Book review

Learning and Teaching in the Virtual World of Second Life

Eds. Judith Molka-Danielsen and Mats Deutschmann

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This book discusses key issues in relation to one of the most innovative learning and teaching approaches within Web-based CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), i.e. the pedagogical use of virtual worlds. More specifically, it deals with learning through Second Life (SL), a widely used modern MUVE (Multi-User Virtual Environment). This virtual environment is used by many people in the world to play, communicate and interact for many different purposes by simulating an amazingly elaborated and versatile virtual reality. The publication follows the structure of a coherent collection of research articles, each one with its particular focus and yet well integrated within a whole picture depicting the pedagogical use of a given virtual environment. Every paper could be read and considered individually –which is also indicated by the fact that they have separate bibliography and reference sections–, and nevertheless, all the papers should be put into the broader context provided by the general discussion of the whole book, which metaphorically acts as magnifying lenses that give a new comprehensive meaning and value to the individual papers. Arguably, the structure of the book could also have been organised around traditional chapters (although the papers of the book are actually called chapters) with a common bibliography section at the end, but the individual paper-collection format is more dynamic, versatile and innovative-looking, since it allows readers to concentrate on specific topics and cases in turn, or, following the optical metaphor, they can observe a series of snapshots of the whole landscape of educational uses of virtual worlds.

The title of the book deserves a twofold comment in order to clarify its actual scope. Firstly, although it makes no reference to language learning, most of the discussion going on throughout the book is –or may be– analysed with language learning pedagogy in mind, which is not surprising, given the close relation of the two editors with the CALL domain. In any case, even when some projects presented as well as some points made and conclusions drawn in the book do not relate to language learning, one could still consider them from a CALL perspective. Secondly, on the other hand, the title does mention Second Life, although many ideas and issues could be applied just as well to other virtual worlds or even to the broader field of online distance learning. Therefore, the scope of the book is quite broad and many statements in it can be of great interest for a number of people with varying backgrounds, such as students, educational psychologists, teachers, CALL researchers, etc., thus giving the book an appealing multidisciplinary flavour.
The nature of the book is both theoretical and practical. On the one hand, the theoretically-driven discussion is reflected in the thought-provoking treatment of issues such as pedagogical design, themes within the field of educational psychology or methodological approaches, among others. The authors certainly provide us with some food for thought when it comes to using virtual worlds for educational purposes, and they do so from a wealth of theoretical standpoints, which is enriching. On the other hand, in analysing the affordances and potential possibilities of SL as far as education is concerned, the book is mostly practical in nature, since it presents a comprehensive roadmap and guide to efficiently assist the actual implementation of SL for teaching and learning, illustrating not only case studies of good pedagogical practice but also plenty of practical ideas for the educational use of SL in several contexts and within different subject-matters and fields. Consequently, the work does not merely show what has successfully been done in SL in the past and at present (SL reality) – which would already render a good result –, but it takes one step further by incorporating some useful pedagogical ideas that could be readily applied in the future (SL potential) – which somehow gives the book an added value for teaching practitioners and learners.

One of the key contributions of the book can be seen as a direct consequence of its twofold nature (theoretical and practical) and lies in the fact that it bridges the gap between a new technology-based learning environment, namely SL, and the long-expressed need within the CALL literature of theoretically-grounded teaching and learning use of that given technology or environment. It is implicitly assumed in the book that SL, being an innovative multi-purpose technology and environment, not necessarily conceived of or used for learning, should not be used in teaching/learning contexts simply because it is a new technology, but because of its capability of providing the learning process with an added value from a pedagogical point of view. To state it differently, as a question: what can be done through SL that cannot be done (in the same way or at the same level of success) by means of other more traditional or conventional methods/technologies? The whole book is a multi-faceted answer to this question. SL is a virtual world, a kind of “empty” space, a form without a content, so this book aims at filling this gap by providing this empty space with pedagogically relevant content, and, in so doing, it also meets the need of a learning and teaching community that is eager to learn how to use the new technology successfully and learn what to do with it and in it. That is probably why Graham Davies, in his preface, believes that “the publication of this book is timely”: indeed, there is need for books like this to fill technology with the required pedagogical content." Davies, like the book, also advocates for the urgent need to equip both learners and teachers with sufficient training and background information to use the technology appropriately when teaching or learning.

The book features case studies of successful educational projects that use SL as a teaching or learning environment within different fields (computer science, languages, culture, art, literature, among many others), some of them linked to the Scandinavian “Kamino Education Island” in SL. It also includes discussions on theoretical issues and practical ideas that may be relevant or useful when using SL for education. The structure of the book is divided in two parts: Pedagogic Design (part 1) and Learning Projects (part 2). This division could be misleading up to a certain point, since both of them include cases of learning projects together with more theoretically-oriented reflections on pedagogical design and other related pedagogical issues, and, moreover, the first and the last chapters could be regarded as a general introduction and as a conclusion to the whole book, respectively. Each chapter starts with an overview or introduction which acts as a research paper abstract and finishes with a bibliography. Although the titles of the chapters are quite self-explanatory for the specific topic or field at hand, some ideas and concepts are recurrent throughout the book, such as collaborative learning, learning by doing, interactive approach to teaching/learning, social learning, authentic communication, affective aspects of learning, active methodologies, enhanced motivation, among many others. It must be pointed out that this recurrence is not a weakness in this particular publication, since it presents a series of case studies discussed by researchers with apparently similar degrees of commitment to active and innovative teaching methodologies. But such an iteration may add a bit of
confusion should the reader wish to reflect upon those pedagogical ideas and concepts in depth and on an individual basis (one after the other), rather than concentrate on the analysis of the case studies and their educational contexts. Having said that, the pedagogical topics and related theoretical aspects are dealt with in a remarkably insightful manner and with the necessary theoretical background, i.e. based on relevant literature or logical reasoning.

One of the many levels at which the book may be read and analysed is from a procedural perspective, i.e. as a manual showing the prospective SL user some useful technical and pedagogical guidelines, together with plenty of useful tips that will be of use for the reader when SL is actually implemented in practice. Even if the reader has never had a hands-on involvement in SL, s/he can still get an overview about what SL is and what it implies. Some brief fragments resemble instructions for the good use of SL in learning, which makes the book even more versatile. We also find several examples of detailed and clear explanations of SL-specific terms and expressions, which is a very welcome feature given the often complex metalanguage used within this virtual world (for e.g. prims, sims, etc.). In this respect, a general and separate list of acronyms or SL vocabulary would have been very useful. At various points in the book the authors express their concern about the need for students and teachers to become familiarised with the virtual environment prior to their educational experiences. Another welcome characteristic of the book is that the contributors show a high degree of knowledge on SL, making it clear that they have experienced the environment and thus speak out of experience, as opposed to embracing unrealistic pedagogical expectations. This is yet another advantage when it comes to the dissemination of expertise on a relatively new technology.

Answering the research question posed implicitly by the book (Can SL provide a pedagogically sound added value in teaching and learning?), the general conclusion, which is present throughout the book, that can be drawn in positive response to this question, is that SL has a wealth of pedagogical possibilities to efficiently implement active methodologies and action learning at many levels, in many fields and from many different perspectives. The case studies presented here demonstrate this positive answer to the research question. Moreover, this pedagogical potential of SL will very likely be improved and extended in the near future. Like other innovative approaches, it also implies a shift in the traditional roles of learners and teachers. To sum up briefly, SL enables learners and teachers not only to do things they could do before in a more efficient way, but also to do things that were impossible before in the field of education. But if we are to take full advantage of its many possibilities, it is necessary to be familiar with the new technology or environment in depth, being aware of its weak and strong points; in other words, investigating what it can do best and worst. And books like this are necessary precisely because they help us to get to know the technology better and analyse it from a pedagogical perspective.

Rafael Seiz Ortiz
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain)