

LESSON: Second Life

Overview

Second Life is a virtual culture and community where users can create avatars (images of themselves) and interact with others as they explore the world within this virtual reality program. Avatars can be individualized by users based on a variety of clothing, accessories, and physical characteristics that the user can manipulate. This virtual reality program involves a variety of similarities and differences when compared with the “real world,” and serves as a very interesting context to discuss education and communication in an online world.

The goal of this activity is to discuss virtual classrooms with students and encourage them to think more critically about the future of classrooms and technology. Clips from a class held in Second Life will be used as a catalyst for discussion. For those teachers who want to take a next step, students can be encouraged to participate in their own Second Life class.

Objectives:

- Understanding of the basic concepts of Second Life
- Encourage students to think critically about their communication and interactions with others online
- Deconstruct positive and negative examples considering the kinds of messages they convey about women
- Develop an understanding of the challenges and benefits of communication online and in virtual classrooms

Level: High School

Time: 2+ class periods

Preparation and Materials:

- Access to computers that can download the Second Life program
- Background in the Second Life program
- Microphone and headphones for computer for teacher (although if equipment were available you could certainly have both microphone and headphones for students as well)
- Headphones for students

Procedures

INTRODUCTION TO SECOND LIFE AVATARS

This activity serves as a great way to involve students in discussing appearance and sexualized images in the media. Students will receive a tutorial from the teacher about Second Life. Following this tutorial, students will create their own avatar for a class in Second Life. The avatar can be created by an individual or by a group, depending on the number of computers available and the time allotted for this activity. Students in groups or individual volunteers will explain the appearance of their avatar to the class.

Note: Many of the options available for females include tight clothes and skinny/curvy body shapes. Discuss the way that even many video environments, such as Second Life and video games, portray characters in similarly physical ways that reflect other media (e.g., advertisements). This can open a discussion to sexualized images in the media, values of consumers and advertisers, and persuasive messages using sexualized images. Discuss how advertisers and other media producers sell products to teens using these types of images.

Have students discuss the different options of clothes and appearances of avatars available to Second Life users. Consider for instance:

- What kinds of clothing/outfits are available?
- What types of images in the media help shape society's idea of beauty?
- Does your avatar reflect the images of attractiveness that we see in the media? Why or why not?

SETTING UP A SAMPLE SECOND LIFE CLASS (OPTIONAL)

Second Life includes areas where individuals can meet up with avatars created and manipulated by others. For this activity, find an area where your class avatars can meet and conduct a brief class session within this area.

The teacher should use a microphone and headset. Students should have headphones and have the audio turned on when using their computers. Second Life includes a chat room board that can be accessed and used by students to answer questions posed by the teacher or engage in class discussions. The program also allows teachers to use PowerPoint slides to teach a class. This is a great tool to use as a visual for students as the teacher is talking about a particular topic.

VIEW SAMPLE VIDEO CLIPS FROM A CLASS

See the video links below which provide very brief clips from a full class session held in the Communication Department at the University of Washington. This class was convened in Second Life for a Media Effects course. The topic for this particular class was advertising.

The following video clips give you a bit of an idea as to how the lesson was conducted relying on a PowerPoint Presentation. (Note these are very brief recordings.)

- You will first see the opening screen for the class showing the big W (i.e. University of Washington) and hear a small segment from the teacher's overview for the session. Note the setting in which the students meet. In Second Life you and/or your students can choose the class setting.
- Take a further look at the setting students chose from another angle. Note the waterfall.
- Meet the class and the avatars students chose to represent themselves. Note the avatars can move to whatever positions they choose and move around as the instructor speaks.
- Listen to segment #1 and segment #2. These are 2 small segments from the presentation the instructor was giving that day. The students had audio and could hear the instructor's voice throughout the presentation.
- Watch the chat board on the left-hand side of the screen. This is where students are answering questions or engaging in class discussions. Note the instructor responds to the chat board as she speaks.
- Moving on to the close of the class and the last slide, note the avatar that is performing in front of the class.

DISCUSS SAMPLE VIDEO CLIPS

Discuss some of the following points as you watch these sample clips taken from an actual class held in Second Life:

- How might the teacher go about responding to all the questions that sometimes appear at the same time?
- It is possible to call on students individually in Second Life. Would that be useful?
- Although we didn't have the chance to view all of this activity, the instructor reported that one avatar

was moving around most of the time as the teacher was speaking sometimes appearing in front of the PowerPoint. Also this avatar appeared at the beginning part of the class in male clothing and later appeared in female attire (which we saw in the closing screen). The teacher said later she did not know which student in her class this avatar represented, although she accepted the student's request to enter the class when the request was first made just as she had with the other students. (Some students in the university class reported this avatar to be distracting although it also added humor, the instructor said.)

- Ask students their views about this avatar's behavior and the ways it might affect the class? How might this compare with similar behavior in the traditional classroom?
- Note that one student was chatting to her friend at the same time that class was in session. In Second Life it is possible to hold private conversations without those conversations being seen by the rest of the group.
- What are some ways the students feel performance might be assessed for this class? (e.g. the teacher can obtain a complete script of the class to assess student questions, answers, and comments and to generally more closely examine/review what was said).

CRITIQUE THE SECOND LIFE EXPERIENCE VIEWED

After viewing the video clips, have the class engage in a group discussion about the differences between virtual classrooms and physical classrooms. Teachers can lead and direct the discussion around the following questions:

- What are the differences that you see between the virtual classroom and the physical classroom?
- What are some benefits of having classes in a virtual classroom? What are some challenges and disadvantages to having class in a virtual classroom?
- Where do you see technology fitting into classrooms of the future?

CRITIQUE YOUR OWN SECOND LIFE EXPERIENCE (OPTIONAL)

If you take the next step and actually hold one of your class sessions in Second Life, have the students critique their own class experience. For example, have students consider some of the things they discovered by actually participating in the Second Life experience. Also have students compare and contrast some of their thoughts about the issues raised above when they were actually in the role of a participant rather than a viewer (i.e. earlier they simply viewed the clips of a class meeting in Second Life). How might they now answer these same questions? Discuss their feelings about their avatars.

Assessment

Have students write one page reactions to their experience in viewing the class held in Second Life and the role of technology in classrooms. If you have actually gone the next step and tried to set up and implement a class in Second Life, then student papers should focus on this experience.

Also consider students' answers to questions in class and the level of analysis, evaluation and reflection that is indicated by these answers.