'Good to use for virtual consultation time': *Second Life* activities for and beyond the technical and web-based English writing classroom

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Abstract

This empirical study evaluates comments provided by first year undergraduate students from an English for Technical and Web-Based Writing (ETWW) course at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HK PolyU) from the second semester of the 2009/2010 academic year. Students were asked to describe their experiences with an in-class task consisting of creating a movie poster, and then responding to and evaluating each other's work in a showcase area designed within the HK PolyU *Second Life* (*SL*) virtual campus. Sources of student comments considered included HK PolyU iFeedback forms and video-recorded focus group sessions. The information was then filtered for facilitation of other possibilities in language learning. The authors examine how these activities could be applied in a collaborative learning environment and other collaborative contexts. The goal of this study is to show the creative abilities of students from a technical writing course to think beyond the technical writing classroom. Creating activities of this nature can not only substantiate claims of practical applicability from a virtual world into the physical world, but also acknowledges the benefits of three-dimensional platforms over two-dimensional platforms. While some of the ideas

mentioned (like creating and featuring films in three-dimensional virtual environments) are not novel, they are relevant in showing the quick adaptability of first year university students – many of whom have little to no knowledge of *SL*, and who tend to view virtual worlds simply as another 'game' – in creative thinking and learning. Additionally, the authors consider the relationships between extension projects and the in-class poster task, and the implications of these projects for a potential virtual Department of English.

Keywords

collaborative learning

creativity

language learning

Second Life

technical writing

virtual department

The modern language classroom utilizes various interactive tools for communications – Blackboard, Moodle, iPad, Facebook and PowerPoint – but ultimately these products are two-dimensional and static (De Lucia et al. 2009: 220–33; Burgess et al. 2010: 84–88). While some of these learning tools have developed over time to incorporate various add-ons and interfaces, they are primarily database tools, closed environments controlled by administrators, rather than interactive learning environments developed by teachers and students for teachers and students (Moxley 2008: 184).

Therefore, in order to foster student rhetorical agency, technical instruction must be integrated with rhetorical analysis, medium-specific concerns and considerations of larger cultural contexts (Turnley 2005: 144–46).

Virtual environments, in general, allow for self-navigation and interaction with the environment and other virtual residents, as well as allowing for object creation (Yasar and Adiguzel 2010: 5684), dating back to the 1968 virtual reality simulators (Sutherland 1968), allowing users to engage with the environment in synchronous and asynchronous fashion. For language-based courses, *Second Life* (*SL*) allows users to visualize three-dimensional data and multimodal representations of images or text, in an age of peer production where composition should include a variety of non-traditional genres to ensure relevancy (Stevens 2007: 298–99). Students from various disciplines also potentially benefit from the affordances offered by virtual environments: students from the medical sciences are motivated to learn through intuitive interaction, the sense of physical imagination, and the feeling of immersion, prompting students to additionally consider social and environmental factors (Huang et al. 2010: 5); students of the natural sciences, without having to travel to out-of-reach places, have the opportunity to discover information through collaborative and competitive play and engage in active learning within a highly immersive and interactive environment, testing their understanding about explained scientific concepts (Wrzesien and Raya 2010: 179–80). Virtual reality is not new in these fields, and can have a complimentary role in student education (Nelson et al. 2005: 105).

Additionally, rather than being theorized by experts, vetted by the peer-review process, and published after a long wait, these pedagogies are subject to immediate revision, collaboration and even deletion, challenging traditional assumptions about authorship, authority and collaboration. Teaching, learning and writing can become more dialogical as opposed to presentational; and in this sense, community-of-learning more evenly distributes power, providing more democratic means for authorship and ownership of ideas leading to construction of common-based peer-to-peer interfaces that engage the wisdom of the crowds (Moxley 2008: 183–86). *SL* goes beyond this to include virtual self-representations and navigation similar to the physical world (Kaplan and Haenlein 2009: 569).

Yet, university life in Hong Kong comprises of a distinct culture where students might prefer more conservative (or rote) styles of teaching over others (Zhang et al. 2005: 1321). At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HK PolyU), students have the opportunity at the end of every academic semester to provide formal feedback regarding their course and teacher experiences. As some comments in these Student Feedback Questionnaires (SFQs) reflect, Hong Kong students can be 'inert' and prefer direction over self-initiative. This may present additional challenges for the first-year student attempting to negotiate unchartered tertiary-education territory. Additionally, in Hong Kong, the individual learner places value on 'being in the classroom' to receiving education in a non-traditional manner (Herold 2010: 791).

Anecdotal evidence shows that many students (as well as teachers) at the HK PolyU have had no *SL* experience or have not heard of it. This is also evident from the

students' comments via iFeedback (an online feedback tool available to the HK PolyU community) and focus-group discussions conducted specifically for this study. Unfamiliarity with avatar and environmental navigation, and contending with dragging servers, students from this study often found it frustrating to perform peer evaluation and commentary within the project display site. Yet, many students indicated positive learning experiences, and some were able to articulate possible creative and collaborative learning activities for a technical writing course in *SL*. With the introduction of the poster task (see Figure 1) during the piloting of *Avatar* (Cameron 2009) movie poster design project situated in the HK PolyU's *SL* virtual campus, a brief virtual campus orientation, visiting other *SL* communities and involvement with other English courses, students were potentially drawn to a more dynamic, creative and three-dimensional environment for and beyond the technical and web-based writing classroom (Burgess et al. 2010: 84).

Figure 1: Poster activity display at the HK PolyU virtual campus, Convention Centre.

This study attempts to address three issues: (1) the ability of first year English for Technical and Web-Based Writing (ETWW) students to engage in creative and active learning; (2) visualizing *SL* as a transformative and dynamic space for language learning; and (3) possible intra- and inter-department collaborations. Additionally, the authors consider implications from the findings for a possible virtual Department of English. By considering a constructivist view of the situation, using Ward and Sonneborn's (2009: 212–14) four levels of creativity (little-c, Big-c, Pro-c and mini-c), the authors will filter student comments into six domains of inter-subject language-learning opportunities: feedback, inter-spatial, library, reading/writing, teaching and visual media. Furthermore, by relativizing these activities with existing and practical counterparts, the authors also hope to convince the reader that it is possible for first year university students to utilize creative productivity in a technical and web-based writing classroom, and that this productivity is made possible through *SL*, which in turn creates various opportunities for intra- and inter-departmental learning.

Literature review

SL *as an education tool*

The Internet as an education tool has been developing for over twenty years. However, while content expertise, knowledge of pedagogical best practices and appropriate teaching materials can be developed in the online setting, students may miss some learning that happens in face-to-face situations such as interaction with the teacher

and exchanging ideas with peers. One way to make these learning experience more immediate for online learners may be to utilize online virtual-reality sites where students can learn from each other in a virtual classroom.

The most cost-efficient and accessible form of virtual reality available today is known as a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE), which is hosted online and accessed through software downloaded to one's personal computer. After Linden Lab released *SL* in 2003, it quickly became one of the most popular of MUVEs available on the Internet. Linden Lab presents *SL* as 'an immersive electronic space where countless people interact, and build communities both socially and economically' (Linden Research Inc. 2009: 6). Educators have looked to *SL* for the potential to bring to fruition the dream of a low-cost, virtual reality program capable of serving student and instructor needs. Many articles have been written about widespread use of *SL* in tertiary education (see Jennings and Collins 2007; Atkinson 2008; Salmon 2009; Herold 2010). Inman et al.'s (2010: 45–50) review of 27 *SL* educational projects, conducted since *SL*'s inception, illustrates the immediate interest of educators to experiment with the possible uses of *SL* in the classroom, such as facilitating role-play activities and experiencing simulations. Salmon promotes the use of virtual worlds in learning, and praises *SL* as 'the complex marriage of the technological application with the challenging pedagogical drivers that results in appropriate support and learning design' (2009: 535). There tends to be a consensus 'that virtual worlds seemed to be a good vehicle for providing people with "lived experiences" of radically different models of education' (Twining 2009: 5122). In addition, based on his experience of building up the HK PolyU virtual campus, Herold (2010: 793) confirms

that platforms such as *SL* make it relatively easy and cost-effective to design and set up a virtual environment for teaching and learning compared to setting up similar facilities offline.

The role of student and teacher in Asia

University culture in Asia reflects deep roots in Confucian values – students tend to have a more passive attitude to learning and tutorials simply become question and answer sessions (Herold 2010: 792). In Jamaludin et al.'s (2009: 327) study focusing on euthanasia, low to middle-income, final-year pre-university Singapore high school students were first asked to take a test in the General Placement (GP) subject. Results show that those who came from the arts stream scored higher than those from the science stream. Students from mainland China look at the teacher as being the deliverer of all knowledge (Jin and Cortazzi 2008: 180). In Hong Kong, students tend to favour face-to-face education (Herold 2010: 791). A study by Zhang et al. (2005: 321–1325) attempted to gauge teaching preferences between Hong Kong and US students. In the survey results that identified age groups, older students preferred a variety of teaching styles, which included more conservative, or traditional ways of teaching. While the ETWW course investigated in thus study usually also comprises of second- and third-year students, this kind of preferred, conservative teaching style can often pose dilemmas for the older first-year student who enters a technical and web-based writing classroom, which requires her to apply creative and independent thinking when creating class products. deWinter and

Vie (2008: 316) challenge this institutional homology by asking educators to transform the classroom into sites of cultural studies and critical thinking regarding the students' own subjectivity and the politics of representation that sustain them.

SL *and creativity*

Student experience with technology in the Asian classroom has often been met with juxtaposing perspectives in the research community. While Asian culture is almost fanatical with computer and gaming technology (Yusuf and Nabeshima 2005: 110), student comments from this study seem to indicate that gaming remains in the personal realm, and has little place in classroom learning. Moberly attempts to answer the question: 'How do composition teachers integrate games into their pedagogy when games implicitly usurp the main ideology behind composition courses – the writing?' (2008: 286–87). One school of thought considers voice over internet protocol (VOIP) – or voice chat – as a new era for bloggers of *SL*. However, another blames the introduction of voice chat to *SL* for the infrequency of recent updates to their blog.

However, if we look at *SL* as something other than a game we can see its benefits for a writing-based classroom. While writing itself may not be the focus in *SL*, student writing and design can still become a part of the virtual environment, and voice chat discussions could still be useful when collaboratively evaluating these works. An interesting theory derives from Ward and Sonneborn (2009: 212–14) who discuss four levels of creativity: little-c (everyday creativity); Big-c (eminent creativity); mini-c,

which captures the idea that even very young individuals and those without a large amount of domain knowledge construct personal understandings of the world; and Pro-c acting as a level between little-c and Big-c where knowledge, skills and motivation make creative advances in a chosen profession, yet creative products do not quite reach the gross level of Big-c contributions. The authors of this article argue that the first-year students from this study exhibit mini-c attributes, as evinced in the categorical domains of student responses in Table 2, discussed in the findings. In the study by Jamaludin et al. (2009: 327) discussed earlier, two-dimensional software employed for scaffolding epistemic argumentation skills, while offering fresh ways of raising awareness, does not offer the kind of collaborative, active, experiential and socially interactive learning that such transformative spaces like *SL* allows. This constructivist approach to teaching permits students to become active agents, to learn-by-trying, in a role-playing scenario.

Other institutions and organizations have utilized *SL* in similar fashion to those discussed in this article, and it is important to recognize those efforts, as they are valid and pragmatic (Big-c) counterparts to the experiential (mini-c) suggestions made by this study's student participants. Jarmon et al. (2009: 173) focus on a graduate course in interdisciplinary communication at the University of Texas, Austin campus. An 'Alley Flats' project was created in *SL*, working with a non-profit organization to create low-income suburban homes. The project went one step further by actually connecting with low-income families and allowing them to view these homes, expense free, via avatars. This learning experience was underpinned by the experiential learning theory (based on works by Dewey, Lewin and Piaget), which places experience at the centre of learning:

concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Yet, Spaulding (2010: 41) warns that while giant corporations like Coke, Nissan, Pontiac and H&R Block have a presence in *SL*, their sims (simulations) are devoid of activity because they – and other communities – have not understood how to promote their brands and products effectively.

Role playing and community building

The idea of learning via trial and error (or role playing) is articulated in Girvan and Savage's (2010) study, which focuses on the knowledge-building and communal constructivist approach (discussed in Findings). The experience gained from one group building an artefact becomes the knowledge base for future groups, and so on. Rife (2007: 158) dubs this creative learning (different from creativity), and acknowledges the engagement of imagination, focusing on the production of an outcome, and identifying the need for such outcomes to be judged as original and of value by appropriate observers.

Alternately, Kaplan and Haenlein (2009: 567) discuss the interesting phenomena of v-commerce, showcasing the success of certain organizations through four advertising applications: setting up flagship stores, buying advertising space in virtual malls, sponsoring events in virtual worlds and the impact of virtual action on physical world press coverage. For instance, Canada's IMAX corporation rented a virtual billboard from MetaAdverse, receiving 15,000 individual hits for the fifth installment of the Harry Potter

saga: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Yates 2007). Herold (2010: 792) focuses on a Media Studies course at the HK PolyU, teaching students to think critically during virtual tutorial sessions through the activity of avatar creation. These experiences were used in conjunction with examples from Facebook, chat software (ICQ, MSN), blogs and movies to illustrate the role of media in creating, adapting and deconstructing identity roles assumed by individuals. Fox et al. (2009: 102) discuss the transference of the chameleon effect, noting that non-verbal behaviour by avatars influenced reaction by physical world (or 'first life') counterparts. De Lucia et al. (2009: 221–25) discuss a SecondDMI (Department of Mathematics and Informatics, University of Salerno) virtual campus using adapted learning management system (LMS) services (like Moodle plug-ins such as MuM – Multimedia Moodle) to increase interaction and communication possibilities amongst and between teachers and students. On the other hand, Burgess et al. (2010: 85) note that most MUVE's (like *SL*) are not designed to store or upload documents such as articles submitted by students. The authors of this study intend to show, however, that in order to utilize such virtual environments (like *SL*), fully, it is necessary and practical to upload text-based assignments for an ETWW course.

Additionally, the use of the Internet or e-mail communication is encouraged as a supplement to transfer students' individual or cooperative work (Burgess et al. 2010: 85); and evaluation of students' work within virtual worlds should include both grading techniques used within traditional classrooms, as well as feedback using virtual world capabilities. Haas et al. (2002: 244) foster sharing of web-based projects via studio review. In a traditional classroom, peer review often means a hardcopy exchange of

papers. In a virtual classroom where web-based projects have multimedia elements, teachers can have students set up pages in progress for virtual commentary and sharing.

Methodology

The *SL* project was rooted in the subject ETWW (English 317): it offers an opportunity for students to develop individual and collaborative professional products for the workplace. Examples of course tasks include notice writing, group-produced user guides and a professional website. During the weekly, three hour tutorials, students in English 317 would be required to turn in graded worksheets and a non-assessed in-class assignment. In Semester 2 of the 2009/2010 academic year, as an in-class task, students were asked to create a movie poster advertising the James Cameron 2009 movie, *Avatar*. The assignment expanded, turning into a pilot study, which included a project manager uploading finalized posters onto a customized display site in the Convention Centre (since the writing of this article the landmark is no longer valid) of the HK PolyU virtual campus in *SL*. However, other online teaching platforms were used for the major class assignments. For instance, the HK PolyU's MyWeb (an online student/teacher university portal) and PBworks both helped create and house students' professional web pages. Other LMS's are available, such as the HK PolyU's officially supported Blackboard system, and the alternative Moodle, which contain a plethora of e-learning possibilities. However, according to McCreanor in a 2002 study (in De Lucia et al. 2009: 220), often these features are not fully exploited and these systems are simply used as a supplement,

just as content repositories in web-enhanced modality. Furthermore, in a 2002 study by Redfern and Naughton (De Lucia et al. 2009: 220), multimedia is rarely used and the content is mainly static, represented as HTML pages, PowerPoint or Microsoft Word documents. As a consequence, course delivery often fails because of the lack of support for social interaction (Pargman 2003: 739).

A total of 99 students from the Semester 2, 2009/2010 academic year participated in the English 317 movie poster task. After movie posters were created and placed on display in the Convention Centre of the HK PolyU virtual campus, students were provided three comment platforms for maximum feedback and collaboration. One platform was an iFeedback survey, which is part of the HK PolyU Educational Development Centre (EDC) feedback system (see Figure 2), using both a five-point Likert scale and open-ended questions. Likert questions included:

1. I believe *SL* is a useful environment for alternative assessment.
2. I enjoyed creating a movie poster for display in *SL*.
3. The design and layout for the poster display area was suitable for my viewing, evaluation and feedback of my peers' work.

Open-ended questions included

1. What were the most useful, meaningful or important things you learned in this session?

2. What suggestions do you have on using *SL* in our learning?
3. Any learning difficulties with this task? How may I help?

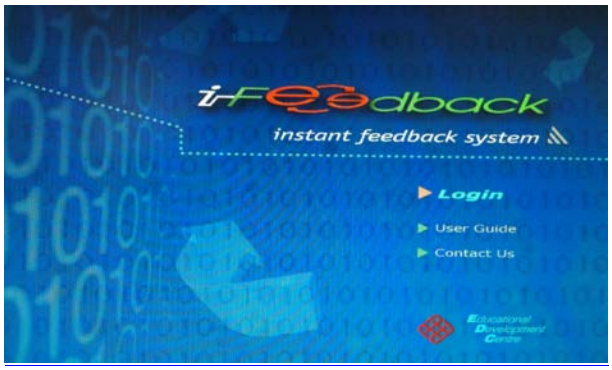

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Figure 2: HK PolyU iFeedback system.

The next feedback platform utilized four focus groups (see Figure 3), with between six and eight invited students each, from four sections of writing classes, for a total of 29 participants. These sessions were then recorded. Each session lasted around 30 minutes. Questions to help generate student conversation included

1. How did your learning change (either positively or negatively) because of the use of *SL* in this course? What were some differences in learning in this course compared to other courses that do not use *SL*?
2. Did you visit any other virtual resources in *SL* or other areas of the HK PolyU virtual campus?

3. Apart from displaying posters, voting and commenting on other's work, what other ways could you use *SL* for the subject English 317?
4. How are your experiences with and the comments you have received from your *SL* poster going to help with you with other projects?
5. For what other types of learning activities do you think *SL* could be potentially helpful regarding your future university studies and career goals?

Comments from the videos were then typed up by the project manager and divided into positive and negative comments.

Figure 3: Student focus group.

The last set of student comments came from the virtual notecards (see Figure 4) that students left for their peers in the *SL* display site. These notecards contained student reaction and suggestions for improvement to their peers' posters. Students were asked to

critique each other's work based on the four criteria for design: balance, contrast, alignment and proximity; but no questions specifically asked about suggestions for learning activities. A total of 47 student comments were recorded. The virtual notecards were scanned for data suggesting possible language-learning activities, but – as suspected – none were discovered. Therefore, no data from this platform were used in this study.

Figure 4: Virtual notecard.

Findings and discussion

A total of 66 students responded to the iFeedback survey and 29 students attended the recorded focus-group sessions. The authors extrapolated student responses that discussed alternate potential language-learning opportunities beyond the original movie poster mini-project displayed in *SL*. What the authors discovered is that while many of these student-suggested activities can be applied to a ETWW course in *SL*, these

activities are also evident across other institutions and organizations that utilize the virtual world for three dimensional, blended communication and learning (Kaplan and Haenlein 2009; Jarmon et al. 2009; Spaulding 2010; Herold 2010; De Lucia et al. 2009; Burgess et al. 2010; Haas et al. 2002; Andreas et al. 2010). However, at an intra-department level, these activities have potential for other English courses, and can act as building blocks for a virtual Department of English (see De Lucia et al. 2009).

Other studies contained survey questions similar to those used in this study. For instance, Jarmon et al. (2009: 169) discusses

1) How does learning occur in *SL*?
2) What types of learning do students experience often in *SL*?
3) Does learning in *SL* transfer to real life?
4) Do students perceive *SL* as instrumental to learning?

Similarly, in deWinter and Vie's (2008: 317) case, they ask

1. What labour did you have to engage in to play in the environment as you wanted to? Did you purchase items with Linden dollars or script any of your own objects for use in *SL*?
2. What parallels do you see in your everyday life – your 'first life' – to *SL*? How does the character you play in *SL* reflect or not reflect your personal subjectivities?

It is evident that other researchers are interested in how *SL* is applicable to learning and first life. This study focuses on the same issues, but goes one step further by connecting the learning to other courses within the HK PolyU Department of English, across departments and faculties, and validating these student-initiated learning ideas to established, external pedagogical examples.

Language-learning platforms

Table 1 breaks down student comments specific to language learning as well as generally positive and negative responses. Notecard information was not tabulated in this data since comments focused primarily on non-controlled student feedback to their peers regarding poster design issues and were not specifically targeted towards language learning (however, notecards were double-checked to ensure no language learning-specific comments were expressed).

	Student participation	**Negative comments**	**Positive comments**	**Comments relevant to language learning**
iFeedback survey	66	N/A	N/A	10
Focus Group	29	14	12	6

Table 1: Totals for student participation and relevant commentary to language learning in feedback and focus groups.

Both negative and positive comments were noted solely in focus group discussion where open-ended questions allowed for more emotionally charged and subjective responses. Examples of negative comments included 'Prefer real life working experience than in Second Life as this is more recognizable', while positive comments included 'Good to allow peer evaluation and able to view all comments on others' work, so as to learn from others'. Language-learning comments were extracted from the overall pool of student responses.

Language-learning domains

Table 2 classifies the language learning-specific comments (a total of sixteen comments: one – 'showing videos' – is mentioned twice) into six domains: feedback, inter-spatial, library, reading/writing, teaching and visual media. The inter-spatial domain reflects language-learning activities that extend beyond the English classroom and Department of English. These isolated comments reflect the mini-c creativity elements discussed in Ward and Sonneborn's (2009: 212–14) study.

Feedback	**Inter-spatial**	**Library**	**Reading/wri**	**Teaching**	**Visual**

			ting		**media**
Consultation time	College fairs (other universities do it)	An archive of relevant in English 317 information resources	Newspaper reading	Virtual tutorial session	Showing video/films in a TV/theatre format
Online discussion	Find fashion information	An archive of resources for all English subjects, where students can give comments and share their own findings and experiences	Reading e-books/e-articles	Virtual lectures/seminars	
Evaluate others' works	Meet each other online in RPG way				

Comment on peers' work privately without any pressure or hassle

Table 2: Domains of student feedback for *SL* language-learning activities.

The following segments investigate the language-learning domains in detail.

Feedback domain

Feedback is an important part of student-centred, collaborative learning, whether that feedback comes from teachers or peers; whether the medium be face-to-face, e-mail, Moodle or Blackboard discussion forums and chat rooms. In *SL*, feedback can transpire in numerous transformative ways, such as via text chat, VOIP, virtual notecards, in-world voting and commenting systems and through logged conversations via adapted technology such as SLOODLE (*SL* Moodle):

Consultation time

Student ideas for extra virtual consultation time straddle juxtaposing views pertaining to the role of *SL* vs two-dimensional platforms and their roles as supplementary educational tools.

In studies by Moxley (2008: 188), De Lucia et al. (2009: 220) and Pargman (2003: 2, 9, 15-16) traditional online tools used for consultation efforts such as WebCT and Blackboard are tentatively closed environments, static and not fully utilized. Conversely, Burgess et al. (2010: 85) caution not to depend on *SL*, but to supplement it with other electronic and traditional teaching tools and practices. Additional consultation meetings could take place during specific times, like during incremental weather when classes are cancelled or for make-up sessions, thus acting as a supplement to otherwise physical meetings about student progress or other class matters.

Online discussion

Virtual teacher–student meetings are dynamic scenarios that mimic a physical rendezvous, which can also be adapted for specific purposes (say the option to use voice or text chat to communicate).

Evaluate others' work

Incidentally, the final assessment for English 317 is a professional website, which traditionally uses Microsoft Word or Publisher as an editor, and is displayed in a wiki-

like PBworks. Students enjoy an opportunity to peer evaluate each other's product prior to turning in a final version for grading. *SL* can act as an alternate platform for evaluating web-based projects (Haas et al. 2002: 233) in a consequence-free environment.

Comment on peers' work privately

This theory of learning in consequence-free environments is evinced in Biever's (2007: 26–27) study involving the creation of Brigadoon Island – a safe-haven for those with Asperger's syndrome to practice their social and cooperative skills until they are comfortable enough to venture back to the physical world.

Inter-spatial domain

Student comments under this domain expressed potential language-learning activities outside of the immediate English subject context:

College fairs

Several international virtual conferences and exhibitions have taken place in *SL*: Second Life Best Practices in Education; Studio Wikitecture; and SLActions (with a local chapter at the HK PolyU).

Find fashion information

In Kohler et al.'s (2009: 398) study, *SL* clothing designers have been approached by physical world work fashion houses; and reverse product placement takes place – creating a fictional brand in a fictional environment and releasing it into real world. American Apparel is an example of a clothing chain that launched its first line of jeans in *SL* before opening it up to physical-world stores.

Meet each other online in RPG way

Regarding the idea of being in a role-playing environment, Jamaludin et al. (2009: 319) discuss the idea of role-playing sessions using Toulmin's argumentation framework. Students discuss the idea of euthanasia, starting with pre-test essays and ending with post-test essays on the topic. An online discussion board forum is also used as a medium of argumentation, with students going back-and-forth between logged *SL* text chat and the discussion board. Final assessments of the study included surveys about student's attitudes and preferences between discussion styles – *SL* took the lead.

Library domain

Virtual education can potentially override many of the limitations that other media encounter, with numerous universities already having some kind of teaching presence in *SL*.

An archive of resources for all English subjects

The idea of using *SL* as a library, or an archive is echoed in Messinger et al. (2009: 221): libraries are attempting to attract younger generations of researchers and their physical-world studies to the boundary-less world of virtual resources.

Reading and writing domain

Under this domain, students are interested in the reading of text: newspapers, e-books, articles and other peers' writings. Girvan and Savage (2010) research the concept of 'paying it forward': knowledge building is based on the use of authentic problems, self-organization, monitoring and correction, collective responsibility, discourse and the creation of products to advance collective knowledge, viewing individual learning as a by-product of this process. Subsequently, communal constructivism closely resembles the underlying processes of knowledge building and extends it with not only a focus on constructing knowledge for current learners but future learners as well. Learning products created by one group of learners become an archived portion of the learning task,

emphasizing the use of past learners and their products to influence the learning experience of future learners.

Newspaper reading

While newspaper production is not a required component of English 317, the principles found in the TV news report example (Figure 6) can be applied here: local or international news, or new of interest to the HK PolyU community could be uploaded in a PowerPoint format, using the same kinds of flipping motions used when reading physical newspapers. Additionally, SLOODLE applications could be introduced allowing a more interactive reading experience by allowing users to blog about articles and leave commentary.

Reading e-books/e-articles

In Girvan and Savage's study (2010), books were created by groups of educators regarding American North-South Interdependence through the history of the banana trade, and displayed on the island, Murias. Each group built a book based upon previous groups' representations, and explorers could stay on the island to harvest information instead of having to move to different websites or web pages. Similarly, in English 317 one of the assessments was a group-produced user guide. As seen in Figure 5, an archived user guide is on interactive display in the movie poster gallery. Future groups

could peruse these products, creating their own products via the experiences of those before them.

Figure 5: Interactive user guide.

Teaching domain

Another application of *SL*, perhaps an obvious one, is running lectures, seminars and tutorials.

Virtual tutorial session

The *Avatar* posters from this study's project could act like the former sim (simulation), Virtual Starry Night, where Van Gogh paintings are displayed in both two- and three-dimensional format. Interesting research questions can be asked about the extent to which providing opportunities for three-dimensional exploration of otherwise two-dimensional paintings can enrich non-artists' appreciation of art as well as art

students' capacities for producing technically proficient and creative works (Ward and Sonneborn 2009: 218). Ideally, for this study, the three-dimensional version of the *Avatar* posters would behave like a living stage where students could walk into the poster, analysing and evaluating its various design parts. Continuing with this thought, as an inter-department collaboration opportunity within the Humanities, English 317 students could have created posters for the HK PolyU's drama club (hosted by the English Language Centre), a favourite poster chosen by virtual vote, which would have then been the advertising agent for a virtual showing of the movie (Messinger et al. 2009: 222).

Virtual lectures/seminars

Burgess et al. (2010: 86) demonstrate this via an example of a course instructor presenting a PowerPoint on the Col framework in *SL* and engaging students in a discussion on possible ways educators could use the model to develop participation for a MUVE. In an English 317 context, a PowerPoint might have been used in *SL* to discuss how to use virtual technology in the ETWW classroom. In a literature course, students could present a progress report on PowerPoint, discussing how their groups might use Machinima (machine cinema) technology in *SL* to create a modern or cultural adaptation of, say, a Shakespeare play.

Visual media domain

The single comment in this domain came from a student who was also taking an English course in intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The final assessment for that course consisted of creating a group video related to an ICC issue. The videos would then be uploaded to www.teachertube.com; however, there were issues of file size limitation, and not being able to invite all users to a group site. Consequently, with that concurrent experience the student had the foresight to suggest perhaps uploading the videos to *SL* and watching them in a TV/theatre setting.

Showing videos in a TV/theatre format

In a related technical writing course, students created TV news reports on community issues. Figure 6 shows a sample of how these videos could be broadcasted in the virtual Exhibition Centre.

Figure 6: PolyU virtual TV screen.

Concluding remarks

Life for the first year university student can often be a difficult and awkward process and appropriate tools and platforms need to be introduced to help these students become acclimated to university life. This study attempted to address three issues: (1) the ability of first-year student of ETWW to engage in creative and active learning; (2) visualizing *SL* as a transformative and dynamic space for language learning; and (3) possible intra-and inter-department collaborations. The results indicated that

- students without much domain knowledge in technical writing or were new to the university environment could construct personal understandings of the world;
- through the set-up of a virtual gallery displaying project posters, students new to the *SL* environment could begin to experience language learning in an alternative fashion – leaving peer feedback to each other's products though virtual notecards, and engaging in text and voice chat (although voice chat was rarely used);
- not only might *SL* be experienced as a possible language-learning tool, but also as a platform to suggest collaborative opportunities within the Faculty and across university disciplines,

Through *SL*, a course in technical and web-based writing allowed students of English to engage in discourse about collaborative, constructivist and creative language-learning opportunities in both the virtual and the physical world. It should be noted that both experienced and non-experienced teachers in MUVEs engaging in blended learning practices have a responsibility to guide their students through learning environments

which may be unfamiliar to them, regardless of discipline or student characteristics (Gamage et al. 2011: 6). The practical application of these student-suggested tasks was beyond the scope of this article, and while preliminary results are drawn from a small pool of relevant responses, they do evince the potential practical nature of a university level technical writing course delivered in a virtual world environment in Asia.

Creativity is not an automatic response to the employment of a virtual world for educational purposes. Much like the physical world, education in *SL* can be uninspiring, unadventurous and individualistic. Without appropriate ethos and pedagogy in place, a virtual world is potentially nothing more than a more technically complicated way for learners and teachers continuing to do what they were doing before – with it, however, staff and students become equals, resulting in asking questions, challenging assumptions, trying out ideas and engaging in discussion (Ferguson 2011: 8–9). Students from this study collaborated in extended creativity, with elements from their learning initially reflected in their physical classroom, and therefore applicable in some regards to teaching and learning in both first life and *SL*.

The realizations are possible for first year university students in *SL*, but from the start of the project server capacity was and continues to be an issue (which was also addressed in student feedback). So far, the HK PolyU's M Core building (the main administrative structure) has the server capacity for full *SL* usage, although recently *SL* software had been permanently downloaded into other buildings with computer labs. Other considerations include the rights of students. When students are asked to sign up for a *SL* account, they are in essence being forced to agree to terms of service (deWinter

and Vie 2008: 318). Extensive and continued use of *SL* might be reason enough to include relevant language about privacy rights when putting together course syllabi and outlines – perhaps a 'virtual code of conduct' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2009: 571) for both student and faculty use.

Currently, several HK PolyU departments already have a presence in *SL*: the School of Hotel and Tourism Management, the School of Design, the Pao Yue-kong Library, the Department of Applied Social Sciences, the Department of Computing, the Institute of Textiles and Clothing and other serving sections. University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) has a virtual English Department presence called UCSB Lane as well as an experimental classroom space named the Transcription Project. *SL* also has its own English Community. During the initial writing of this article, the authors had considered developing a virtual Department of English. Since then, a neophyte model has been built based on elements from Salmon's 'Tree of Learning' concept (Salmon 2010). It is hoped that this platform will serve as a learning space for all students to engage in creative and collaborative language activities – but especially first-year students to guide them towards a more diversified and educational tertiary education experience.

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