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A glimpse of the future

Creating real benefits from a virtual world

People's initial reaction to the mention of Second Life, a virtual world found on the internet, is typically one of skepticism. "I have enough trouble managing my life in the real world," they quip. On closer inspection, however, most people are quick to grasp the vast potential of this virtual world.

Second Life was launched to the public in 2003. It has grown exponentially since then and now has a resident population of 12 million and a thriving economy of its own. Its currency, Linden dollars, has established its own exchange rate with the real world and more than \$5 million worth of transactions (real US dollars that is) are conducted each month. Well-known, well-respected organisations have set up a presence in Second Life - not just the commercial juggernauts, such as Mercedes Benz and Addias, but also non-commercial outfits, such as the BBC and Save the Children charity - as well as many smaller, lesser known companies.

To visit Second Life you need to get an avatar (virtual persona) and some software, both of which are free from Second Life website (www.secondlife.com). You are given an online tutorial that shows you how to walk, fly, touch, speak and so on. Then, using your keyboard and mouse, you are free to roam endless landscapes and cityscapes, meet and chat to other avatars. If you get really hooked you can become a member for a small fee, buy land, create virtual homes and conduct real business.

Given the phenomenal pace at which Second Life has taken off and its great appeal to the younger generation, one could argue that it is time to investigate whether it has any educational potential.

Removing real world barriers

Working with St Dunstan's College, a forward-thinking independent school in South East London, VLE Support has identified three key areas that offer clear benefits to teaching and learning. Over time, we anticipate developing further ideas and finding new ways to benefit education.

The first of the three areas identified is the ability to recreate objects and environments that are difficult or prohibitively expensive in the real world. So for example, one could create a chemistry laboratory where teachers and pupils can carry out experiments that they cannot perform in the real world either because of health and safety regulations or because the equipment is too expensive. Science teachers, for example, could carry out nighttime astronomy lessons, during daytime classes. Those responsible for leadership training could set team building challenges such as constructing a raft to cross a river in a virtual environment so that pupils of all ages could learn from the experience without risk.

Paul Glyne-Thomas, head of ICT at St Dunstan's College, says: "Although we are still at the planning stages, we are already very excited at the learning opportunities Second Life presents. The ability to create different environments for students to visit could significantly expand the realms of what we can teach our pupils."

There are also exciting learning opportunities for languages in Second Life. For example a French department could create a boulangerie or café with a quintessential French atmosphere and then restrict all conversations to French within this area. Pupils can speak to each other using headphones and voice over IP technology or 'chat' by typing to each other. There is, of course, the opportunity to share the space with overseas schools so pupils from different countries can have an enjoyable place to meet and practice their language skills. From our experience to date, young people are very open to using Second Life for meeting and chatting; their experience of gaming and social networking sites, makes this all perfectly natural and fun!

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) recently unveiled its virtual island on the Second Life website, cleverly taking advantage of the popularity of Second Life amongst their target audience. UCAS has created areas for applicants to meet each other, such as the beach area, where they can sunbathe, play beach-ball or take a trip on a pedalo. Professional advisers in the form of UCAS avatars provide real-world clearing and application advice.

Collaboration and partnerships

Another area of Second Life that we feel has potential for education is collaborative projects and partnerships between schools. Second Life is the perfect medium for bringing people together from far and wide, as mentioned already in the language example above. There is something special about collaborating in Second Life – perhaps because your avatar gives you a very real feeling of presence that is unattainable in other forms of online communication technologies.

Projects between schools are the most obvious type of collaboration. Such an exercise might involve pupils carrying out an online discussion or debate about issues that affect their respective local areas to highlight people's different perspectives.

Another form of collaboration or partnership could involve schools sharing their Second Life facilities. Although getting an avatar is free, there is cost involved in buying virtual land, building schools and equipment. It is not hard to imagine an independent school, for example, providing access to its virtual chemistry laboratories to the local comprehensive school. With increased pressure for private schools to prove 'public benefit', Second Life could become the modern equivalent to loaning out the school swimming pool.

Developing business acumen in pupils

The final area of Second Life that we feel has particular educational benefit is developing business acumen in pupils. These days, many schools recognise the benefit of this and work with organisations like Young Enterprise. One such organisation that St Dunstan's College and VLE Support are keen to work with is the Social Entrepreneur Project (<http://sep.hopehiv.org>). This organisation encourages children to find creative and resourceful ways of making money, having been given a little seed capital. All of the profit generated is donated to HOPEHIV, an international charity working with children who have been orphaned by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa. In the past children have made and sold cakes or provided a car valet service outside the local supermarket to raise the money. St Dunstan's College, however, is interested in using Second Life as the medium through which some of its pupils set up their businesses to raise money for HOPEHIV.

Unlike in any other virtual world, residents own their own creations, so they can buy and sell them freely with Linden dollars that is readily converted into real money. Not only does Second Life operate its own economy but we believe the opportunities for entrepreneurs are significant – this is virgin territory for commerce after all. So, for example, just a few months ago the first monthly lifestyle magazine aimed at homeowners was launched in Second Life. Although the subject matter is not radical – articles about dream homes and must-have household wares, albeit virtual ones - it is the first magazine to corner this market and has a potentially massive global readership. Currently, of the 13 million inhabitants, only several thousand run real businesses inside Second Life, some making enough to earn a real-world living.

The future is here

Visiting Second Life can be like tumbling down the rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland. It is a weird and wonderful place with the promise of more to come.

Although the technology is cutting edge, it is accessible and easy to use and so there are not the barriers that some technologies can create.

The aspects of Second Life that we believe make it interesting to educational professionals are its ability to teach things that would otherwise be problematic or expensive in the real world; to bring a new dimension to partnerships and collaboration between schools; and to help develop business acumen in young adults. Paul Glyne-Thomas from St Dunstan's College sums it up: "The educational potential of Second Life appears to be endless. It is a case of identifying what will benefit the pupils most."

The application of Second Life to education is still embryonic. If our generation is brave enough to embrace this New World, then we can be confident that the younger generation will be ready and willing to learn – after all, this is second nature to them.

Mark Trinick is managing director of VLE Support. For more information on Second Life or virtual learning environments visit www.vlesupport.co.uk or call 0845 6384328