

SECOND LIFE IN THE CLASSROOM?

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Forget the rumor about digital classrooms as a possibility for the future. The simulation of "Second Life" is one that should not replace the body of education. But many instructors are striving for the new incorporation of this medium into the everyday curriculum. The foundation of teaching and learning is about the necessary interaction between teacher and student, right? Not for some.

"Second Life" offers a substantial claim to be the first virtual reality of all means of communication. This virtual land was designed by Linden Labs just at the peak of the millennium. Today, the Linden land of simulated opportunities consists of about ten-million people worldwide. But what are the implications of having "Second Life" as another facet of teaching the classroom information that could be more beneficial in a tangible setting?

"Second Life" is an online database, not specifically run by anyone, that costs nothing other than the cost of a few megabytes. The idea is simple, within "Second Life" your character that you create, the Avatar, is designed by you and it may roam free to pursue any event that you might come in contact with throughout your virtual pad. Your character can be almost any object imaginable; a cat, an alligator, a potato, or tomato. Any characteristics from our three dimensional world can be applied; entertainment, business, currency, music, fashion, sports, violence, sex, or even digital drugs can be brought to life. While this is all amusing, the real glitch is that people of all forms of education believe that it is somehow an even substitute for the public sphere of schools across the globe.

Perhaps if you take certain elements of "Second Life" and apply them to the classroom it could be deemed useful, although I would suspect that the real learning still resides in the human interaction of interpersonal communication. As a media analyst, I am driven to take a closer look at how "Second Life," could obstruct the natural learning environment of students. But still, teachers from all over the globe and particularly in our Western culture are deciding to cater to this "second classroom." Many of these instructors are building their own curriculum around the "Second Life" environment prior to considering possibilities of ineptitude.

I put the program to the test and tried to see what the hype was all about. When I logged on to Second Life, I became so frustrated with the lack of help the program offers. Like any other computer game it had its help menu, but that did not seem to be enough. Call me technically impaired, but I grew up in the 20th century, and my childhood consisted of pseudo-educational technology as well as video gaming. What I really needed was for someone to teach me how to use it so that I could learn the technical tools and special nuisances of how to be a part of the Linden country—which should prove a strong point in itself. Teachers of all professions cannot expect to give a fully comprehensive curriculum-based course in the absence of human interaction and guidance. Not only is it poor teaching, it detracts from real knowledge that can only be obtained in a social environment. If educators want to provide substantial ways to learn in different nodes of communication, it would be advisable to offer Media Literacy courses, particularly early education K-12, about the effects of jumping on board with the rapid growth of new technology.

In highlight of what this all means, it brings me to what a prominent media critic and analyst would say. Mr. Neil Postman, if he were alive today, would accumulate a windstorm of criticism for this technology because of his in depth passion for studying the possible detriments of new technology, and

the apparent lack of mankind's knowledge about it. He comments in his novel *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, on the agenda of modern technology. "Of course, like the brain itself, every technology has an inherent bias. It has within its physical form a predisposition toward being used in certain way and not others. Only those who know nothing of the history of technology believe that a technology is entirely neutral."

We as the Media Communication scholars of this new generation, we must ask ourselves is it about the media, or the communication when it comes to education? Neil Postman was correct in the fact that we must be skeptical about the flaws in new technology. I hate to sound inflexible with the new era of potential, but all that needs to be gained is a skeptical review of something before it is thrown into the public sphere. Sure "Second Life" is great fun at first but when education starts to come into play we must ask, "Are we ready for this?"

When new technology is created to increase the efficiency and convenience of communication; human connection and social interaction often shows a decline. Should this be overlooked? Do we need to step back from our creations to them? What will happen if we do not? In an inspiring way, Postman offers a metaphor that amplifies the idea that when new inventions come into existence, our true understanding of what the media means is lost. "There is an old joke that mocks that naive belief [in technology]. Thomas Edison, it goes, would have revealed his discovery of the electric light much sooner than he did except for the fact that every time he turned it on, he held it to his mouth and said, "Hello? Hello?"