

### **Teaching Reflection on Practical Applications: 5-8**

On November 30<sup>th</sup>, I co-lectured a synchronous session for Practical Applications: 5-8 through the use of Second Life. The topic of the session was service coordination. The course instructor asked that I send out a survey to students in advance inquiring about their availability for a synchronous Second Life (SL) class; I used the survey tool in Google Docs to create the survey and provided specific options that jived with the schedule of the instructor and my own. As might be expected, there was no date in which all students would be available, so in conjunction with the course instructor, we selected the date that most students would be able to attend. The instructor made arrangements with the class regarding how they could 'make up' for missing the live session, including an asynchronous discussion platform (though I intended to participate, this did not occur). Further, the instructor had the class learn the ropes of SL and set the Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Research and Teaching (CEECRT) location as their home prior to the class. In the interim, I responded to student emails inquiring about the session.

On the night of the session, I logged into SL about 45 minutes early. One student was there already, and I assisted her in checking out her sound and maneuvering (flying and sitting as an avatar). Most of the students that could participate made it on time, with two students coming in about 10-15 minutes later. We began on time, and assisted students that were late in catching up and joining our discussions.

I did the sound checks with the class, and amazingly, we had very few issues. I told the class what was on the agenda and then let the instructor do some of the routine class information-provision. We had uploaded a PPT into SL, but as might be expected, this did not work (we tried 45 minutes before class when we logged in to keep trying- it had been uploaded days before). We had been prepared with a backup plan though, so all students had the PPTs open (I asked them to do this as we did sound checks and the instructor tried to get the PPT to work in SL) and we proceeded with the lecture. The PPT had been developed by the instructor, though I had reviewed it prior to the session, of course. Unfortunately, we were unable to provide a full 2- 2 ½ hour session given that many students had to leave for their 2<sup>nd</sup> evening class (we began at 6), so I highlighted important points from the PPT and then segued into preparing the class for small group discussions in the learning pods in SL. The discussions were to revolve around what service coordination looks like, how it is delivered, who delivers it, and what responsibilities those that coordinate services have. Flying to the pods with their avatars worked for one group, but for the other three that were having a difficult time, I immediately had them drop to the ground and walked them to areas far enough apart that their sound would not overlap.

The instructor and I "walked" around and participated in group discussions. Discussions were, by all accounts, thoughtful, engaged, and meaningful. Research available on using Second Life for online synchronous discussion has similarly suggested that once students feel comfortable enough with the technology (and that when done properly, this can occur rather quickly), students tend to engage in rich discussions and interactions (O'Connor, 2010; Petrakou, 2010). Many of us have had both good and bad experiences with SL, and often times there is not a place to lay fault- the technology isn't always reliable. In this situation, though, since it was a

relatively small group and we chose to focus on small group discussions and were prepared for technological glitches, I think many potential issues may have been avoided.

As I joined groups, I shared the NEILS article I was introduced to during the course Natural Environments last spring. The study demonstrated the vast differences in service coordination on a state-by-state basis, as well as the differences in eligibility determinations, specifically as it related to service coordination. Students rose to the occasion and pulled up the article, and enhanced discussions with the information they browsed. That is, I had them use the material as a basis of informing their discussion about what they had already learned in preparing for the class, and students really were able to make many important connections. Further, a number of students were shocked at the disparity across the country and wanted to learn more.

As 7 o'clock approached, the instructor and I rounded up groups and brought them back to the large group. The instructor made some comments to the group, and then opened the floor for me to speak. I inquired what take-away points students felt they had obtained, and most students had much to say. I elaborated a bit more on the disparity and differences in service coordination and invited students to contact me with the further questions or for more information. Students spoke up to describe how much they enjoyed the session and how they had learned a great deal, and we closed the session feeling that it was very much a success.

In this case, I am not sure what I would change in the future aside from perhaps including an activity with a product in mind during the discussion. Alas, our time was short so this was not feasible. Perhaps the discussion could have been problem-based instead, or could have been more specific. In terms of the minor technology glitches, I am not certain there is much more we could have done about that, as we were prepared for the problems. I would certainly have provided the survey about availability sooner in the semester though, so most/all students could have attended. Moreover, I wish there were a way we could have recorded the SL session, as I feel that would have benefited the students, particularly those that were not able to make it.

## References

- O'Connor, E. (2010). Instructional and design elements that support effective use of virtual worlds: What graduate student work reveals about second life. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 38(2), 213-234.
- Petrakou, A. (2010). Interacting through avatars: Virtual worlds as a context for online education. *Computers & Education*, 54(4), 1020-1027.