

It's a Wired World

In her regular column dedicated to technology and the teacher trainer, **Nicky Hockly** explores a new 3D virtual world called Second Life, where online teacher training and language learning are starting to appear.

Imagine a 3-dimensional virtual world, much like entering a video game, where you can learn Spanish or Esperanto, attend a seminar from the Harvard Law School on cyber law, or watch a teacher training video in a virtual seminar room, sitting next to other teachers and trainers from all over the world. You can do all of these things in real time, and you can 'be' there. The place is Second Life, and you can visit it from your very own home computer.

Founded by the RealNetworks Chief Technical Officer Philip Rosedale in 2003, Second Life (SL) is a virtual world, which currently has approximately 800,000 users. In Second Life you sign up for free, design a 3D representation of yourself (known as an 'avatar') and move around a rich online world, in which the residents interact, build houses, design clothes, make gadgets, dance at virtual clubs and, yes, attend classes.

But is Second Life all just fun and games? Whilst there is plenty of gaming occurring 'in-world', there is also a burgeoning collection of more serious projects, from courses in 'cyber law' taught under the auspices of Harvard Law School (blogs.law.harvard.edu/cyberone/), to awareness-raising projects for young people (<http://www.holymeatballs.org>), and even a group dedicated to discussing and exploring the potential for education in such environments (www.simteach.com).

What has this got to do with the teacher trainer? There are two main ways in which the teacher trainer might want to start exploring SL for him/herself:

- as a tool for further professional development, and
- as a space to take trainees if he/she is working on distance or online training courses.

Let's look at each of these options in turn:

Second Life is a rich environment in which to further one's own professional development. The teacher trainer can join a professional development group, and attend virtual conferences, listen to podcasts, and watch videos or PowerPoint presentations, all the while interacting via voice and text chat with teachers and trainers from all over the world, in SL. To find out what's going on in SL for EFL/ESL teachers and trainers, and when educators' get-togethers are being held, join the Webheads online community of practice (which I've recommended highly in a previous column - www.webheads.info). Webheads are currently holding regular meetings in SL, and exploring its potential as a teaching and training medium.

Second Life can also provide a rich synchronous environment to take trainees who are studying by distance. The trainer can take a group of trainees to a classroom in Second Life, show them a PowerPoint presentation, or a video clip, or ask them to listen to an audio podcast or recording, and then suggest trainees discuss issues, either by text or audio. The real thrill - that feeling of 'social presence', of actually 'being there' - comes from having your 3D character along with everyone else's in a virtual space, at the same time. You can literally turn to your partner while you discuss something, you can see them (or rather, a 3D avatar of them), and it's all happening in real time!

As with any new tool, and especially one that is as highly visual and experiential as SL, it's very difficult to give a flavour of what SL is

like. You really have to see it for yourself. To get started in Second Life, you simply download the software (www.secondlife.com) and sign up for a free account on the same site. Once installed and running, you create a 3D virtual representation (avatar) of yourself. From here you are given a virtual tour of the basics of how to move around in SL, then we suggest you go to the educational space set up for EFL/ESL teachers and trainers at Edunation. Access to SL is free, and you do not need to pay a subscription or anything else to explore it, or to interact with others.

If you are interested in doing some reading about SL, what it is and what it does, here are some useful links:

- **The Second Life homepage**

This gives you a good overview of what SL is all about
<http://secondlife.com/>

- **Getting Started With Second Life**

A step by step guide to getting started in SL, from installing and registering to learning how to move around in SL
http://www.nmc.org/campuswiki/index.php/Getting_Started

- **SimTeach**

A site for educators interested in using environments like SL in teaching and learning. The site includes a blog, (an online journal or diary), a wiki, (a collaborative web page which anyone can edit), a discussion group, and some sample SL videos
<http://www.simteach.com/>

- **SLED Archives**

The archives from previous discussions held by educators in SL
<https://lists.secondlife.com/pipermail/educators/>

- **You Tube – Sample Second Life Videos**

A selection of videos that show you clearly what life is like in SL
http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Second+Life
The video on the NMC campus shows an educational environment in SL: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=S9VZKTT6gZ8>

- **Talk to the Avatar**

An article on Second Life and education published in the Guardian Weekly October 2006, by Gavin Dudeney and Nicky Hockly
<http://education.guardian.co.uk/tefl/story/0,,1929335,00.html>

- **Education**

An island in SL set up for EFL/ESL teachers and trainers
<http://www.theconsultants-e.com/edunation/>



Nicky has been involved in EFL teaching and teacher training for the past 17 years, both face to face and online. She is currently Director of Pedagogy of The Consultants-E, an online training and development consultancy (www.theconsultants-e.com), who own the Second Life educational island EduNation. EduNation is used for teacher training sessions, seminars and conferences, and includes a virtual seminar room, podcast and videocast lounges, and a social breakout area.

Please contact Nicky directly at nicky.hockly@theconsultants-e.com if there are any specific issues related to technology and teacher training you'd like to see explored in this column.