USING SECOND LIFE TO TEACH ENTREPRENEURSHIP:
ADAPTING TECHNOLOGY TO PEDAGORY

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

This workshop will present a collaborative effort at Iowa State University that leverage technology (e.g. Second Life) to teach entrepreneurship in e-commerce courses. Students created avatars and participated in a number of learning activities in Second Life to understand e-commerce processes and products/services as well as the role of human behavior. The workshop will include the process used to build infrastructure and deliver content. This workshop will be of interest to members who want to learn about collaborative university efforts to use technology to teach entrepreneurship.
Background

Second Life (SL), publicly available since 2003, is a 3-D virtual world where content is built and owned by its residents. SL is inhabited by over 8.5 million residents from all over the world. About 43,000 avatars are logged into the grid at any given time. The SL marketplace supports millions of US dollars in monthly transactions. This commerce is handled with the in-world unit-of-trade, the Linden dollar, which can be converted to US dollars at the LINDEX, the online Linden Dollar exchange operated by the game operator, Linden Lab. SL offers a fully-integrated economy in that residents create their own virtual goods and services and retains the intellectual property rights for their creations. Linden Lab reported over 73 million meters sold by residents and over 14 million transactions in June 2007.

The Iowa State University (ISU) strategic plan recognizes innovation (a key aspect of entrepreneurship) as a key aspect of the university’s mission. The ISU entrepreneurship program is now entering its tenth year. The program was designed to integrate and encourage entrepreneurial activity on campus, ranging from coursework to assisting students and faculty starting businesses. The entrepreneurship program at ISU includes undergraduate and graduate courses in all colleges. Pedagogical innovations and curriculum initiatives are encouraged strongly by the Pappajohn Center for Entrepreneurship and from the supportive university infrastructure.

Description of the Workshop

The workshop presents a collaborative effort between the College of Business, Pappajohn Center for Entrepreneurship, Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, and Engineering Distant Education to leverage technology (e.g. SL) to teach entrepreneurship in e-commerce courses at ISU. The students in this course created avatars and participated in a number of learning activities in a 3-D virtual world, SL, to understand the complexity of e-commerce processes, products and services, and the role of human behavior.

Second Life is increasingly being used in a number of educational activities for topics as diverse as geometry, business, sociology, and mathematics. Nevertheless, an important prerequisite for using SL for educational purposes is building the infrastructure and content needed to run a class using SL. The workshop presentation will include information about the processes used to build both the infrastructure and content needed to deliver a course that includes significant content related to entrepreneurship. In addition, the workshop will highlight both the benefits and potential pitfalls associated with using SL for educating students about entrepreneurship. Specific topics will include:

1. Obtaining an educational parcel of virtual land; that is, an island.

The ISU Research and Education Technical Experiment Island was purchased by the Iowa State University Educational Distance Education (EDE) program. Educational institutions are able to buy islands at a set, discounted price of $895 and also pay a reduced monthly service charge. The basic process of buying island content will be discussed and reviewed.
2. Development of island content

The ISU Research and Education Technical Experiment Island is viewed as a safe place for students to start exploring SL and engage in meaningful learning activities pertinent to the subject matter of the course. All meeting places were constructed by the instructor (Professor Brian Mennecke), including the classroom, store, team spaces and instructor’s office. Professor Mennecke departed from the idea of replicating the physical world, but rather created open spaces that emphasized the uniqueness of this online environment. The classroom was located on top of the mountain and had a convenient speaker podium and plenty of sitting capacity for the audience. The team spaces were floating in the air thus giving each group of students an opportunity to engage in conversations without being interrupted by other avatars. The store resembled the University Book-Store and was filled with freebies- clothes, accessories and objects that avatars could freely receive and experience in order to become familiar with the basic functions of SL.

Because the majority of student avatars were encouraged to teleport from orientation islands to the Iowa State Research and Educational Technology Experiment Island, the professor and staff involved in supporting the class were highly cognizant of the importance of clear instructions and the availability of assistance from experienced users. Clear instructions were placed throughout the island regarding the easiest ways for students to teleport to SL workspaces and experience objects in SL (the store, for example, had both short and long (with pictures) versions of instructions that described the basic steps for unpacking and using various objects like clothing and scripts). Although the actual location of avatars in SL is not significant for engagement, we felt it was important for students that were new to the game to come to first visit the Iowa State Island and work on class projects for several reasons:

- The island helped to ensure the sense of belonging and purpose.
- Assistance from more experienced avatars, such as the course instructor and support staff, was available at the island at all times. The island was a secure place to explain things without the noise of the ‘big world’ of SL.
- The island had a sand-box where students could build and share objects they created. Unlike the public sand-boxes located in various public locations in SL, our island rarely lagged and had enough space to allow students to experience objects (for example, building structures, riding cars, flying planes, etc.).
- The island “hosted” learning activities for this course and allowed time for student reflexivity away from the “busy, big world”.

Since effective functioning of the island was particularly important to ensure productive teaching and learning, special security measures were taken by the island administrator and officers. All scripts were banned and suspicious objects were removed promptly. Students were only allowed to build in sand-boxes. Only students in the course and/or associated with the course (e.g., invited speakers) were granted access to the island.

3. Required time to prepare class
As with any new technology, one of the issues that should be recognized by any instructor is that the use of SL will require significant time to prepare and deliver the course. Instructors will need to learn about the nature of SL in order to use it effectively. This is particularly important for courses related to entrepreneurship. One of the features of the SL environment is that entrepreneurs abound. Nevertheless, to meet those entrepreneurs, learn about them, develop an understanding of their businesses, and develop a working relationship, a professor needs to spend time in the SL environment and interact with its residents. In addition, an instructor will need to learn about how to use SL itself. While the instructor may not need to build content like a classroom, the instructor will need to know enough about how to use the game so that he or she can operate in SL effectively and also help students when needed. All of these and other related activities take both time and effort. We will discuss strategies and tactics that will be needed to minimize the time needed to develop course content and build infrastructure.

4. Time demands and time line of course development

Preparing for this class was a key to success. The instructor asked the representatives of two academic units, EDE and the Center for Educational Leadership Training (CELT), to provide both technical and pedagogical support and called for several meetings, where the vision for the ecommerce course was discussed in detail. Constant communication between all members of the support team occurred throughout the preparation phase. We will discuss strategies for both instructors and institutions related to the management of course development and coordination between instructors and support staff.

5. Required knowledge about how to build content and understand the context of SL (i.e. interact with people, use objects, experience events, etc.).

SL has a steep learning curve and requires a certain degree of immersion for new users to become familiar with basic SL functions. Learning how to chat, change the avatar appearance, walk, fly, teleport and experience objects might not always appear self-explanatory. In addition to these basic skills associated with the technicalities of SL, new users may be puzzled with the sophisticated communication patterns occurring in the SL environment. For example, experienced users refer to their presence in SL as “being in-world” and possess abundant vocabulary descriptive of SL’s complex nature (e.g., sim, region, lags, freebies, textures, etc.). New avatars need time to figure out how the in-world businesses are structured and operated. New users seldom understand how to contact prominent SL figures and join interest groups. This combination of both technical and social knowledge of SL is very important to be fully cognizant of the complexity of this environment and its economy.

To help new avatars develop an appreciation of the complex nature of SL, the instructor and CELT specialist designed and developed a learning activity, SL Scavenger Hunt that invited teams of students to co-experience and explore as they discovered interesting places and learn basic SL skills. We will discuss how this scavenger hunt and other tools
like it can be used to orient new users. In addition, we will review several of the basic concepts associated with the SL environment so workshop participants will understand several of these concepts.

6. Guest speakers

The majority of guest speakers were identified through personal contacts and professional networks that had been previously developed by two experienced SL users: the course instructor and one of the CELT specialists. Both of these individuals had been in-world for several months before the class started and had been learning about business opportunities in SL.

The CELT specialist was active in several SL groups that are concerned with using SL for meaningful teaching and learning. She participated in a number of SL educational conferences and also developed friendships with and attended SL classes of other educators. One of the speakers who ran his own SL consulting business was identified through the educational group’s chat sessions. Strategies for identifying business people who students can interact with will be discussed so that workshop participants can understand both the opportunities and the requirements needed to use SL for educational activities related to entrepreneurship.

7. Student assignments to teach entrepreneurial skills

Our intent will be to present and discuss the experience at ISU in a manner that will stimulate discussion and sharing of ideas. We will discuss how assignments in a class like this can be used to encourage students to be creative, to look for opportunities, to identify how to respond to opportunities, and how these activities can be managed and focused towards meaningful educational activities. Our focus will be to show how SL can be used as a meaningful educational forum and workspace that allows instructors to expose students to real entrepreneurs, to enable them to observe businesses in operation first-hand, and to understand the entrepreneurship process.

**Intended Workshop Audience**

This workshop will be of interest to USASBE members who are interested in learning about (1) an innovation pedagogical approach to teaching entrepreneurship, (2) developing collaborative university relationships to support entrepreneurship curriculum initiatives, and (3) leveraging technology to facilitate student learning. Implications of the experience at ISU may be of wide interest to a large group of entrepreneurship educators in both large and small schools.