This paper will be titled “Experiential Learning in Virtual Worlds: Second Life in Art Education and Art History.” The accompanying presentation will illustrate the pedagogical potential of Second Life via “visits” to exemplary Second Life sites as well as show the ways in which virtual worlds may be used to enhance both art education and the traditional art history curriculum.

A number of Second Life sites offer a unique view of a “real life” work of art. It is the ability of a student to experience a work on demand, in three dimensions and to scale, which provides the opportunity that no textbook illustration, no projected slide or even a video is able to provide. The interaction with a full-scale medieval altarpiece, or a renaissance sculpture, or an archaeological site becomes infinitely more relevant and explicable when a student can “physically” experience it with his or her avatar.

Through our SL field trips, in-world lectures and SL-based student research projects, Second Life has augmented the experiences of my art history students at the Community College of Philadelphia during the last two semesters. The paper will describe how I have used Second Life as a teaching platform to enhance student learning, as well as my plans for using it with future students. This semester Second Life is a major component of my online course as well. Second Life offers unique possibilities for Distance Education in terms of synchronous and asynchronous class activities and collaboration. I will report on the results of SL-based independent study projects I have directed, my current use of Second Life as well as the development of SL-based curriculum for my art history courses in future semesters.

My presentation will also touch upon the planning and building of a virtual world learning spaces. Vassar College (home of the immensely popular SL Sistine Chapel recreation)
has recognized my efforts to incorporate Second Life into my teaching by inviting my students and me to use a dedicated space on the Vassar Island in which to build, teach and conduct classes. Furthermore, I am currently collaborating with faculty members from the College of DuPage to design an interactive, multidisciplinary site that focuses on the poetry and printmaking of William Blake, and his importance as an early Romanticist and artistic innovator.

By the time of this paper’s presentation, I will be able to give an account of four semesters of incorporating Second Life into art history instruction. Via reporting on real-life and virtual world experiences with students and other educators, this paper and presentation will describe the evolution of teaching in virtual worlds, the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of the medium and propose ideas for its future application in art education.