

Openness in Virtual Worlds: The Case of Virtual Learning Communities in Second Life

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Introduction

In recent years, educators have been striving to improve their teaching skills and practices related to the use of technologies and virtual worlds, by creating Virtual Learning Communities (VLCs). These communities enable communication, collaboration, and shared activities in immersive 3D environments, where users—represented as avatars—can interact, create content, and explore. In the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), virtual worlds support openness, accessibility, and inclusiveness. This study reviews the literature and presents a case study in Second Life, highlighting its role in ODL and showcasing the most active VLCs.

Theoretical Framework

Virtual Worlds in ODL: Virtual environments allow free movement, interaction, and immersive 3D experiences. In education, they go beyond traditional e-learning by offering interactive and engaging learning opportunities, supporting the democratization of education through global access without borders.

Second Life (SL) is the most widely used platform in ODL and blended learning because it promotes openness, collaboration, creativity, and accessibility, even for Persons with Disabilities. SL is an online three-dimensional multi-user free virtual world created in 2003 by Linden Lab, and it has over 70 million users and almost 48,000 daily active users. Within SL, Virtual Learning Communities organize seminars, workshops, and courses in virtual amphitheatres, universities, etc.

Methodology

A qualitative case study was conducted through observation in SL, where the researcher also participated as a user. The aim was to identify and document VLCs that organize and host open educational activities.

Selection Criteria

- Open to the wider academic community (and beyond)
- Organize open courses, workshops, seminars
- Free participation
- Regular meetings announced on their websites and calendars



Virtual Learning Communities in SL

- Virtual Worlds Education Consortium
- NonProfit Commons
- Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education Conference
- Community Virtual Library
- Rockcliffe University Consortium
- Virtual Worlds Education Roundtable
- Builder's Brewery
- The Science Circle
- The Virtual Pioneers

Conclusions

VLCs in SL play a key role in improving teaching practices in ODL. They offer weekly open activities -meetings, seminars, conferences, courses, events- that enhance collaboration and knowledge exchange. SL remains popular because it provides:

- Interactive & collaborative environments
- Accessibility without spatiotemporal constraints
- Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities & Vulnerable Groups
- Virtual visits to cultural, historical, and art projects
- Personalized learning experiences with high aesthetic value
- Democratization of knowledge through openness and free access

👉 Virtual Worlds deserve further exploration for their role and opportunities in ODL.

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