Case study > i-youth > South Australia > 2009

Second Life Integration with Moodle (Sloodle)

Tabor Adelaide and South Australia Baptist Union (SABU)

Background

Tabor Adelaide, a dual sector provider, in partnership with the Youth Development Facilitator, South Australian Baptist Union (SABU) worked together to develop online learning resources for two *Certificate IV in Youth Work* competencies. Tabor Adelaide has had an ongoing relationship with SABU and with Baptist Community Services SA for over five years and sought to build on and strengthen the relationship with this project. The project supported organisational strategic directions for both partners – SABU wanted to extend vocational education and training (VET) training to existing youth workers and leaders around South Australia. Tabor Adelaide wanted to build the partner relationship with SABU and embed the use of virtual worlds within its e-learning environment.

SABU required the courses to be engaging and contemporary, thereby motivating and capturing the imagination of the trainee youth workers and leaders of the future they provide training to. It was for this reason that the virtual world Second Life (SL), together with Moodle integration via Sloodle, was thought to be an ideal solution.

SL was used to provide a live/synchronous learning environment to create immersive scenarios for the learners. Sloodle (Moodle/SL integration) and Machinima (movies of scenarios created in SL) were used as additional learning tools/objects in conjunction with role play scenarios.

The 2009 E-learning Innovations Project Team had varying levels of exposure to e-learning and e-learning technology and collectively were a very strong team. i-Youth did not have expertise in SL or Machinima at the outset and consequently engaged the expertise of various e-learning consultants in Adelaide and nationally. i-Youth also sought advice from networks created through the Framework.

What was done

i-Youth began by creating separate Moodle courses for the two competencies being covered (*Participate in Workplace Safety Procedures* and *Work within a Legal and Ethical Framework*). i-Youth also created a SL induction course in Moodle in readiness for the learners to run through prior to beginning the live sessions in SL. The installation/integration of Sloodle into Moodle also occurred at this time.

i-Youth appreciated the excellent work that had already been completed by projects like Virtual Worlds, Real Learning and Verbl (both Framework projects) and utilised these materials to prepare ourselves where possible.

Malcolm Jolly of GippsTAFE generously allowed i-Youth access to the GippsTAFE SL island, *Pandani Island*, which was used as a 'home' base for i-Youth learners. i-Youth built its own area comprising of a house, campfire, various outdoor chairs, a virtual theatre (when required), a sky lecture theatre complete with podium, and various other items, sourced from SL vendors, or for free from various educators and education organizations in SL.

After the i-Youth project team experienced the technical aspects of getting into SL and setting up avatars, and having excellent discussions about self image along the way (in relation to what our avatars looked like) i-Youth felt that it had a reasonable idea as to how to support learners with basic functions when they first logged in. Throughout the life of the project, i-Youth continued its exploration of SL, getting to know interesting characters and stumbling upon amazing places along the way – all the while improving the avatar's ability to walk, fly, communicate, build and create things! i-Youth had three one hour live sessions in SL with the pilot group of learners.

Prior to the first session, i-Youth experimented with the Sloodle Quiz Chair but didn't actually use it in the end as it felt as though questions were made up just to use the technology. The Sloodle presenter tool worked when experimented with it but unfortunately had technical issues that couldn't be resolved in time for the first live session.

The first session was primarily an induction, the activities were structured purposefully so that the learners were learning how to move around and communicate in SL whilst carrying out various tasks. i-Youth used note cards attached to various objects to disseminate information and discussion topics in the form of a treasure hunt – not all of the note cards worked. Sloodle Reg Enroll Booth was also used (to register learners avatar names against their real names in Moodle) and the Sloodle Chat Logger (Web Intercom) which then relayed the chat taking place within SL back to a chat session in Moodle.

i-Youth found that the Sloodle chat logger did not record instant message chats (private chat between two avatars) and therefore did not capture all of the discussion during this session as avatars were paired up and discussed the information found in the note cards. Using the chat logger for a large group was a little confusing due to the large amount of chats happening at any one time – this tool may not be useful for more than three or four participants synchronously chatting. The benefit of using it would of course be that the user could go back to review all of the chat in the session and it is recorded straight through to Moodle, within the course, so there is no need to remember to copy the chat window – but there is a way to automatically record the chat onto the hard drive anyway – so the main advantage seems to be that it keeps the chat in context by placing it within the Moodle course, for all to review if necessary. i-Youth had a lot of technical issues before and during the session but it was all managed in the end.

For the second session, i-Youth delivered a live lecture in SL in the informal lecture theatre. This was much more controlled and orderly than the previous session, although the learners were much more passive compared to a normal stand and deliver lecture. In real life, the lecturer can gain feedback from the learners by watching the body language, eye contact and facial expressions. In SL these visual cues are absent and it feels very one way. i-Youth used the method of asking the learners to give us a "k" by chat, if they were following/engaged. This gave immediate feedback and lecturers found it very encouraging, otherwise it was hard to even know if the learners were still at their computers. i-Youth also provided a transcript of the lecture via chat, as the lecturer was giving it.

For the second part of the live session, i-Youth provided the students, via note cards attached to objects, four scenarios to discuss, based on the lecture they had just heard. I-i-Youth used the Sloodle Chat Logger to record the discussion again, as well as making some live recordings using WeGame and Fraps (screen capture software).

In preparation for the third session, i-Youth met with Grant Wildman, Head of Performing Arts at Tabor Adelaide who spent time with several volunteer learners, running through the mechanics of script writing for the Machinima movies the learners would be making for the project. i-Youth then met with Kerry Johnson from Education.au who ran the learners through the finer points of making Machinima. The project used a scenario and 'chunked' it into smaller portions so there were snippets of Machinima for discussion starters.

During the third live session in SL the students watched the Machinima – unfortunately i-Youth could not get the media player or the Sloodle Presenter tool working in SL, so the movies were uploaded to YouTube. The learners still sat in a movie theatre environment in SL, then watched the videos in another browser window. i-Youth then went to the various locations where the Machinima were filmed to pick up where the story left off in order to role play the scenarios further, pausing the role play at times to allow the learners to provide feedback. The session ended with a debrief with learners.

Benefits experienced by Tabor Adelaide and SABU

i-Youth found that the learning experience could provide for the learners in SL was more immersive (more than expected!) and therefore absorbing and engaging, than a traditional online course using Moodle only.

SL is brilliant for synchronously gathering a geographically scattered group of participants. It is also an effective way of getting quieter/shy participants to contribute through chat and voice. It is also visually exciting and fun. This helped engage learners – they actually wanted to attend the sessions and were looking forward to it!

The benefits far outweighed any difficulties encountered. There were technical difficulties and there was a learning curve for the facilitators and the learners, but it seemed that by the third session, all were feeling comfortable in the environment. ICT skills/comfort levels increased for all involved which is an excellent outcome.

i-Youth weren't completely sure what the educational benefits would be using SL would be, however, now that i-Youth have participated in this environment, it is very keen to build on what was learnt and is enthusiastically looking at ways of using it in the future.

Lessons learnt

SL requires a decent internet connection (broadband) and a reasonably powerful computer with a graphics card. It is possible to use SL with a low specification computer but the effective and immersive experience comes when the ocean looks like water, and your avatar has freedom of movement and your computer is not continually crashing.

Everything will take longer than you think and having more than one facilitator makes a big difference. The first live session in SL was set up as primarily an induction, however it still took a little longer to get going due to the technical issues, all three of the facilitators experienced problems before and during the session such as headset, microphone and sound not working, break in internet connections, distractions in 'real' life, objects within Sl not working as expected, and losing a learner and then having to travel to another island in SL to find them. Having three facilitators, including someone concentrating on the

technical aspects, worked well. i-Youth found that using SL as the first point of contact for course information and the Moodle site as the secondary source of information, with Sloodle connecting the two, was the most effective and immersive experience for the learners.

SL, Sloodle and Moodle are all free (technically) but there are extra costs associated with each in the form of buying SL objects (buildings etc), having Sloodle set up for you in your Moodle installation (as it is not for the beginner) and of course Moodle has various costs associated with hosting, maintenance etc.

The results

By providing the learners with an online induction to SL (via a Moodle course), i-Youth found that the students generally coped really well during the first live session. Of course all experienced walking into walls and falling off buildings, but overall facilitators were really pleased with how quickly the learners got the hang of things.

i-Youth surveyed the learners at the beginning of the project about their experience with online learning, their general ICT skills, and in particular, their experience in SL. The ICT skills varied from beginner to advanced, however none of the learners had used SL prior to this course.

Integrating the Sloodle tools was a helpful addition in terms of 'officially' recording what happened during the sessions, and i-Youth intend to experiment further with the rest of the tools. i-Youth's stated required outcomes in its original project plan were 'Second Life, Sloodle and Machinima successfully utilised as immersive and effective learning environments for students resulting in deeper, more reflective learning.' Without a doubt, this was achieved. The Machinima/role play session was really successful – the learners were engaged with the content and having them take turns being a youth worker, dealing with the scenario presented, was quite powerful for them.

The project team was unsure at the beginning of this project whether it would be able to successfully provide a truly immersive experience for the learners with sound pedagogy, but I think we were all a little disappointed when the project 'officially' ended (learners and facilitators) as i-Youth felt it was going well.

i-Youth received very positive feedback from the learners. All participants were positive about their SL experience and everyone indicated that SL helped a topic which would normally be 'boring' to be engaging. There was also enthusiasm in thinking through more options for the use of SL. Overall, the project team all felt that a merged technology approach using Moodle, SL and Sloodle mades the most sense. Moodle/Sloodle for assignment work, SL/Sloodle for lectures/engagement.

Reflections and suggestions

Have a SL: Get to know SL before trying to use it as a facilitation tool - familiarise yourself with avatar movements, flying, teleporting, chat IM and local chat, groups, voice and educational methodologies such as lecture booth, Machinima videos, chat logger and Sloodle.

Gather a Gun Project team with a mixture of skills - i-Youth used an industry partner with knowledge of organisation and training needs who was also a gifted facilitator and trainer. From Tabor, i-Youth had educational expertise, technical and e-learning knowledge, project management skills and IT staff. External consultants were also used and GippsTafe provided the project with an island to use.

Walk before you run! - The SL skills of the participants (and facilitators) take time to develop. Don't be too adventurous at first. Teach new skills in SL along the way eg teleporting, changing appearance and flying.

Be flexible - Prepare for things that can go wrong in SL. Eg technical difficulties, avatars getting lost, SL crashing [presenter 'crashes'], distractions at participant's computers, eg visitors, children and phone calls. You must plan thoroughly and consider the above contingencies. Go with the flow, eg move to chat if voice not working, if someone drops out, keep going a different facilitator takes over.

It takes 2 (or 3!) - At least one group facilitator and one technical facilitator is a must. Group discussions need strong facilitation skills. Avatars can get lost, have trouble with voice and audio. Trying more complex methodologies eg Machinima, videoing and recording takes another level of expertise that the educational facilitator may not have. There is a lot going on and there is a lot to juggle for just one presenter.

Be inclusive - At times, technical difficulties can present limitations to the participants eg can't speak, can't hear. Need to ensure you have a variety of ways you can communicate to the learners eg the script of the lecture can be handed out through a note card so they can read it if they cannot hear (also may suit their learning style). One facilitator can type chat in, and avatars can use voice. Also, it is really helpful to establish group norms for communication eg typing the letter 'k' in the chat area for 'OK' – to acknowledge understanding. It would also be helpful to have a list of the participants at hand and tick every time you address questions their avatars. This is an easy way to ensures no one is overlooked.

Other suggestions - i-Youth used SL as the first point of contact for the course information and the Moodle site as the secondary source of information and found this worked really well. Don't just use a stand a deliver approach, (15 min is plenty for that) mix it up and get those avatars moving around which helps to keep engagement levels up.

By the second live session the learners were far more familiar with the SL environment which makes the session simpler to run. Interactions worked well, learners combined voice and chat well. Essentially by the third session it appeared that learners can be up to speed - even the technology challenged were able to fulfil the essential requirements. This made it far easier for the lecturers.

Framework connection

The national training system's e-learning strategy, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework[1]) funds and supports E-learning Innovations projects which aim to embed e-learning into the national training system by supporting and enabling innovation in training design and delivery, at the state and territory level.

i-Youth intends to continue to use SL, Sloodle and Moodle to build on the learning that has taken place, and to ensure it continues to provide its learners with engaging learning opportunities. A number of the team are quite active within the e-learning community locally and nationally and therefore will be sharing its experiences with others on an ongoing basis.

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[1] http://flexiblelearning.net.au

[2] http://virtualworlds.flexiblelearning.net.au

[3] http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/verbl

In engaging in this E-learning Innovations project, the following Framework products and resources were Virtual Worlds - Real Learning[2] and the Verbl project[3].

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