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Creating Community Outside of the Classroom: Strategies for Integrating Second Life into the Interpersonal Communication Course

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ABSTRACT
The educational opportunities for Second Life across various courses have been well documented in the literature. However, instructors new to teaching online may not have explored Second Life as an instructional resource and may perceive using Second Life as overwhelming. For this assignment, students create an avatar and interact with other avatars in Second Life. This assignment can be used in the online or face-to-face communication course. Second Life provides a context where students can participate in interactions with other avatars, their classmates, and the instructor. Students observe and analyze self-disclosure, interpersonal deception, verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and additional interpersonal communication concepts.

Concepts: Self-disclosure, Interpersonal Deception, Verbal Communication, Nonverbal Communication, and additional interpersonal communication concepts

Course: Interpersonal Communication

Learning Objectives: 1) Identify interpersonal communication concepts in a virtual world 2) Reflect on the verbal and nonverbal communication in this context 3) Reflect on the potential implications of computer mediated communication, specifically self-disclosure and interpersonal deception 4) Interact with strangers, family, friends, the instructor, and classmates outside of the classroom or online course

Rationale: The educational opportunities for Second Life (SL) in various courses have been well documented in the literature (for example, Mahon, Bryant, Brown, & Kim, 2010; Ralph & Stahr, 2010; Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007). However, instructors new to teaching online may not have explored Second Life as an instructional resource and may perceive using this resource as overwhelming. This assignment can be used in the online or face to face
communication course. Second Life provides a context where students can participate in interactions with other avatars, their classmates, and the instructor.

**Time and material needed:** [http://secondlife.com](http://secondlife.com)


The instructor should also provide links in the online course that offer additional information about Second Life. For example: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zAb4XxnVMM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zAb4XxnVMM)

**Instructions:** Students in the online or face-to-face interpersonal communication course spend at least six hours in the virtual world Second Life. Students create an avatar and interact with other avatars in SL. Second Life allows for flexibility in the online communication course. Students are not expected to interact in this virtual world during specific times so they are able to complete the assignment at their convenience.

Students do not have a script for their interactions. Students can interact with other avatars by initiating conversations and other avatars may initiate conversations with them. Students use these interactions as examples in their Analysis Paper. Students will reflect on their own experiences as well as their observations of interactions.

After students have created their avatar they email their avatar’s name to the instructor. The instructor should include a list of each student’s name and avatar name in the online course or make this available for students. Students contact each other and meet in Second Life. In an online course students interact with students they did and did not know in a face to face setting, such as a prior course. This can be helpful for students with reservations about Second Life.

Students should have at least four weeks to complete the assignment. If possible, the assignment should be due near the end of the course so students have the opportunity to spend time in Second Life over the period of a few weeks or even months. During their time in Second Life, students interact with strangers, family, friends, acquaintances, and classmates. The instructor may also decide to meet his or her students in Second Life. This strategy may enhance teacher immediacy in the online course. The author’s university has a SL island where students and faculty can meet. Second Life provides a space where students and the instructor can interact outside of the face-to-face classroom or course management system.

Finally, the instructor should include in the syllabus and assignment that students should never disclose personal information about themselves in Second Life. Bugela (2007) raises critical questions about the implications of using SL in the college classroom. Instructors should consider these concerns when using SL.

Second Life provides a context where students can learn about computer mediated communication. Students complete a formal analysis paper about their experiences in Second Life. They illustrate their understanding of the course concepts by analyzing the interactions in this setting.
Instructions for Students

In this paper you will reflect on your experiences in Second Life. Your paper will include 3 parts:

Part 1: You will describe the nature of the communication in this setting.

Part 2: You will analyze the communication using course concepts.

Part 3: You will reflect on the significance of this type of computer mediated communication.

You will need to reflect on your experiences in SL and this will require having interactions and experiences to write about. The more time you spend in SL – the more you will have to write about and analyze in your paper. Six hours in Second Life is a minimum requirement.

Part 1: Description (45 points)

In order to prepare for this section, while interacting in Second Life you will need to consider the interpersonal communication concepts from the textbook, lectures, and class discussions.

Discuss the following questions/ topic areas in this section:

1. What interactions did you participate in? Did you initiate these interactions? Why or why not? Include at least two examples of interactions you had in SL.
2. Describe the nature of the nonverbal communication in SL.
   a. What is the role of nonverbal communication in SL?
   b. Is nonverbal communication in SL different from face to face communication? If so, explain.
   c. Describe the physical appearance of your avatar. Why did you create an avatar with these physical characteristics? Does your avatar reflect your physical appearance? Why or why not?
   d. What type of nonverbal communication is appropriate in SL?
3. Describe the nature of the verbal communication in SL.
   a. Did you use text or voice feature when communicating in SL? Do you think this affected your communication? If so, how?
   b. Do you think you used more abstract or more concrete language use in SL? (see Floyd, 2011, p. 172).
c. In your opinion, do you think SL is a high context or low context culture? (see Floyd, 2011, pages 49-50). Your answer will be based on your experiences and observations. Explain your answer.
Focus on documenting specific interactions and describing the communication at the site. Use examples to back up the statements you make. Your analysis paper should document your experiences and your observations about the interactions. Identify 2-3 interactions and use these as examples in this section of your paper.

Part 2: Analysis (35 points per concept)

In this section of your paper you will use concepts to analyze your interactions in SL. You can select any course concepts from the end of each chapter under the KEY TERMS heading. However, you should not use the term Self-disclosure because they will use this concept in Part 3.

Select THREE course concepts from the textbook that you want to use as analytical tools. The concepts will provide insight in the interactions in SL. You will want to select the concepts that were most evident in your interactions. For example, concepts from chapter 1 (Floyd, 2011) would include implicit rules, self-monitoring, and context. (The assignment can be adapted for use with any undergraduate interpersonal communication textbook.)

Part 3: Potential Implications and Significance of Second Life (SL) (30 points)

1. Were you “comfortable” interacting in SL? Why or why not? What are your prior experiences, if any, with this type of virtual environment?
2. Did you notice self-disclosure in SL? What type of self-disclosure did you engage in? Explain your answer. Self-disclosure is sharing information about yourself that the other person does not know.
   Did you find yourself offering vague information about yourself or potentially including deceptive information? Did you engage in interpersonal deceptions? Explain your experiences. Use examples to illustrate your claims.
3. Will you enter SL after this class? Why or why not?

General Flow of Ideas/ Writing (20 points)

Debriefing

Students submit a formal analysis paper. The instructor should provide timely and detailed feedback using the rubric. In an online course, instructors could also have students share their SL experiences in an asynchronous discussion.
Assessment

Second Life has been widely used for educational purposes across academic disciplines. This assignment offers instructors an opportunity to use Second Life in an online or face-to-face course. Second Life offers a virtual world for identifying course concepts and engaging in computer mediated communication. For example, a student reported in his analysis paper that he planned to return to SL after the course so he could practice his communication skills. Yet other students frequently report that they are too busy with their real lives to have a second one. In the end, the assignment provides students a context for identifying and analyzing course concepts. In addition, instructors new to using virtual worlds are able to explore SL as a pedagogical resource.

References


