

The Facts of Virtual Life: Education and the *Second Life* Experience  
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2008 SLIS Doctoral Research Forum

**Extended Abstract:**

Some educators believe that it is time for schools to stop viewing the learning process as a form of punishment and explore alternative options (Cross, 2007). In an attempt to make teaching and learning activities more appealing to today's tech-savvy students, educators are examining ways to integrate new technologies into the curriculum. Advocates of this approach suggest that there are benefits to the interactions that take place within visually rich, complex virtual worlds, like *Second Life* (SL); however, the research to support these assertions is lacking. In fact, decisions to move educational initiatives into these game-like environments appear to be made on the basis of "leaps of faith" rather than on empirical evidence (Hays, 2005, p. 9). Perhaps more importantly, there are some who question the female-friendliness of this space (e.g., Wajcman, 2007), which could impact the learning potential of female students.

Currently, librarians are leading the way in conducting and promoting educational activities in virtual worlds. For example, the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in conjunction with the Alliance Library System (ALS) in East Peoria, Illinois, offers a series of non-credit courses about virtual worlds. The course offerings cover a broad range of topics such as Second Life 101, setting up an educational presence in virtual worlds, basic scripting skills, and machinima. These SL-based courses are designed for librarians, educators, and others interested in providing alternative forms of library services and educational programs. They are offered for a fee (\$125 - \$250 per course), and individuals from around the world enroll in and attend these sessions.

Teachers and students in these SL courses communicate with each other through text and audio chat, and discussions are accessible to anyone in the area. Instant messaging (IM) is also available but is used for more private conversations. Another feature of this world is that the class sessions via text chat are recorded for free, and transcripts are available for students and instructors to review at a later time.

For the purposes of this study, text chat data from two virtual world librarianship courses were analyzed: one was a six-session course conducted during Summer 2007; the other was a four-session course conducted in Spring 2008. Each session lasted two hours. Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) approach was used to assess the structural characteristics of the data and the levels of participation among participants. Using the work of Paulus (2007) as well as that of Osman and Herring (2007) on educational chat as guides, functional moves were investigated.

The findings of this research provide empirical support for the claim that synchronous discussions can have the potential to support deep learning. A large percentage of the messages posted during the 2007 and 2008 class sessions were cognitive in nature.

Overall, instructors posted a considerably higher percentage of messages to the discussion than students. However, instructors also relied heavily on the use of logistical moves, particularly in the April 2008 sessions. Further, instructors more actively contributed to the discussion than students and took longer turns. For those interested in creating a more student-centered and democratic learning space, these actions run counter to that notion.

Gendered participation patterns were revealed during the course of this study as well. While female students did post messages, there were sessions where male students had more active levels of participation. However, in the April 2008 sessions, the participation patterns of average male and female students became more similar after the first session. Because most instructors and students were female, it is possible that male students adjusted their behavior to match the majority gender group. Regardless of the behavioral patterns in these courses, it is important to remember that gender is still a concern even in a space with a large number of female residents, like SL. In fact, gender was a topic of conversation in many of the virtual world librarianship sessions. As Instructor IE<sup>1</sup> noted in the April 4, 2008 session, “The thing that makes people like Random [an example of a typical SL problem patron] a potential problem is their assumption that any attractive woman who talks to them is interested in them.”

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<sup>1</sup> Instructor IE is the pseudonym of one resident in SL. She teaches courses in SL that are targeted toward librarians and educators who are interested in this virtual world.