UWE: Virtual MA providing real benefits for students

Summary

UWE (University of the West of England) is offering students a unique opportunity to study a Masters degree entirely within a virtual world. The MA Education in Virtual Worlds allows students to engage in activities and simulations that would otherwise be very difficult or impossible to practice in the real world. The course is populated by students from all over the world and is proving to be a popular choice for students, some of whom are keen to go on to take a PhD.

About University of the West of England

The University of the West of England (UWE) is located near Bristol and has campuses at Frenchay, Glenside, Bower Ashton and a regional centre at Gloucester Docks, Gloucestershire as well as an associate faculty (Hartpury College) specialising in animal behaviour and welfare, agricultural and sports related courses in Hartpury, Gloucestershire.
There are over 25,000 students and around 3000 academic staff.

The University is consistently ranked in the top 10 new universities in the country.

**The challenge**

When the MA in Education in Virtual Worlds was first made available to students two years ago, much of the issues around using the technology involved the stability of the platform (Second Life) used to run the virtual world. They also found that the university’s firewall was blocking many features within Second Life, such as voice, which made it difficult.

Following on from the adoption of the technology, the team needed to work closely with staff and students to provide them with support and training on how the virtual world could be accessed as well as how to use the software. This presented additional challenges in terms of how the team could use the technology and virtual environments as effectively as possible rather than something that could appear too ‘gamey’ and something that may only be a fad, or have limited possibilities in terms of longevity.

The fact that the MA was launched as the only Masters course of its kind in the world entirely within an online virtual world was a bold step for the university and one that presented a constant challenge in terms of ensuring that students had the same level of support as they would have in the real world.

**The activity**

Some early educational adopters of virtual worlds preferred to develop replicas of their institution, so that students had a physical and virtual world that they could visit. At UWE, Liz Falconer, Professor of TEL and Director of the Education Innovation Centre, was keen to develop a different virtual environment, which would be more conducive to their needs in terms of the types of buildings and areas that would be most beneficial for the learning needs of students.

“We very much build environments within the virtual worlds that we use, which reflect what it is that we want the students to learn and the kinds of research activities that we want to take in those environments.” – Liz Falconer, Professor of TEL and Director of the Education Innovation Centre, UWE
In terms of the virtual world, the buildings and environments can all be reused for many different activities as needed, which means that the team don’t need to reconstruct the environment for every new activity as required.

Subjects areas that use virtual worlds in their teaching at UWE now include:

- Psychology and counselling
- A Dragons’ Den-style area for Q & A sessions and practising pitching ideas
- Accident investigation
- Risk assessment
- Environmental health
- Law
- Auditing and finance
- Sociology
- Forensics

“It’s very important to say that it’s not just about what we build in a virtual world, it’s about what the students on a range of different courses can create, and in the case of the MA the learning environments that they create as part of their studies.” - Liz Falconer, Professor of TEL and Director of the Education Innovation Centre, UWE

Within the different buildings and subject areas, students on courses across the university engage in activities such as:

- Undertaking financial audits for a company and watch transactions between auditors and managers. They can additionally check the amount of stock in the warehouse
- Selecting favoured events from the last 200 years and constructing their own sociology simulations
- A house specifically designed to allow students to use their investigative skills for different techniques in forensics
- Interviewing programmed bots across a range of subject areas, particularly psychology. Students can interview patients with a variety of psychological issues
- Managers and counsellor bots can be activated to act out various situations and simulations involving different scenarios
- Dragons’ Den-style scenario for students to pitch ideas against the ‘dragons’, comprising tutors and guests.

“There is a lot of experiential learning; that’s how we learn. There is a lot of learning by doing and situated learning.” - Mari Carmen Gil Ortega, Senior Lecturer in Virtual Worlds, UWE

The Dragons’ Den virtual room, where students can pitch ideas to the dragons

Students can also work through simulations themselves as well as have guided help from teachers and mentors. They have access to workshops, seminars and tutorials, where they can concentrate on active learning rather than the more passive style of lecture attendance in the real world.

Students can practice different scenarios that would otherwise be too dangerous/ethically not possible or difficult to do in the real world, for example:

- Conduct accident investigations for emergencies
- Interview people with complex mental health issues
- Undertake a range of financial situations
- Any activity related to environmental health, such as a gas explosion
The outcomes

Returning to the MA specifically, the main benefit of having a course run entirely within a virtual world is that students can attend the course from anywhere in the world, and meet up with fellow students regularly. This helps to overcome the isolation often experienced by distance learners.

“The interesting thing that we’ve had back from the students about those kinds of activities is how much they value them and also how much they’ve learned in the virtual environment.” - Liz Falconer, Professor of TEL and Director of the Education Innovation Centre, UWE

Students are immersing themselves within an environment, which although is virtual; provides them with a platform that they can test their knowledge and engage in activities that are helping them to:

- Develop communication skills
- Practice real-life activities
- Develop their creative skills
- Develop social and group working
- Perform actions and replicate scenarios unavailable in the real world

Some students are additionally keeping their own blogs to log their activities and develop a social media presence, which is extending the reach of their studies.

Students also find the experience very socially engaging as Mari Carmen Gil Ortega, explains:

Liz Falconer and Matt Ewens’ avatars attending a counselling simulation
“The way the group gels pretty much from the beginning is quite special and I’ve said this on many occasions you see that the bond is stronger even than with face-to-face students, so I think that this is unique.”

The impact

What Liz and her team have found over the two years since the course has been running is that students really value the opportunity to extend their learning and then take back what they learn within the virtual world and apply it to the real world.

“In the sense of the MA their performance is quite outstanding and we have really been pleasantly surprised at how good the student marks are on the MA.” - Liz Falconer, Professor of TEL and Director of the Education Innovation Centre, UWE

Liz and her team are also careful that the course is moderated properly both internally and by external examiners, so the MA is well regulated to ensure that the material and content is of a consistently high quality.

“Overall our statistics or our research outcomes if you like both qualitative and quantitative point to really strong affordances of these environments.” - Liz Falconer, Professor of TEL and Director of the Education Innovation Centre, UWE

What this course provides is something that can’t be offered in the real world and is providing students with skills that they can apply into their future lives and careers.

“I think we have created a community of students that like working together in this environment, they can see how it works and the majority of them are educators, there are some developers, e-learning technologists and therapists. They all find a use that they like and they can see the potential for their own careers.” - Mari Carmen Gil Ortega, Senior Lecturer in Virtual Worlds, UWE

“At the moment this is the only course in the world of its type. We run the only MA in education that is fully delivered in a virtual world that we are aware of. I’m fairly sure we are right as we get so many applications from students from all over the world, from countries like South America, North America, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and even Saudi Arabia.” - Liz Falconer, Professor of TEL and Director of the Education Innovation Centre, UWE

The lessons learned

Developing a virtual course at any level, particularly a Masters degree programme is something that educators should spend quality time researching, building and testing before launching or publishing.

Liz and Mari Carmen both invested considerable time to develop the course and ensure that the structures and content best suited their students’ needs.
The course team has learned a lot from the process of developing the course, and from the hundreds of hours of teaching and research they have undertaken in virtual environments.

**Useful links**

- MA Education in Virtual Worlds
- Jisc RSC South West
- Second Life

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