Exploring Student Engagement Through Virtual Worlds: Seton Hall University’s Second Life Projects

This presentation will focus on Seton Hall University’s use of the on-line virtual environment, Second Life, to enhance student engagement. Through a series of projects in four courses—both undergraduate and graduate—the university has been exploring the ways students can work collaboratively, can develop projects that allow them to actively engage course material and concepts, and can become active participants in their own learning. The first project, which was at a quite basic level, involved an Industrial/Organizational Psychology class, where students were challenged to create virtual teams in Second Life. They were provided with a scenario and tasks to accomplish, were required to submit a written reflection and respond to a survey, and had to complete a final project for the course based on the scenario. The second project, in a graduate American literature class, was more advanced and therefore also more challenging. This project gave students the opportunity to co-create a learning environment, specifically Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “House of the Seven Gables” from the novel of that title. Based on research into the period and the principles of material culture theory, students created projects and assignments that enable visitors to the house to learn about such nineteenth-century topics as the cult of domesticity and true womanhood, the impact of the railroad on the economy, and gardens as gendered space. The third project brought together a group of business students and a group of law students who worked in small teams to develop business plans for Second Life enterprises. This time, the students were on different campuses of the university, meeting in-world to work out their plans and meet with their instructors. Finally, a class in Public Health Care Administration participated in a crisis management scenario that enabled them to practice some of the behaviors and techniques they would normally only read about and discuss in class. This distance-learning class was able to meet in world, adding a new dimension to the typical student experience for the course, as well as get the equivalent of first-hand experience in a simulation of a health care crisis.

As a result of these projects, Seton Hall’s Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center has begun to develop a set of best practices, as well as a set of assessment tools to evaluate the effectiveness of such projects. Attendees will be able to see the results of the university’s current Second Life projects and will also hear about projects currently in development. Second Life provides a unique venue for both face-to-face and distance learning, but its potential for educational applications is still being explored. This presentation will detail some of the challenges of working in this environment, as well as the potential rewards.