an e-moderator (Salmon, 2000) to elicit active participation on the part of learner and be "sensitive to any individual or group that appears to be disadvantaged or not participating online" (Salmon, 2003). In her more recent study on SL, Salmon tested her "Five stage model in Second Life" (2010) with a group of students and tutors from three courses at two higher education institutions in the UK. The five stage model, namely access and motivation, online socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction and development. One key finding was that participants communicate easier in SL and relate with each other more naturally through experience of interaction, once basic skills are acquired, than through asynchronous bulletin boards.

The virtual department of English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University came to its being from a virtual exhibition hall to a three level design of root theatre, and trunk rooms and roof garden. Its design is inspired by Salmon's "tree of learning" idea presented at Teaching and Learning Innovation Symposium 2010.



Figure 1. Poster showing the virtual department of English

This paper focuses on issues faced by students and teachers who have been using Second Life in a technical writing exercise. It attempts to look at needs of students and difficulties teachers may face in the design of the online platform and explore possible ways to improve the learning and teaching experience.

### Background of Case Study and Follow Up

In 2010, SL was used for an undergraduate course on English for Technical and Web-based Writing provided by the Department of English at a university in Hong Kong. In this subject, students are asked to give peer feedback to each others' assignment posted in a virtual exhibition hall in the Second Life. Peer comments were recorded in the format of virtual notecards.

Research questions raised in the 2010 study were:

1. What are students' perception of working on a virtual campus for technical and web-based writing?
2. What are students' attitudes and achievements of using SL as a collaborative learning community?
3. How can SL learning experience help with future university studies and career goals?
4. How does the peer critique affect their learning of the taught component?

In 2011, with the set up of a virtual department of English, peer reviews for the same exercise were posted on the virtual bulletin board (Figure 2). The feedback can be shared openly among students by simply clicking on the number of each exhibit.



Figure 2. Snapshot of roof garden with the peer comment board and exhibits

To cross examine different perspectives of the stakeholders, a teacher (X) and a web-designer (Y) and two students (A and B) are invited to share their experience of using Second Life for the same course. Four research questions are proposed in this paper with reference to research on virtual world teaching, experiential learning and assessment in SL (Jarmon et. al, 2009):

1. What types of learning do teachers wish to encourage in SL?
2. What types of learning do students experience often in SL?
3. Does learning in SL transfer to real life?
4. Do students/teacher perceive SL as instrumental in learning?

In addition, as a follow up of the case study in 2010, another i-Feedback survey with a cohort of 75 students was carried out at the end of the course in 2011.

## Methodology

In continuation with the previous case study, students of the technical writing class were asked to design a billboard to be exhibited in the roof garden and a virtual comment board was set up for peer evaluation where comments can be viewed among students. A set of 11 questions was posted online through a digital questionnaire tool, i-Feedback. Four semi-structured interviews of 40-50 minutes were conducted with designers (one teacher and one web-developer and students (one full time student and one part time student). While designers, teachers and students were cross examined on their perspective of creating and using the SL virtual campus, the interview data is analyzed based on Salmon's five stage model of SL.

## Findings

### *i-Feedback results*

Of the 75 respondents, 49 successfully completed the survey. Five statements were listed (Table 1) to elicit students' opinions on using the tool for learning and if they find peer comments useful for learning.

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
1.	Using SL helped me in learning the subject.	2.5	1
2.	I enjoy using SL in learning the subject.	2.6	1

3.	I have visited other SL sites.	2.7	1.2
4.	I would like to visit other SL sites.	2.8	1.1
5.	I find the peer comments useful for my learning.	2.7	1.1

Table1. Results of i-Feedback Questions 1-5

One student wrote in detail views on the usefulness of SL:

*To begin with, I don't think students can get any constructive comments from Second Life because it [is like] computer games rather than a learning tool that encourages students to learn in another platform. The collection from different views by this platform was a dream. Second, it is better to teach how to write the user guide. I mean that students can learn useful phrases and words from the lecture. Of course, students can learn it from reading. But, in fact, part-time students have insufficient time to do their reading thanks to having full-time jobs. Hence, it is better to change the curriculum in the hope of make the best use of resources in nurturing the talents of students.*

Another four statements (Table 2) were added to see how proficient students were with the virtual campus and if technical training has been adequate.

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
6.	I have no problem navigating in SL.	2.9	1
7.	I find it easy to give my comments in SL.	2.9	1.1
8.	I find it easy to retrieve peer comments in SL.	2.9	1.1
9.	I find SL runs smoothly on my computer.	2.8	0.9

Table 2. Results of i-Feedback Questions 6-9

From interviews with students and teachers (to be disclosed next), it is confirmed further that technical difficulty can be one challenge that seriously affects the use of SL.

The last question of the survey asked if SL can be applied in other subjects, many feedback were rather negative, one student wrote:

*In my opinion, SL is just a virtual game but not a suitable platform for teaching and learning. We need to spend our valuable study time to learn the operation on SL, just for walk around and find out the location. We[find it] difficult to check clearly what is the poster design on SL. In general, the learning experience of SL is really ineffective. In addition, the most important point is, I expect this Degree programme would help me to improve the writing, listening and speaking skills in English. However, I don't think SL could enhance my English proficiency in any aspect. Please provide us [with] more practical English training rather than focus on those useless platforms. I hope we won't "play" SL on other subjects following anymore.*

Even for students who find the virtual learning world interesting, they expressed there are technical obstacles to overcome:

*I think the idea of using the second life is really great, but I got so many technique problems when I get to the second life.... So whatever it is a great idea, thanks for designing that.*

### **Interviews with Students**

So what do students think about the SL environment? A part-time and a full time student were invited to talk with me about their experience of using SL in the poster exercise. Both students preferred tools like Facebook or weblog for the exercise on the ground that they were more familiar with them and that SL does not offer a unique learning experience to them as first time users. The student who was much experienced with online games stated that “SL is *not* a game because it’s so boring” while another student

who did not play online game at all expressed in the interview that students who were interested in SL tended to “concentrate on clothes changing of avatar though spending a long time, to them it is a game, *not* a learning”.

### ***Designers and Teachers’ Responses***

The three teachers who taught the subject were also aware that students mostly did what was required in class but were not motivated to make use of the SL tool outside of the classroom. One teacher suggested:

*I think if you want to encourage more users, the most important is the content... when people feel they learn something, then they will find it more interesting... So probably we would also put some previous projects ... So in this way, first we can encourage students to say “Your work is public”, [it] is not just for teachers, for your peers, but also for the general public. They will also look at them [like] our department teaching or learning or research. I think that could be more practical.*

One designer admitted students were not consulted in the building of the virtual world and their needs were ignored:

*We tried to provide as much thing [as we] can [to be of] benefit to them. We think [it] is good for them. But the thing is the way we give them may not be somehow benefit for the students because [of] the technical issues, their computer knowledge. All these make our students stop somehow. So they cannot get into the stage to benefit from SL. And then by years, and then we tried to do more ... rather than technically something but we would like to do more on the interface on the way of [becoming more] interactive. So this somehow [gets] better feedback from students. I think that’s the major issue we need to concern when we use SL.*

The establishment of the virtual campus began in 2008 at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the driving force of it were teachers and web developers only. So far students did not have a chance to participate in the building process. While designers and teachers in this study spent hours to make the virtual learning world look interesting and visually appealing, hoping their efforts will be paid off by creating an alternative learning experience, the main responses from students tend to be lukewarm to negative.

### **Discussion**

Of Salmon’s five stage model of teaching and learning online, the first stage, *access and motivation* is to involve e-tivities to motivate learners to participate and explore the online learning environment. This stage however was not so well established in the case study above. One important reason being many students in this study regard the SL environment more of a visual one. This can be seen from their preference for tools like blogs and Facebook. Students declared visual elements or designs were not attractions for them in subjects like technical writing.

However, visual elements are regarded by the designer and teachers as important cues for users to make use of the virtual learning world. Therefore design features of the online environment need to foster professional learning opportunities (McLoughlin & Luca, 2002).

Another key factor for a successful virtual learning world is the ease of its use. This is especially important when peer interaction takes place during class when a group of 30 students log onto the virtual world at the same time. Technical hiccups have so far seriously affected the smooth use of the learning tool. Technical issues can especially be damaging when most students only use SL for completion of tasks assigned by the teacher during class time, the time they really experience the virtual learning world is already very limited.

Before going onto other stages of the model for the development of the virtual learning world, designers and teachers will need to ask the question of why SL, not other online tools, is used. Student collaboration in SL projects can go beyond one university and even beyond one territory. This can then make use of the uniqueness of SL and help to build a learning community leveraging on the virtual learning world. It can also be a concrete step for stage two of the model, *online socialization*, when learners of varying cultural backgrounds can bond and work together.

In this study, the teachers withheld from intervening or providing feedback to students as encouraged in stage three, *information exchange*. While the peer comment board was designed and used for collaborative learning and information exchange, it is suggested teachers can also give their evaluation after the peer review exercise has been completed. It reinforces the learning as the teacher helps to form a deeper understanding of what is required of the task and highlight the key goals to be achieved.

Stage four, *knowledge construction* was identified by Salmon in her study (2010) through collaboration and sharing. Participants are to be seen as online authors rather than transmitters of information. It echoes with the findings of this study, that student participation and involvement will be essential. Students and potential users of the virtual learning world are to be invited in the design of e-tivities. This means more participant-led goals and objectives are to be set and the whole design of the virtual learning world has to consider the needs of the learners.

Stage five is of the highest level of achievement where participants develop *self-insight*, pursue personal goals, reflect on their new experiences and knowledge and look beyond the forum. SL can then become a playground, a crucible for ideas about how people can augment their interaction through constructive play or work.

## **Conclusion**

Over the year as the virtual department is under construction, the peer evaluation system in SL is redesigned to facilitate giving and viewing comments via instant chats. Further improvements are to be seen as the five stage model is better adopted in the course of development. Twining (2009) sees the open virtual worlds as unclaimed spaces as far as education is concerned-educators have not yet established norms of how to support learning within them. The virtual learning world in this study therefore is still searching for directions for growth based on its concept of a learning tree design.

Salmon (2010) has expressed a key challenge for an educator is to design educational activities in virtual worlds, while exploiting the social nature of the visual environment. This can thus ensure learning in SL be transferred to real life. This is also how all kinds of learning take place.

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