

Virtual life learning: a panel discussion with Glenda McPherson, Alan Levine and Jo Kay

Jo Murray: Welcome to *The Knowledge Tree*, Everyone! Today we have brought together an international panel of educators to discuss virtual life learning. So let's go around each of you to introduce yourselves with your location, please. Glenda would you like to start?

Glenda McPherson: Yes. Thank you. I am Glenda McPherson and I work at Gipps TAFE which is a TAFE Institute in south east Victoria (Australia). We are doing some really exciting stuff in Second Life and I welcome everyone to the session. Thank you for allowing me to be involved.

Alan Levine: Hi there. This is Alan Levine talking to you from Scottsdale, Arizona, pretty far from everybody else. I'm Vice President of Community and Chief Technology Officer for the [New Media Consortium](#). The NMC has been experimenting and doing a lot of work in Second Life and virtual worlds for at least a year and a half or so.

Jo Kay: Hi Everyone! Thanks for having me in this session. My name's Jo Kay or Jo Kay, Wollongong in Second Life. I work in educational technology supporting teachers in professional development and I have been working in Second Life for about twelve months now, establishing a space that educators can come to, to actually acclimatise and develop skills in using Second Life for virtual learning.

Jo Murray: Thanks Everyone. So can we define what we mean by the term 'virtual life learning'? Alan, can we go to you to start off and then hear from others if they have got something to add?

Alan: Oh, I really don't like definitions, and actually the term 'virtual life learning', it's, I guess, new. I guess I can understand what it might mean, but virtual worlds have come on to the radar and a lot of attention in the last year and a half or so, although in some form, they've been around for a long time going back to [MUDES](#) (Multi-User Dungeon, Domain or Dimension) and [MOOs](#) (MUD object oriented – eg. a text-based online virtual reality system to which multiple users are connected at the same time). The virtual world we've created a lot of times in our imagination aided by technology, now with rich graphics, fast Internet, we're gonna have a much more immersive experience and we are starting to see people go from the experimentation stage which I think we're in right now, possibly towards some future where perhaps some level of formal learning might take place in these virtual spaces. I am not really sure it's gonna really envelope all that we try to do with learning. I think there's still gonna be multiple avenues and environments for learning as we go forward, but it's an interesting time and a lot of it just fuelled by the sheer number of people who are actively engaged in it. It is a very creative environment that we're seeing and the educational community that has kind of come out of the virtual world, especially in Second Life, has just been astounding. It reminds me a lot of the sharing and openness and excitedness that went on with some of the first web browsers that came out many moons ago.

Jo Murray: Jo or Glenda, do you have anything to add to that to describe your understanding of where virtual life learning happens? Is it only in Second Life? Can someone give us a brief description of Second Life for people who haven't come across this concept before please?

Jo Kay: I would love to jump in there. Yeah, I'd say that although all three of us have a focus around Second Life, that what is really exciting about virtual worlds at the moment is the explosion that is happening out there in the virtual space with all sorts of new environments being created, particularly for young people. I am quite interested in the

'avatarisation' in a sense of young people and in the number of spaces that are being created for 'twens' like Barbieworld and some of those spaces that are associated with cartoons like the Nick Tunes spaces.

I think that what that says is that we are on the cusp of virtual worlds becoming much a more a part of our day to day existence in the way that we use the Web. And for educators I think it also says it is important to get on board because the students that are heading towards our institutions are going to be well versed in using these spaces.

Jo Murray: So Glenda, did you have anything else to add to that?

Glenda: I will concur absolutely with everything that Alan and Jo Kay have said and certainly it was because of particularly our youth students here at Gipps TAFE that we chose to go down this virtual world area and they have certainly benefited significantly from it and we have actually found, it is really interesting, that some of the slightly older students are less comfortable in Second Life than the younger students and time is certainly going to overcome that, but we find that we need to do a lot more nurturing, encouraging, protective strategy kind of work with our older students than we do with our younger students. So certainly it is an environment where young people in particular feel very comfortable, very much at home and that was also one of the reasons why we decided to go down this virtual world exploration.

Alan: And I definitely agree with it that Second Life is certainly not the only game. At NMC we have certainly been looking at many other virtual spaces for a while. It is just that's the place right now, we decided to go into it because it was a place that was readily available. We have been urged to explore the open source [Croquet](#) software and frankly it's great technology, it's hard to use, you have to be a 'techie' to be able to use it, so Second Life has the inertia that makes a lot of the things on the Web very popular, because there are a lot of people in there to make it a very socially active environment. And I would like to caution that sometimes it is a little bit too easy to generalise that all young people – and I don't think my colleagues are saying that – but not all young people are really readily adept at this. We have a number of institutions we work with, who have first year college students who really resisted and these are students who use technology and have the cell phones on all the time and they're in the MySpace all the time, but they are very anti-receptive seeing the Second Life environment and don't discount the other end of the spectrum. There are some good statistics from game researchers about the number of people over 55 who are active gamers. In fact, I like the term, they call them the 'grey gamers'. It is a pretty sizable portion. So it is kind of tricky when you make assumptions about students and their acceptability towards technology.

Jo Murray: Thanks Alan, thanks Glenda, thanks Jo. So, the first question that comes into my mind then, is it a certain style, sort of thing, that suits some people and also can you tell me, like, how many people are we talking about? You are saying lots of people, but, like, how many?

Alan: I think with Second Life and there are people who focus their whole attention to arguing about the numbers of people active., that at single times it could be 20-30,000 people in this space. It is a huge space and at quiet times it can be really lonely because you can wander a lot of empty spaces where there aren't a lot of people in there and Second Life is pretty much smaller than, say, the game space of World of War Craft and some of the big, virtual world environments in China and Korea and India, so it is certainly not the biggest one, but it is appealing to a lot of people, I think, because of the ability that you can, you create things in there, it is not an end game solution in Second Life. It's basically is a giant play area in some sense where anything you do, anything you create are done by the people who are using it and that is really fascinating.

Jo Kay: Yes I would love to jump in there and agree with that Alan. The appeal that Second Life held for me originally was around the ability to create, that it is a space that you can create almost anything that you can imagine and when you think about that in a learning context and particularly when we start to focus on more student centred models of learning, the ability to give students a space that they can make their own and customise and collaborate together is really exciting and I think the other thing as well that is really appealing to me about Second Life is the ability to immerse and connect and my experience of Second Life and what I see the participants of some of our projects experience is the ability to create and connect with others in the space very quickly and that sense of immediacy and being able to stand next to each other and go and experience a video or go to the NMC and go to the fantastic conferences that happen there is really, you know, a fantastic experience.

Glenda: Yes and I would just like to back all of that up too. That was an interesting comment that Alan made about 'it can be quite lonely'. Particularly here in Australia, if we're on sort of lunch time, early afternoon, in the wider Second Life, you certainly do see people, but not a great deal of people, whereas if we are on here late in the evening, ten, eleven, twelve or 1 o'clock in the morning, then certainly the world is much more buzzy than it is during our daytime. But again for us, like for, both Alan and Jo Kay, it was the ability to be able to create a learning environment that chose us to select Second Life. We looked at a number of virtual worlds because we went into our project just wanting to work in virtual worlds. We hadn't nominated one and part of the project was about having a look what was out there and like Jo Kay I work in a support area for teachers, where we are not the technical department. We just simply support teachers in technical matters and Second Life offered us the capacity to create very, very easily and then to allow the students to do that. What we didn't want was to either create a campus of an institution. We were not interested in that at all and we also didn't want to have to have technical people behind the students doing things for them. We wanted the students to be able to do it for themselves and Second Life is perfect for that.

Alan: And interesting on the numbers and what I remember hearing is that the US is not the largest population in Second Life. It is Europe and I believe it is Germany who has some of the greatest numbers of residents. The whole international community and there are spikes and valleys of activity depending on where you are and where the clock is in terms of who you might find in the Second Life. We have done a survey of educators last spring, and we are still working on the results, and there are some really interesting things, but most of all it really confirmed a lot of what we have felt about Second Life is it is really the social presence that makes Second Life so compelling, the fact as Jo Kay suggested that there is a presence of other people there although they are really not near you, you get social cues, you get interaction, you can get a lot of feedback that you don't necessarily get on something say like a pure text chat environment or a bulletin board area. So it is the social aspect that is really important. When I have asked people and I am sure they have had their worst experiences in Second Life and of course things came up about people getting grieved and having trouble learning how to fly and all that stuff, but there is a good number of people who really mentioned some of the feeling of isolation and loneliness and that was an interesting finding there.

Frankie Forsyth: Thanks for that, Alan, Glenda and Jo. Just in terms of the content areas what I am thinking is, you are talking about Second Life as sort of a play area and also for learning. Are there any content areas that suit this sort of learning, if any, anything that works better in one area, than another?

Jo Kay: I will jump in and answer that one. Sean Fitzgerald and I have actually been working on an educational resource just over the last five or six months that is focused

around identifying educational uses of Second Life. So we actually went out and did some research and wrote a long, long list of all sorts of different educational uses of Second Life and examples of groups that were using it. So just to give a few examples there is obviously NMC and Alan I am sure will talk more about what they are doing, but Harvard Law use it to deliver some online law learning. Glenda's work with Gipps TAFE, there are also all sorts of projects going on around libraries and the Second Life library project is quite amazing. We have created a long list, but just to add a couple of categories, photo stories and photo scenarios, which connects a lot with the digital story type stuff, multi-media and game design, historical recreations and re-enactments, displays and exhibits, you can even go into Second Life and learn to sail which is quite interesting, so the list is long and the examples are just exploding at the moment.

Glenda: Thanks Jo Kay. I agree and I know we will talk more about our projects shortly, but certainly one of the reasons why we did our VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) project last year was because we had a group of young mums who were going to have difficulty with their babies, getting baby sitters so that they could do the work placement part of their course and that is one of the reasons why that particular project was so interesting and so successful because we were able to create a holiday resort where they took on the roles of the staff and in that they had the sort of work placement experience that they would have had in real life, but they did that in Second Life and we have got some legislative changes, certainly in Victoria, and probably elsewhere in Australia, where we are finding it more and more difficult for example to get our Child Care students into work placements and again we are looking at Second Life to be able to do that so it very much offers an opportunity, particularly in the work placement area, which on vocational education is so strong, it is harder and harder to get students into real workplaces and Second Life gives them an opportunity to experience much of the same sorts of things that they would in the real workplace.

Jo Murray: Thanks very much Everyone. Some great examples coming through. Can we hear a little bit more about what you are doing with your participants, Glenda, in the project that you are working on and move around to each of you to hear what you are specifically working on at the moment that is highly innovative? Thank you.

Glenda: Yeah thank you. We started working on Second Life in May 2006 and we received some funding through the New Practices Australian Flexible Learning Framework to explore the use of virtual worlds in real learning, in terms of students completing competencies and we had some young mums, as I mentioned earlier in our Warrigal campus, and these young mums, actually there were eight of them – and they actually bring their babies into class. Our classroom is a conglomeration of cords and mums and babies and toys and all sorts of things and part of their course was a work placement which was going to be very, very problematic, so we decided that we would create a holiday resort and the students designed it and named it. They named it Paluma Resort. In real life, they researched all the jobs that would be available at some sort of holiday resort and then they decided on which job they would like. They wrote resumes and in Second Life they actually had interviews for their jobs, which naturally they all got.

Once they were allocated their jobs or they got their jobs through their interviews, they then created themselves team uniforms, they organised, they decided what sort of activities they were going to offer tourists who were going to come to their holiday resort, they had gardeners, they had recreational co-ordinators, they had receptionists, they had the hotel manager, they had all of these people who together as a team created an environment so that another group of VCAL students from one of our other campuses and some people from around Australia and overseas became tourists on the island in the holiday resort and for one afternoon we had people sailing and going on merry go rounds and drinking cups of coffee and scuba diving and abseiling and doing all sorts of things all

on an island on a holiday resort that our VCAL students created by themselves which was just awesome.

The other project that we had last year, which was totally different, was a group of painting and decorating students. They were doing Certificate IV in Arts and Interior Decorating and we looked specifically at the competency Interpret and respond to the client brief, and what we did there was to – there were only four of them – and they did it voluntarily in their own time and what we did was to build four houses that had very little furniture in them. Each client who owned one of those houses had a different brief and only using Second Life we met with the student in Second Life, talking about the things that we liked, the view that we could see, where the sun rose and set, where the light came in the window, the kind of textures that the building had and what we liked about it or didn't like about it and then ultimately through a whole range of conversations between client and student in Second Life, the student was able to come back to the client with a colourboard of different fabrics, different designs, different layouts in response to their particular client brief. So we didn't actually ever go into the next step of actually doing, making the building into what the student wanted because that was going to involve a little bit more technology than we actually wanted to occur.

So that was last year and that was really very interesting. This year we have got fifteen students from the Community Services area from Western Australia and two here in Gippsland and they are working on competencies with risk so they are looking at things like assessing a client for suicidal tendencies, needle exchanges and working with drug and alcohol issues and working with people with disabilities and we have created a community health centre and they are acting out, I guess, a range of scenarios in Second Life that they can practise their skills at dealing with clients who are displaying a whole range of 'at risk' characteristics and that is just starting now, so we are monitoring that one at the moment with great interest.

Because of some of the things we found out with our VCAL students and how young people react in Second Life, we've also linked up a group of at risk students both here and Gippsland and also a group in Melbourne and they are meeting in Second Life mainly from a connectivity perspective so they are meeting, they are having fun, they are actually using some of the activities that still exist around our holiday resort and they are really just getting to know each other and learning some of those communication skills that these kids really struggle with and we are hoping that the kind of bonds that those students form in Second Life will be such that we are planning on actually going halfway between the two geographical locations later in the year and actually having an occasion where they physically meet each other too and see if we might be able to develop there. So we have got a lot of things happening. There are about twenty students, young people involved in that particular group of the young 'at risk' kids.

So there are lots of things happening, lots of things to keep an eye on, and there is also another project where we have actually built a business office and in there people can, a student can go in there and learn all about the whole job interview environment, so the difference between a formal interview and an informal interview, what sort of clothes you'd wear, and there is actually a clothes rack that they can change into different clothes depending on the interview and so there are a lot of technologies within the building where they can learn about the interview process and things that they need to be aware of and then ultimately they have an interview in Second Life with someone from an area that they, if they are particularly interested in hospitality area or in the agricultural area, then the person interviewing has those expertise and they will take them through an interview and then give them feedback on it.

So we have got a range of projects happening, all of which are very, very different, all of which are very exciting, and we are just having a look at how things are working out now so they are starting to get into the evaluation phase of our current 07 projects.

Alan: Well that is really impressive Glenda and I look forward to finding out more about all the things that you are doing there. The NMC, we are a little bit different. We are a membership organisation of about 250 universities, colleges, museums, mostly in the US, but we have members here in Australia, we have actually got a few more recently. The University of Barcelona, has joined us and Mexico. Anyhow, our first venture was to build a single place and really it was to explore the world as a place where collaboration and set it up as a place where people, who were members in NMC, could experiment and explore this virtual space. So we had a single island in March of 2006. We've started by running a lot of events and bringing in some, we did a couple of live presentations, using live audio streaming and slide tours, bringing in speakers.

We were really connected with the arts community in Second Life, so we have some big art events. There is a huge community of people who just create art in Second Life and we now have them on display and show the work but we set up panel discussions so that people can learn about the art process. We expanded to about eight different areas and we didn't really have the skills on staff at that time to build, so we were hiring contractors to build our different ideas that we had to create a virtual biology lab. We have a biosphere sort of like a replica of the structure that is down here in Arizona, and that is enclosed in glass, but it is a place to simulate the growth of different species of plants etc. We have got a couple of classrooms that hardly ever get used because in Second Life you can almost teach anywhere, but what happened was we saw that there really was not anybody out there. There were a lot of people who offered building services to organisations, but there was not a speciality, a company who dealt with education, so we saw an opportunity to more or less set up our own service arm of the organisation and we hired. We have four full time builders, two are in England, one is in Washington, and one is in Nebraska, who have been building projects for Case West University, MIT, Princeton, a whole raft. We opened up a whole bunch of rental islands as places for educators who do not necessarily want to get into building a whole island can just throw a reasonable sum, \$100 a year as a small parcel and they can get a start and do some experimentation.

My interest is not in building. I can barely build a plywood tube and sometimes I think we get so focused on the pretty buildings and structures and building replicas of domes and buildings in real life. My interest is more in the social interaction and the community building and that is where I put my efforts. So last August, working with Nick Noakes who is at Hong Kong University, we started running this thing called NMC Teachers' Buzz and we just decided every two weeks we would set up a meeting somewhere in Second Life and invite educators or people who were interested in talking about learning in Second Life to come to hear an informal discussion or a field trip or sometimes we have people do presentation type things and it has been a great way to extend our connections out into a really wide educational community and we have had some really large turnouts with 65 people in February came to hear Joe Lambert from the [Center for Digital Story Telling](#) to speculate on the possibility of story telling in and with Second Life. We did a 12 day symposium last October that had probably about 40 different events from presentations to workshops to a live keynote by Howard Rheingold.

We had a number of colleagues who stayed up very late, for them, to do some presentations from Australia for us. We had live music performance, and again it was all to sort of explore what sort of collaborations, what kind of events could we do in Second Life? and more or less what has happened is, since people are involved in this and we have built a community around NMC, we do not have to be directly involved with running

events. So we have a lot of people who say 'we would like to have something happen on an NMC campus' and we make arrangements for them to be able to use an auditorium or to use a space etc. and right now I believe in our vicinity we have about 80 different fins or islands that are part of our little archipelago of educational land and we are working now on building an education orientation island, so when people create new accounts in Second Life they won't have to go to the public one that Linden Lab runs, where it is very confusing to a lot of people and you sure meet a lot of strange people there. We want to build a place that is really geared for educators and students and have a lot of educational resources there.

We just try to connect as much with other educators in Second Life and do some collaboration. We have recently, look there's some fascinating people doing things in literature. There's a English teacher in Pennsylvania Beth Ritter-Guth and in Second Life she is Desidiria Stockton and right now on NMC campus she has this incredible, I just spent a whole afternoon there, she has Dante's Inferno with the nine circles of Hell and it is not just a replication of what this might be. It is a real complete learning environment that is going on with two different classes and they have been not only researching and learning about the literature and the history behind this work, they are also creating content within there, they actually have to go out and research people and they have to decide whether certain people belong on certain levels of the nine layers of Hell, and you go all the way down to the bottom and you get to see who wandered down there. So it is always fascinating build and again it is being done by people outside our organisation and we just like to find interesting things that are going on and bring them, not only to people within NMC, we have really expanded our reach and have a lot of collaboration with people outside our organisation. That was really quick, we do a lot and I will get the URL where we can find just about everything that we do for the [NMC Campus Observer](#) and with that I'm going to turn it over to Jo Kay.

Jo Kay: Thanks Alan. I guess I have been working in Second Life for about twelve months and the main focus of my work has been around supporting educators and also other groups to get a handle on Second Life, to actually guide them through finding some spaces that illustrate the kinds of uses that they are interested in or that might be applicable to their area of teaching or work and also to establish to space where people can meet together and start to collaborate. So we have run a range of different sessions including sessions for E-Networks which many of The Knowledge Tree listeners would have actually attended where we have toured around and shown people examples of education in Second Life including the NMC campus that Alan has described so well.

The other work that we have been doing is around researching and providing resources and. that list of examples that I mentioned before, that is all available on our wiki ([Second Life in Education](#)). Following up on that this year we have started to work on a number of projects mainly funded by LearnScope in NSW, so I have been supporting an advanced virtual world team over the last couple of weeks that are just starting to explore Second Life. We will also be doing some comparisons with some other virtual worlds. They are drawn from across TAFE NSW from institutes across the state and their various areas of research that are going to be very interesting so I am looking forward to any outcomes of that. We are also supporting the Sydney Institute's LearnScope project which is focused around Second Life and we will be working with students from the [Enmore Design Centre](#) in the first instance to explore ways that they can use Second Life for exhibiting and creating their work. So that will kick off over the next couple of weeks with both some professional development for the teachers that support those students and also a number of building classes and discussions around what sort of presence they want to establish in Second Life.

In terms of my own work, I am actually moving into doing more and more freelance work in Second Life, so we are in the process of establishing an island and actually creating some spaces to do some collaboration, both with educators and with artists and also to start looking at multi-reality events. So as Alan has mentioned the educational events that happen on the NMC, we are really interested in seeing both Australian groups, but also international groups come together and explore ways that we can use the virtual space and also other more traditional web communication tools to connect together.

The other project that I have to mention is the TAFE NSW hairdressing project which has been very exciting for me. We have actually just recently created a virtual hairdressing salon in Second Life. This project is very focused on workplace skills. We are using it as a space to actually create artwork in images for a more traditional CD rom learning resource, but in the longer term teachers from the hairdressing program will actually develop skills in using the space both to create artwork to illustrate their learning resources and also to use it as a space for bringing students together to do role plays around workplace skills like communication, cultural diversity, occupational health and safety and those sorts of things, so it has been really exciting to see a group of teachers who are not necessarily used to using a lot of technology in their delivery, start to explore such an emergent technology and see real ways of using it with their students and that is particularly relevant for the TVET program where we are bringing together young people.

Other than that we are supporting a number of tours and events in Second Life over the next couple of months, including in particular events for LearnScope participants, but we are also available to provide tours for organisations who want to start to explore the space in the context of their work.

Jo Murray: Thanks Jo and Alan and Glenda. What a detailed picture of the range of projects that you are involved in and giving us some clear ideas of what can be facilitated in a virtual world context, but I have got a question about the digital divide. What is the minimum bandwidth that you need to get into Second Life and similar virtual world places?

Glenda: For us that is one of its main issues. We actually had some students in our Painting and Decorating pilot last year who wanted to be involved, but because they were doing it voluntarily they just weren't able to get into Second Life from home. You need an excellent bandwidth and it is really interesting, when you listen and talk to people internationally, they don't understand how difficult getting into Second Life from a bandwidth perspective is, in Australia which doesn't say a great deal about our Internet connections, I have to say, but you really do need a very high level of bandwidth and you need a very good quality graphics card and we have found although you work primarily with laptops, although we have got fibre cable linking between our campuses, we find that we can't have any more than probably 8 to 10 students on campus, all in Second Life, which is why we really try to encourage students to log in at home, but then that becomes problematic in terms of their Internet connection and the amount of cost that's involved, all those sorts of things.

Alan: Yeah, it is definitely something that requires a broadband connection, definitely not dial-up. So that is a severe limitation for a lot of people without the ability to access either at home. In many places it is not very efficient if you have a lot of people connecting through a wireless network, generally a wired connection if possible. Sometimes you'll lose the ability to be able to participate in things that are audio video, if you don't have the fastest connection. I spent some time up in the mountains where I am on a satellite connection and it is about half to three-quarters broadband. I can get into Second Life, but often it is not the same experience and your computer, yeah, you probably need something that is less than two years old really to have a meaningful experience, as much

memory as you can get inside the machine there. It's a barrier because not everybody is going to have hardware.

For institutions there's also an issue if you have some firewalls that are there for your network security, you run into a lot of issues with Second Life needing certain ports open and your security folks don't always like opening them up and then there's the fact with computer labs that Second Life probably needs a complete update about every two weeks when they change their software which is anywhere from a 70 to 100 MB download to be able to use the software. If you don't update your software up to the current version of Second Life you can't get in.

Glenda: Yes that is exactly right Alan and that constant upgrading for us is probably our biggest concern. It is just constant, but it has got to be downloaded and our IT department is really, really, really concerned about more and more of our teachers and students using Second Life. They have tried a whole range of things to try and keep security and off their network, but we have still got lots and lots of issues that we are continuing to talk with them about in terms of how can we allow students access to Second Life in a more open way than what we are doing at the moment, but so that we can still have a secure network. So there are lots of technical considerations that we certainly don't have answers for at the moment, we are still trying to work through them and I guess one of the reasons why we continue to have specific projects in Second Life is so that there is a continuing conversation with the IT department. If we stopped using Second Life then no issues would get resolved, so we need to keep using it and keep saying we have got more teachers who have got more students who need to use it, how are we going to do this, what are some of our options? So it is an ongoing conversation and there is no doubt that it is limiting the amount of work that can be done in Second Life within the institute at the moment.

Jo Kay: And I will just chime in there and agree with that. In NSW we actually have great difficulty even accessing Second Life. It is blocked in most institutes. The only way to access it is via alternative connections so that poses some fairly fierce barriers to educators who want to start to explore it. However there is some discussion going on around that at the moment and I think as the number of educators who start finding alternative ways of getting them and their students in there start to pop up, those policies will change, but it definitely represents a whole range of network security, child protection issues for big educational organisations like ours and it is definitely a factor that needs to be considered when planning Second Life projects in that, it can all be going very nicely until your IT department realise how many updates they are going to have to do and which ports you are actually asking them to open.

Alan: There have been some people getting around the inability in some labs to be able to run updates on machines because you need to be an administrator and there are some people at Penn State have got a set up going where they can run an executable off of a USB thumb drive, so the whole application does not have to go onto the organisation's secure machine and they can run an update from a portable device – an interesting solution or attempt at one.

Jo Murray: Well, it looks like the innovation to make sure that people are able to access Second Life is certainly not going to stop. Can we move then to talking about what all of you consider might be the future or what you know is the future of virtual world learning?

Glenda: For us it is about that connectivity, it's about being able to make connections, it is also about being able to use the visual cues in order to react. We have had a lot over the years of online role plays that are text driven and students are allocated roles in all those sorts of things and while there is certain learning that takes part in that, what I think

Second Life offers a spontaneity which you just simply cannot script and it is really interesting trying to talk to people who are interested in Second Life in terms of “Okay, I can write a script for x, y and z” and it is like, “No, you actually just have to create the environment and then allow the avatars to interact with each other and see where that goes”.

If you want a specific outcome then there needs to be some cues, either some visual cues and avatars in the conversation or the activities in a certain way, so in some ways it is very uncontrolled learning space but that’s where it’s strength is, that you can’t predict what is going to happen, it is so spontaneous, it is just like in the real world, we don’t know from one minute to the next how an individual is going to react to a certain situation, so too in Second Life and for us that’s its strength. It gives an opportunity to learn a whole lot about other people’s reactions, about reflecting on what they said, why they said it, how they said it, if they would do that again and we are really, really big on debriefing. We debrief on a constant and regular basis, both in Second Life itself and also in the classroom because we think that the learning, it’s nice to experience things and to learn that way, but for that learning to really become ingrained in the student, then it is the reflection process that is absolutely critical and the learners are absolutely responsible for their own learning and that is what is so exciting about it.

One of the VCAL teachers last year said things like that “the best part of using Second Life was there was no teacher and no students, we were all the same, we were all learning things and experiencing things at the same time. It was awesome!” So for us that is its strength. It is the synchronicity of it, the unpredictability of it is really excellent.

Alan: For us at NMC Second Life is here and now. We don’t necessarily see it as a long term solution. There is going to be a lot more, other kinds of virtual world environments that are just starting to come out. Sisco has come out with one, that is open source, there is that Croquet project. We are involved as an organisation because we have a whole initiative called virtual worlds, we don’t specifically focus on Second Life, although that is where the focus of our activity is now, but there is a group called the [Media Grid](#) that is a collaboration and they are trying to develop standards and protocols for the next generation of virtual world system with the idea that there potentially could be interactable, open source etc. Some of the criticisms of Second Life is that it is owned by a private company, you are subject to what Linden Lab can do and there are going to be other alternatives that pop up.

The question is what will it take for them to sort of get the level of momentum that something like Second Life has gotten? and that does take a while to get the numbers in there that are going to make the use of it really compelling. I don’t believe in Web 3.0 being the 3D Web necessarily. I see more connections between the two. I don’t really see the power and the variety of things that we can do on the Web is necessarily, naturally progress into a 3D environment and there is a growing space for the compelling interesting things that people are doing and can do in the 3D environments. The interaction is just going to get richer. We are going to see even more realistic looking avatars, we are going to see movement that is more fluid and not so ‘quirky jerky’. The voice capability that is coming into Second Life, is going to really change a lot of the communication levels and protocols and strategies, so it is an evolving space and it is going to continue to be evolve really, really fast.

And educators and many people are going to continue this struggle to quote unquote ‘keep up with it’ which is another one of those myths of technology of being able to keep up.

Jo Kay: I will chime in there and agree with that. Keeping up is going to be an interesting thing as the virtual space continues to develop. I guess for me over the last twelve months what has been most exciting is seeing that innovation really explode and spaces like Second Life start to become discussed in the broader media and more broadly in education as well. So I am looking forward to seeing what implementation of virtual worlds, be it Second Life or other spaces, in education. I am also looking forward to exploring Second Life for commercial uses, being able to telecommute, for being able to use it to meet with international colleagues, all those sorts of things and I think that whether it's Second Life or another more open source, interoperable space, we will see more use of virtual worlds although I do agree that there will always still be a 2D Web, and as advocates of virtual worlds, we need to be careful to advocate it for its useful purposes, not for all purposes, just because it's cool.

Glenda: Yes I agree with that. Here in Gipps TAFE we are really strong users of Web CT Blackboard and we don't see that a virtual world in any way is going to replace that because of the tracking and all those sorts of things. We see this as just another tool in the suite of ICT capacities that we can offer the students, so we don't see it as it's going to take over learning, 'cos it certainly won't, just like Blackboard hasn't taken over our learning even though a lot of people within the institute use it. So we are looking at virtual worlds together with all of our audio Wimba technologies that we use a lot too. So we have already a range of different technologies that we use with different students for different purposes and we see virtual worlds as another tool that is in our suite of things that we can offer and it really is 'horses for courses' – what the students and teachers want to do then that is going to suggest one sort of technology rather than another, so for us it is expanding our suite of technologies already offered, rather than replacing it in any shape or form.

Jo Murray: Great. Thanks very much Everybody. Just to wind up if something is happening in your world in the next few months that you would like to let people know about?

Glenda: I would like to jump in there, thank you Jo. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework has funded Gipps TAFE to facilitate a network focusing on the teaching and learning in virtual worlds and one of the things that when we used virtual worlds last year we discussed it is really difficult to have conversations about the pros and cons of education in a virtual world if someone hasn't had a similar sort of experience, so if they have just gone to the wider virtual world then they don't know what we have been doing or vice versa, so it is really hard having a conversation about it. So what this network is about is allowing a group of educators to have a shared experience and over the course of the year, we are visiting a whole range of different places in Second Life looking at what people are doing there and then we follow that up a couple of days later within an Elluminate session where we talk about what happens, what kind of educational capacity that had? how you might enrich it? what sort of planning needs to go in it to turn it into that kind of learning environment?

So very much a shared experience, then a discussion about what is the pedagogy that sits around that? Because we are particularly interested in the pedagogy of virtual worlds rather than just using it and then moving on. We've got a wiki with it ([Virtual Worlds Real Learning](#)). So we are really happy for people to share in that network because we think that is a good way of allowing the ongoing educational debate about virtual worlds and their role in teaching and learning.

Alan: Every two weeks – it's Monday here, it's probably Tuesday for you folks – we run our NMC Teachers' Buzz meeting and we try to hook up the times so it is not really painful for someone every other week and this Tuesday we are having a discussion on

avatars and identity, people talking about why they made certain choices about their avatars and two weeks from Monday actually Jo Kay and her colleague Sean Fitzgerald are going to be our guest hosts and we are going to have people visit their fabulous research place and we hope in the future to have [Eric Hackathorn](#) who is the person behind the [NOAA](#) (National Oceanographic & Atmospheric Administration) [simulation](#), one of the greatest science builds in Second Life, to come and talk about those sort of things that they do there.

The NMC is running an event August 12 – 18 we are having basically a full fledged online conference within Second Life. We have been doing online conferences twice a year. We use basically a website and Elluminate. It has worked very well for a couple of years, but we try to change our format every few years and push it and we are really intrigued by the idea of having a full online conference completely in Second Life and as a trial we're going to run a symposium on creativity in Second Life. It is going to be a variety of activities. There will be some keynotes, but there will a lot of break-out sessions, there will be what we call 'studio tracks' and we are really trying to set up learning opportunities – they are not presentations, they are not me sitting audience watch Jo Kay talk about what she is doing and we are trying, we're encouraging people to create activities, workshops that people will actually be doing, learning, hands on skills in say scripting or building or avatar design or taking pictures in Second Life or teaching in Second Life, so we certainly encourage everybody on your continent to come out for that the 12-18 (August).

We are actually building a whole new island that's going to be our NMC conference Centre, it is going to be a really fabulous facility that's got some great features and it is being worked on right now. And then lastly from October 15-26 I believe, I am going to be on tour in Australia as part of the Flexible Learning Framework, they invited me to come, and I am doing a crazy, whirlwind tour of every capital city and I will be doing presentations and workshops largely on things, not necessarily Web 2.0 related, having some sessions on technology, I am certainly willing to talk about Second Life. I am just really looking forward to this opportunity to networking and meeting all the great colleagues I know are there in Australia and I am really looking forward to that and I hope that I get to meet a lot of you when I am over there.

Jo Kay: Hear, hear. We are looking forward to Alan coming too. I guess for us over the next couple of months we have got a range of projects happening in our space that people will be able to come and check out and engage with. Our LearnScope Teams will be engaging in this space and will be welcoming other educators to come and see what they are doing. We are also planning some events later on in the year that will allow our educators from the LearnScope community to come together, but we will also be inviting others to join us. As Alan mentioned, I will be doing the NMC Teachers' Buzz in a couple of weeks and I really hope that some Australian educators will come and join in on that session and back us up (Laughs).

Jo Murray: Well what a rich and exciting world you are all living in at the moment. It sounds fantastic. Thank you very much for putting the time aside and coming to speak with *The Knowledge Tree*. Hopefully you will get lots of feedback on the blog about the activities that you are engaged in. So bye for now.

Useful links

[New Media Consortium](http://www.nmc.org) (<http://www.nmc.org>)

[Second Life in Education](http://sleducation.wikispaces.com) (<http://sleducation.wikispaces.com>)

[Virtual Worlds Real Learning](http://virtualworldsrealllearning.wikispaces.com) (<http://virtualworldsrealllearning.wikispaces.com>)