



Teaching first-year studies in religion students in Second Life: UQ Religion Bazaar

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The UQ Religion Bazaar project was originally conceived in 2007 and developed through 2008. It consists of a Second Life island situated in the New Media Consortium educational precinct and boasts a number of religious builds including a church, a mosque, a synagogue, an ancient Greek temple, a Freemasonic lodge, a Zen Buddhist temple and a Hindu temple to Ganesha. The island was used in two large first year classes and for supervising distance postgraduate students.

After a brief introduction to the discipline of Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland, this paper will assess the suitability of using Second Life as an environment for learning based on constructivist methodologies. Further, it will explore the original conception and development of the UQ Religion Bazaar project within Second Life, and outline the preliminary findings of the project.

Keywords: Second Life, virtual worlds, constructivism, studies in religion

Introduction

Second Life is an internet-based, three-dimensional social world which can be accessed by individuals via a software client which runs on a personal computer. Since 2003, this virtual world has captured the imagination and ire of the general public, on the one hand concerned at the implications and complications for a first life, and on the other intrigued by the possibilities that such a flexible environment affords. Many educators fall into this latter category; in higher education institutions a vanguard of adventurous educators have been quick to spot the possibilities for innovative teaching and learning in such environments, providing an unparalleled opportunity for people to interact with each other and their surroundings in unfamiliar and innovative ways (Conklin, 2007). Second Life is the foremost Multi-User Virtual Environment (MUVE) exploited by educators, with hundreds of tertiary institutions offering classes partly or entirely within Second Life. The University of Queensland is also represented there, with the studies in religion discipline purchasing a Second Life island in 2007 and constructing a number of religious builds for use in two large first-year courses.

The studies in religion program at the University of Queensland seeks to educate undergraduates and postgraduates about various ethical, cultural and religious systems in alignment with the graduate attributes espoused by this university. Similar attributes are promulgated by most tertiary-level institutions and include the acquisition of knowledge about other cultures, the fostering of intercultural communication, an appreciation of cultural diversity, historical consciousness and a global perspective. Traditionally, content

has been delivered via a tutorial and lecture program, supplemented by assessment that necessitates field trips to religious spaces situated in South East Queensland. The main focus of this study will be the introductory level courses offered within the discipline, namely *Meditation and Soul Journeys: Eastern and Western Spiritual Experience* and *Introduction to World Religions*. These courses form the core of the Studies in Religion major within the Bachelor of Arts degree and are compulsory for students undertaking a major or a double major in this discipline. The greater proportion of enrolments is comprised of first-year students – 18 or 19 years old – new to tertiary education; even so, mature-age students ranging in age from their early 20s through to the late 50s, form a significant proportion of this cohort. Though figures are not available for the numbers of these students enrolled in these courses, McInnis reports that nearly half of students commencing university studies in Australia are mature age (2001, p. 106). In addition, these courses have no prerequisites so there is no assumed knowledge, making it challenging to cater to all learners' needs. This increasing diversity of first-year students has long been recognized as a feature of Australian university programs.

In order to give students a broad experience of other religious traditions, assessment in both of the large, first-year courses in studies in religion, required that students go to various places of worship around South-East Queensland in order to observe and investigate religious practice. There were a number of issues with this approach. First, Australia is a predominantly western Christian country. Even though there are significant populations from other cultures resident in the area, there are still relatively small numbers of Taoist temples, Hindu temples, Sikh temples and so on. Second, given that significant proportions of students are completing other courses, working to supplement their income, are sometimes parents themselves and are otherwise juggling the competing demands placed upon them, it is often prohibitively time-consuming to complete the assessment tasks, especially the off campus visits, to a satisfactory degree. And because of the public liability insurance implications, the institution is unwilling to streamline the process by providing transport and appropriate supervision. Finally, there are ethical implications when sending students to observe worship and other religious practices. Though most religious adherents are happy to let students observe them, some are disturbed by this.

The relevance of constructivist methodologies

Students enrolled in first-year studies in religion courses necessarily bring with them a wide range of experiences and knowledge. In order to design effective learning for all, it becomes necessary to consider appropriate approaches to teaching and learning taking into account this variety of experiences. Constructivist learning is the conviction that knowledge is constructed by learners, not merely transmitted by a teacher or lecturer (Brown & King, 2000, p. 245). Constructivism places the learner at the centre of the process. Advocates of constructivism assert that learners should play an active role in learning. In order to facilitate this process, learners should be encouraged to explore and manipulate the learning environment (Dickey, 2003, p. 106). Central to the philosophy of constructivism, is the belief that meaning is made within the context of a situation (Brown & King, 2000, p. 245). In addition, constructivism advocates the provision of opportunities for collaboration between learners. This is enhanced by discourse and supports social negotiation between learners; information is shared, allowing learners to reflect on their learning.

Three-dimensional virtual environments, such as MUVes, are showing some promise as constructional learning environments (Dickey, 2003, p. 106) and a significant literature is building around this topic (for example, see Nelson & Ketelhut, 2007 and Sardone & Devlin-Scherer, 2008). Winn (1993, p. 4) explains that knowledge is acquired in two ways. First, it is constructed through direct interaction with objects and situations, such that the learner is unaware of its presence. This form of knowledge is direct, subjective and personal and is called 'first-person knowledge'. The other way knowledge is acquired is through description by someone else and is consequently objective, vicarious, communal and explicit. This Winn calls 'third-person knowledge' (Winn, 1993, p. 4). He further makes the point that 'first-person knowledge' is non-symbolic in contrast to 'third-person' knowledge which is symbolic and frequently codified. Transparency of the user interface in VR affords the acquisition of first-person knowledge and is consistent with constructivist approaches to learning in MUVes (Winn, 1993, p. 4; Dickey, 2003, p. 106). Though the user interface is not so transparent in MUVes – actions are mediated through a computer keyboard and mouse – participants are only minimally aware of its presence; this awareness decreasing as the participant becomes more experienced in the environment.

Back to Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland

Studies in religion discipline convenor, Dr Rick Strelan teamed with Dr Helen Farley to successfully apply for a competitive Strategic and Learning Grant of AUD\$30,000 from the University of Queensland in order to establish the University of Queensland's studies in religion presence in Second Life. The project is called 'UQ Religion Bazaar', a reference to the wide assortment of religions to be represented in the space. A number of religious structures were constructed on the island including a mosque, a church, a synagogue, a Hindu temple, a Buddhist temple, a classical Greek temple, Freemasons' lodge and provision for ritual magic and neo-pagan rituals. These buildings were constructed in such a way as to allow ritual reconstructions and role-playing. In addition, there are a number of non-religious constructions including an amphitheatre, an office with a conference table and screen, numerous informal meeting spaces and a reconstruction of the University of Queensland's iconic Great Court. The main use of this environment is for the large first-year studies in religion courses *Meditation and Soul Journeys: Spiritual Experience East and West* and *Introduction to World Religions*, both of which consider practices and rituals in a wide variety of religions and religious contexts.

The project coordinators believed that Second Life provided an immersive experience for students. Students could experiment with identity and experience empathy by taking on avatar of a different gender, culture or race. For example, a group of students gained a unique insight into the discrimination experienced by Muslim women wearing the burqa in western society, by dressing their avatars in that way and going to a public place in Second Life. In this way prior experiences could be reanalysed and reinterpreted. And students, working together in an environment where distinctions obvious in the physical world become obsolete, construct knowledge through firsthand experience. Through their avatars, students could explore every inch of a religious space with just-in-time information provided by way of notecards and triggered messages displayed in text chat at the various places. In addition, they could closely examine religious artefacts and outfits which would be very difficult, if not impossible for them to access in real life.

In each course, students were divided into tutorial classes of up to twenty. Each class was taken at a separate time to a computer lab equipped with computers with the Second Life client installed. Initially, it was decided to have the students enter Second Life under supervision so that the lecturer and teaching assistant could render any help to the students if they needed it. Students self-selected into pairs and each pair was assigned an avatar that had already been created. Students worked together to overcome any difficulties they encountered with the interface or with the assigned task. The students were of diverse ages from 18 years old to mature adults in their late 50s. Though the younger students could be said to be of the 'Net Generation' (Kennedy et al., 2009) or to be representative of Prensky's 'Digital Natives', the older students were less comfortable with the technology and could be considered to be 'Digital Immigrants' (Prensky, 2003). During the course, the older students became more confident with the technical aspects of Second Life under the guidance of support of their younger peers with who they were partnered. Each avatar had a certain number of religious outfits and an identical collection of religious objects readily accessible through the avatar's inventory. It was decided to provide the students with avatars as Second Life training was not available to the students outside of class and there was insufficient time in class to make up the deficit.

In the initial session, each student pair was encouraged to explore religious spaces on the UQ Religion Bazaar island or other religious landmarks that had been provided (these places were previously investigated and permission to use them was gained from each build owner). The next activity to be completed in Second Life was much more complicated and required considerably more planning and preparation. Students left the pairs they had formed; instead working in groups that they had already been allocated into. Students in their groups were asked to research part of a religious ritual or historical event of significance to a religion, with a view to re-enacting it in the virtual environment. They were initially given time in class to discuss and plan their approach to this activity. They were particularly asked to pay attention to the context of the ritual or event: What was happening? Why was it happening? What was the significance? Who was taking part and why? They were instructed to be respectful at all times and were prompted in text chat on entering religious buildings on the UQ Religion Bazaar island to be respectful and wear appropriate clothing or to remove their shoes or to wash before entering. When the students returned

to the computer lab, they were able to work on their re-enactment of the ritual or event. They were given four hours over four weeks to do this. In the subsequent two weeks, two groups in each session would perform their role play while the rest of the tutorial class could watch. Students would explain the significance of what they were doing and saying as well as the symbolic significance of the implements they were using. Further, they would explain the relevance and importance of that event or ritual to the religion. This exercise met with varying degrees of success but was mostly enjoyed by the students. Some expressed frustration with their lack of familiarity with the interface or with the limitations of the technology. For example, the range of movement, gestures and facial expressions is limited and are difficult to instigate when the student was busy doing something else such as typing, speaking or moving (Ediringha, Nie, Pluciennik, & Young, 2009, p. 471). No data was collected though instructors talked to students about their perceptions, difficulties with the environment and motivation towards the exercise. Students reported feeling a sense of identity with the avatar that they were using, even though they did not create that avatar. This was especially interesting when talking to students who adopted an avatar of the opposite gender to their own. In some cases, they reported identifying and feeling more like they expected that gender to feel. For example, one male student said he felt more submissive and less outspoken when he was operating through a female avatar. Because they had to research and then re-enact the ritual or event in an immersive environment, students reported feeling they had a bigger investment in the activity. As they were a part of the ritual, the research informing the role-play became more personal to them. Some students said that it gave them much greater insight into what it felt like to belong to a different religion (or to a religion). Many reported that they felt they understood people from different religions better than they did before the exercise and that they would probably be more tolerant of differences between religions in the future.

The learning design was not formally evaluated. It was intended to be exploratory with a view to refining the design for future iterations. A survey of the relevant literature seemed to suggest that this approach held significant promise in terms of improved student engagement through immersion, and that the environment would support learning through constructivist approaches. In this iteration of the Second Life activities, the project coordinators were broadly looking for major problems with either the design or with implementing Second Life that would preclude future iterations of the activities. Overall, the coordinators had the sense that students enjoyed the experience and felt they gained something from it, but adjustments to the design still needed to be made. For example, students did not have enough lab time to adequately prepare for the role play. In the future iterations of this design, more class time will be allocated to group work in preparation for the role-play; they will have five weeks instead of four. Also, students tended to be too ambitious in what they were trying to do. This was a product of both the inexperience of the project coordinators as well as the enthusiasm of the students. A modified version of this exercise will run in the summer semester of 2010 in the course *Introduction to World Religions*, using a design-based methodology (for example, see Ma and Harmon, 2009).

Conclusion

The UQ Religion Bazaar island in Second Life provided the venue for group role-play activities designed around constructivist principles for first-year studies in religion students at the University of Queensland. Even though a formal evaluation of learning outcomes and perceptions was not undertaken, informal evaluation consisted of classroom observations and informal discussions throughout the courses under consideration. Though students were frequently frustrated by the technical aspects that interfered with the execution of the assigned tasks in the supervised Second Life sessions, some reported feeling a sense of identity with the their avatar and an increased understanding of how it feels to belong to another religion (or to a religion). These students also reported that they believed that these activities would increase their understanding and tolerance of those of another religion.

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