



Second Life: a virtual world for learning and skills?

Inside Evidence interviewed Shirley Evans, an e-learning advisor who has been contemplating Second Life and its use within the sector

Second Life (SL) (www.secondlife.com a trademark of Linden Research Inc) is an online virtual world in which users interact with each other as they would in the real world. It has been popular in many facets of real life, especially business and e-commerce. Now education is beginning to see the benefits too.

Shirley, along with a number of others, was sponsored by LSIS to attend the Association for Learning Technology conference 2009 to support the LSIS objective of engaging the sector with research. Although she had been aware of SL before this time, it was here that Shirley came across research about SL and began to see the benefits and potential of using it in the learning and skills sector. "I wanted to know how it could be used in recreating environments: what are the barriers, what are the alternatives, what are the benefits?"

SL has been successfully used for teaching and learning in universities for several years. At the University of Leicester a 'Media Zoo' recreates the university setting, allowing lecturers specific areas in which to try out new teaching experiences, but also provides online learning environments in which students can participate (www.le.ac.uk/beyonddistance/mediazoo/). A college Shirley has worked with recently visited the university to look at setting up something similar for staff training and development, so using virtual worlds like SL is gradually becoming known to the learning and skills sector.

Tapping into the potential of SL as an online education tool is not going to be plain sailing, according to Shirley. But she doesn't

think this should be a barrier to use as, when imaginatively concerned and focussed on real challenges, the benefits of using SL could far outweigh the difficulties of implementation. For instance, SL could be used in partnership with schools and universities to ease students' transition into and out of the learning and skills sector.

"What is needed", according to Shirley, "is collaboration between colleges", to try to establish a virtual FE world in which teaching and learning can be implemented and learners can experience aspects they might not be able to in the real world, such as what it is like to be at university. This could be especially useful for those who are still considering whether or not to go. "The transition from further to higher education can be a traumatic experience and a steep learning curve", she says, so Shirley believes that SL has considerable potential for making the move easier, reducing misconceptions and encouraging both participation and retention. Shirley also sees SL working well in distance learning so that participants can meet without travelling. "SL could be an extension of the VLE in colleges, allowing collaboration among peers that can also link in with teaching and learning."

Shirley is especially interested in SL as a tool for teaching soft skills such as communication or functional skills for example. But at present there is a lack of research into SL and virtual worlds in the FE sector and their potential benefit to learners. If like Shirley Evans, you have the vision to make it a reality and have evidence of its value as a teaching and learning tool we'd love to hear from you. Please email us at: research@lsis.org.uk

Evidence source

Jarrett, C. (2009) Get a second life, *The Psychologist* 22 (6) pp. 490-493.

Inside Track

NCETM FE magazine

www.ncetm.org.uk/resources/14609

The magazine is produced by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics for LSIS. It includes a regular feature on the mathematics involved in different jobs such as a farmer and a website designer and photographer, ideas for the classroom and suggested resources.

Geoff Petty's website

www.geoffpetty.com/style.html

This website has a useful questionnaire that will help you to analyse your own teaching style as suggested in the article on page 2. The website also hosts a variety of other useful research tools and evidence-based teaching resources available as downloads as well as details of his recent book – 'Evidence-based teaching'.

Ofsted's Good Practice database

www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=goodpracticedatabase

Ofsted has always aimed to show practitioners the best of what the sector has to offer. So when Ofsted inspectors find something particularly effective during their inspection work, they go back to find out what it is that makes it so good. From this information, they have created resources that will help you improve your own provision by learning from others.

Reader panels

We would like to thank members of our reader panels.

Practitioner panel:

Alistair Woodcock, *quality and standards manager, Oxford and Cherwell Valley College*

Sara Hunter, *chief executive, Royal Artillery Centre for Personal Development (RACPD)*

Alison Ashworth-Brown, *head of engineering academy, NG Bailey LTD*

Tony Pattison, *director quality: learning and teaching, Stockton Riverside College*

Elizabeth Johnson, *assessor, Royal National College for the Blind*

Researcher Panel:

Kathryn Ecclestone, *professor of education and social inclusion, University of Birmingham*

Ann Hodgson, *professor of education, consultancy and knowledge transfer / co-director, centre for post-14 research and innovation, Institute of Education, University of London*

Garth Clucas, *HMI, principal officer, strategy directorate, Ofsted*

Andrew Morris, *independent consultant*

David James, *professor, Bristol Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning and Education (BRILLE)*