

‘Real Challenges in a Virtual World’ or ‘Can I get full text from ERIC and what on earth is Dialog Datastar?’

Based on a breakout session presented at the 33rd UKSG Conference, Edinburgh, April 2010 by Philippa Sheail, who submitted the winning essay in response to UKSG’s invitation to give an original and personal perspective on ‘Real Challenges in a Virtual World’

‘Can I get full text from ERIC and what on earth is Dialog Datastar?’ was a Facebook status update by the student author of this paper in 2009. The post highlighted the sometimes confusing experience of working with journal articles online. This article provides an introduction, from a personal perspective, to some of the joys, fascinations and frustrations of being both a real and virtual student in real and virtual worlds. It suggests that e-learning should be considered a broad term which covers a variety of digital tools, environments, pedagogies and experiences. For students taught fully online, e-learning can mean experiencing the university, the library and its resources purely ‘at the interface’. However, it is argued here that e-learning incorporating social networking, online communication tools and virtual worlds can be a socially and culturally rewarding learning experience which can cross boundaries of ‘place’ and ‘time’.



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The author’s Second Life
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Introduction

“...the online world is not a lack of context; it is a *different* context. The ‘virtual’ is not the *opposite* of the ‘real’ - it is a medial term, *between* the real and the artificial or imagined.”¹

I have been an online postgraduate student at the University of Edinburgh since January 2008, studying for an MSc in E-learning². The course is taught fully online, using a variety of digital tools and environments, including a virtual learning environment (VLE), discussion boards, blogs, Skype³, Second Life⁴, video games and, of course, access to a myriad of digital resources from the University Library and the wider online world.

For online students, time and place have different meanings. When we talk about time we

are discussing the pros and cons of synchronous versus asynchronous chat, or trying to organize virtual meetings across time zones. When we talk about place we are meeting ‘on’ Skype for online chat, or ‘in’ the 3D virtual world, Second Life. Maybe we are having a virtual drink by a virtual camp fire, whilst discussing issues of online identity. (It’s not often in the real world that your tutor turns up as a hedgehog, or regularly swaps gender). Or maybe we are still figuring out what to wear and how to wear it, and mastering sitting down without fear of embarrassment.

Wherever, whatever, and whenever we are, we are devouring information online: bookmarking, tagging, tweeting, hyperlinking, sending files and

updating profiles. We don't need to know about library fire drills, or whether the toilets are out of order. But we do want full-text resources, fast, and we don't want to be given choices we don't understand to get to them. Would I like my article from SwetsWise⁵ or SAGE⁶? I don't know. What's the difference?

I don't use the library catalogue and search software to find out what exists. I already know – or at least I think I do. I have asked Google⁷ and Amazon⁸. I have read abstracts and reviews and publication lists online. I have messaged my tutors and fellow students and stopped them as we pass by in virtual corridors. I know what they are reading through Diigo⁹, Delicious¹⁰ and Mendeley¹¹. I am following key academics on Twitter¹². I use the library to find out whether I can get access to a resource and, more importantly, when. In fact, sometimes I don't know I'm 'at' the library, until I turn a virtual corner and ... find myself in Dialog with ERIC ...

What is e-learning?

I would like to begin by suggesting here that there should be greater discussion about what e-learning is and what it can be. The term can be used broadly to incorporate a huge variety of methods and activities where education and technology overlap, but it is often spoken about and written about in policy literature as if it were a single thing. Some people, for example, might think of e-learning as solitary self-teaching by reading online information and completing an online test. Yet for the e-learning course I am enrolled on, there is a huge amount of online discussion and collaboration between groups of students and tutors, often based on sharing previous experiences, pursuing new experiences together, and relating these experiences to educational theory and practice.

In my experience, e-learning means mobile study which travels with me, in terms of both hardware and software. Whilst my PC and net-book have become very important to my study, so has off-campus access to course materials and library resources. Equally importantly, my tutors and student peers have become an essential portable resource and collective travelling companion, contactable on the move through social communication technologies such as Facebook and Skype. Such social, networked conversation has

been a major element of my learning, particularly as many of my peers are studying for continued professional development and have years of technology, teaching, learning and research experience under their combined virtual belts. I am fortunate to study with experts who are not bound by their physical locations.

Bearing in mind that students may not be 'on campus' in the traditional sense, but are spread across the world, it becomes important to think about university 'at the interface' from varying degrees of distance. It might be argued that 'distance learning' is not as meaningful a term as it once may have been. Looking around the physical library at the huge number of students using laptops to access and produce information, I sometimes think that their experiences cannot be too dissimilar to those of my peers 'attending' the University from their homes and workplaces in America or Greece. Whether on campus, or on another continent, we use the same University interfaces and the same digital resources.

It might also be useful, in a discussion of distance, to rethink what we mean by the terms 'international' and 'home' students. In my dissertation research interviews with other online students, one story struck me in particular. An interviewee described a photography competition, organized by the International Office at the University of Edinburgh, on the theme of Edinburgh as 'home'. The student told me that a group of 'international' students on the MSc in E-Learning arranged to meet up on the virtual University campus in Second Life. They spent some time exploring and entered the competition with some screenshots of their avatars on Second Life campus. I was fascinated by the idea that Edinburgh as a place of study for them was most 'real' and recognizable as 'home' when they were together in Second Life. It seems that there is room for further discussion of the notion of the virtual institution and how we experience and make sense of it when it is located fully online, 'at the interface', but also of how the institution is then constructed as a concept by its learning communities.

The virtual university

When studying, I use the University portal, 'MyEd¹³', as the 'front door' to the virtual

University. I need to log-in there to access the University's VLE, WebCT¹⁴, which contains my course reading lists and materials, allows me to submit and pick up assignments and, perhaps most importantly, 'authenticates' me so that I can access subscription library resources online.

A tab within the portal provides the 'front door' to the library. If I had never visited the 'real world' Library buildings on campus, as many of my peers have never done, this is how I would visualize the library. For those unable to take advantage of the physical books and study spaces available to students on campus, the virtual library becomes the sum of its digital resources and online services.

Another tab in the portal takes me to an MSc page, from which I can access a variety of links to other digital tools and environments used on the course. The page displays a dedicated MSc Twitter feed, which staff and students can use to share information about articles and conferences. The page also links to the University's territory in Second Life, the course Facebook Group, links to e-learning related journals and course handbooks and to the VLE.

From the VLE I can see which of my fellow students are online. This is useful when learning with a group of mostly part-time students spread across time zones. There is nothing like the sense of relief at finding a fellow student online when it is one o'clock in the morning and I am struggling to understand a concept or find an article. Of course, when students are spread around the globe, there is likely to be somebody to talk to online, whatever the time of day or night.

Academic discussion boards

Discussion boards, or forums, have been important on the course as spaces for course conversations and activities. These interfaces can provide a backdrop for fascinating threads of discussion, which visualize academic conversations between groups of students and tutors and give those conversations a kind of permanence, for re-reading and reflection. These areas can be useful for those students not always able to be online at the same time as others for synchronous 'real time' activities.

Not all students feel this way about discussion boards and forums, however. In student interviews, I found that less confident students can find them intimidating initially when others adopt a

formal academic style. The asynchronous nature of the threads can mean that students coming later in the week to a discussion feel everything on a topic has already been said. Other students commented that it is easy to be ignored on a discussion board and for the conversation to carry on past some questions posted.

Course blogs

Blog writing, as it is used in some modules on the course, is very personal and reflective, tending to have a narrative style. Blogs can be spaces of relative privacy where students can write without entering into a conversation open to a course group. Students I interviewed described blog spaces as places where they could allow their minds to wander, to test out theories and make notes, and to explore the application of e-learning theories and experiences to their professional lives.

For some students blogs are also very creative spaces. One interviewee described filming his explorations in Second Life and presented them as vodcasts in his blog, relating his experiences online to the course readings for a particular week. The blog is not just a writing space, but allows for the integration of multimedia for those students who choose to experiment with format. For many students the practice of regular writing every week becomes important. Another interviewee stressed how important regular blog writing had been in helping him to improve his academic writing skills, with the help of regular comments on his progress from his tutor.

Tutorials: Skype and Second Life

For the students I interviewed, the synchronous environments for interacting with other students were the most powerful and emotive experiences they described. Synchronous environments used on their first module were Skype, for either text, voice, or video 'chat' and Second Life for text or voice chat in the context of a 3D 'virtual world'. The students described synchronous environments as those in which they were 'all together at the same time', despite the distances and time zones separating them, and as environments where they could talk informally as well as having focused tutorial discussions.

It doesn't take much time in Second Life to see the contrast of its interface with others dominated by text. It is a visually engaging, colourful, creative environment with a real sense of 'location' for Second Life student avatars. Second Life is used on the course for scheduled tutorials, where students can move their avatars around a virtual landscape by walking or flying, and where typing on the keyboard opens a chat window at the foot of the screen, where the conversation unfolds. Avatars in Second Life make typing motions as their operators type, so that others know a message is being worked on. Second Life also has the capacity to incorporate voice with the addition of a microphone and headphones. However, some of the students I interviewed described this as 'breaking the spell' of Second Life and having the effect of disconnecting the visual experience from the conversation of the tutorial.

The IS Cream Van

A current Information Services (IS) project from The University of Edinburgh is the innovative Second Life 'IS Cream Van'¹⁵. A virtual ice cream van on University territory in Second Life offers a menu board of links from the IS cream van to library and information user services on the University website and in the 'real' world. Information Services staff have also been experimenting with offering information guidance via their avatars on a volunteer basis during Second Life tutorial times for the MSc in E-Learning. A formal evaluation of the project is currently under way, with a survey to explore whether there is a useful

"Get your IS creams!"



role for Information Services in Second Life and, if so, what form it should take.

Virtual graduation

In December 2009, Second Life was used by the University of Edinburgh as a venue for the virtual graduations of MSc in E-Learning students. Virtual graduation gives students who, for various reasons, including physical distance, are not able to attend 'real life' graduation, the opportunity to share in the graduation experience. Video footage of 'real life' graduation was streamed into the Second Life environment in 'real time', and in 'real life' the University Principal welcomed the students from Second Life to graduation. At the end of the ceremony, the 'real life' audience in the University's McEwan Hall applauded the students graduating in Second Life¹⁶.

Online frustrations

Of course, virtual life wouldn't be mirroring real life if there weren't some frustrations to encounter. I have been surprised to find that these haven't been so much to do with multiple technologies, log-ins and pseudonyms, but that they have sometimes been to do with access to, and recognition of, academic resources. I think this is more to do with the organic and developing relationship between publishing, libraries and digital technologies, but I am often surprised by how difficult it can be to get access, by navigation or 'authentication', to an online article; negotiate an interface for an e-book; and, increasingly, to make a guess about what 'kind' of academic text a piece of writing might be. Google Scholar, for example, will not necessarily find me an academic blog post, even if it links to a peer-reviewed journal article by the well known Professor blogger. Academic texts are changing, faster than it takes to say 'Lifestream'¹⁷.

I have become interested in the way in which it is now possible to interact with academic writers online and to follow them in real time. Using Twitter, I 'follow' academics, such as Henry Jenkins, Professor of Communication, Journalism and Cinematic arts at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles¹⁸. I also read academic blogs, such as that of a working group on Digital Ethnography¹⁹ led by Michael Wesch,

Assistant Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Kansas State University (the academic behind the now famous video, 'A Vision of Students Today'²⁰).

Of course, not all academics choose to use Twitter or other Web 2.0 tools and some have very little in the way of an online 'presence', nor much interest in developing one. But I am attracted to the idea that I can follow the interests of academics and sometimes see what they are reading and thinking online, often in 'real time' rather than awaiting the next big publication. There is potential here for students to build up 'news feeds' from selected academics, integrating them with tutors from a 'home' institution, regardless of whether they are formally 'taught' by them or not.

As academic texts are changing, as library, information and publishing professionals are well aware, so is the personalized information landscape. As Wesch suggests in a discussion of the ever changing online environment, 'there are no natives here'²¹.

Conclusion

This article has provided a brief introduction, from a personal perspective, to some of the joys, fascinations and frustrations of being both a real and virtual student in real and virtual worlds. It suggests that e-learning should be considered a broad term which covers a variety of digital tools, environments, pedagogies and experiences. For students taught fully online, e-learning can mean experiencing the university, the library and its resources purely 'at the interface'. However, it is argued here that e-learning incorporating social networking, online communication tools and virtual worlds can be a socially and culturally rewarding experience which can cross boundaries of 'place' and 'time'.

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