Provo's Learning Innovations Grant for Faculty
Request for Full Proposal
2007-2008

Project Title:

Exploring pedagogical issues in Secondlife™: Teaching Online advertising.

Applicant(s):

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Dept.</th>
<th>College</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susan Barnes</td>
<td>54695</td>
<td>School of Communication</td>
<td>College of Liberal Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil Hair</td>
<td>56322</td>
<td>Management, Marketing and International Business</td>
<td>Saunders College of Business</td>
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Title of Project:
Exploring pedagogical issues in Secondlife™: Teaching Online advertising.

1. Summary:
Our project is to design and teach a new blended class on ‘online advertising’ within one of the world’s leading Web 2.0 / social networks – Secondlife™. The impact of Web 2.0 / social networking business models in the past two years represents a significant development in the cultural acceptance of commercialized online worlds. Increasingly the media is awash with commercial innovations in major virtual worlds. Secondlife™ is arguably the world’s largest with upwards of 1.3 million members and reports exponential growth rates. One innovation reported on regularly in this environment is that of teaching. Whilst a number of lectures have been developed and administered in this virtual land the media has yet to report an entire class being taught and how these have been evaluated by students. Our project aims to take the subject matter of online advertising and self branding and use this world as a platform for delivery and analysis. We propose therefore the development of a blended class (with a 50/50 split between Secondlife™ and traditional in class format) which explores online advertising methods in a unique 3d graphical environment. What makes this project unique is our focus on part delivering an 11 week class in Secondlife™ and evaluating students’ perceptions of their learning experience. We believe this to be not only the first attempt by RIT to administer and evaluate the effectiveness of an entire class in this environment, but the world’s first.

2. Targeted learners:
This project will be broadly applicable to many liberal arts courses but in particular those in the schools of Communication and Business. We will specifically target undergraduate students in both communication and business programs who have an interest in marketing, advertising and branding. As a jointly taught class between the School of Communication and the Saunders College of Business we anticipate an offering in the Winter quarter of 2007 for 72 students (two classes). It is a course that will fit with the new Advertising and Public Relations Major in the Department of Communication and the existing marketing major in the college of business. This is a new course that will be taught as a special topics course in both marketing and communication. It can then be adapted and approved as a regular course offering. As a regular part of the curriculum it will reach many more students.

3. Is this for a new course or an existing course?
This is request for support of a new course.

4. Anticipated impact on teaching and/or learning:
On teaching:
Several RIT classes have experimented with visits to Secondlife™, but none have tried to teach course content in the environment. We are not sure how students will react to this environment, we think they will like the addition of graphics and visual cues. Because this is an unknown type of online teaching, we want to research the environment in addition to teaching in it. Student reactions to the course will pave
the way for future courses to be taught in Secondlife™. Specifically our anticipated impact on teaching includes:

1. An RIT representation in Secondlife™ using the grounds of the New Media Consortia (NMC) raising RIT's profile in this arena
2. An understanding of this unique learning environment in Secondlife™ from faculty perspectives
3. Significant external publicity opportunities showcasing our results and experience

On learning:

1. The world’s first online examination of student learning in this environment
2. The online evaluation of students learning experience on an ongoing basis
3. A more in-depth offline examination of students learning using personal one on one interviews

5. The anticipated impact on student success:

Given the rise of the importance of online interactions the experience that students will have in this course will be invaluable. In successfully completing the course students will be acutely aware of the issues surrounding online advertising methods and means of evaluating performance. This will include working with real organizations who need assistance in managing their identities in online environments such as Secondlife™ and in students abilities to advertise, brand and ultimately promote themselves. Further more, given the impact of Secondlife™ generally our efforts may have positive implications for retention as this shows RIT as an institute that is on the bleeding edge of understanding the commercial implications of this environment.

6. Measuring the impact and reporting of findings:

Measuring the impact:

We are proposing the world’s first in-depth study of the learning outcomes and learning experience of students and faculty in this unique Secondlife™ environment. The evaluation of these experiences will be triangulated in a number of ways including;

1. Members of Online Learning’s instructional design community at RIT – providing the applications with third party expertise and a neutral evaluation of this project
2. Students of the class will be interviewed in-depth both on and offline using a number of methodologies detailed below
3. Faculty teaching the class will maintain a teaching journal that reports on the learning environment throughout the period of class acting as a real time ethnography

Firstly, student evaluations will involve electronically administered personal construct theory interviews (PCTI) of all class members. Whilst time intensive to administer and evaluate, these are well placed to compare and contrast students learning perceptions through comparisons of other learning environments. PCTI’s have a successful history of exploring perceptions of learning outcomes and the results
produce both qualitative understanding as well as a quantification of success. This will be coupled with the critical incident technique (CIT) aimed at exploring the key moments of their experiences in Secondlife™ in more detail. Secondly, Dr Hair will in-depth interview a selection of students (minimum 20) on a one to one basis exploring their individual learning issues (saturation of data is normally reached with 20 individuals). These interviews are expected to last no more than 90 minutes and will yield highly rich data about the overall learning experience. The applicants along with Online Learning are particularly interested in the members of the NTID community’s response to learning in this environment. As a result, all hearing impaired students will be interviewed in this second stage of our research. Given the extensive nature of this evaluation a course release is therefore requested.

Reporting the findings:

Apart from reporting the findings to the wider RIT community through the vehicle of the Teaching and Learning Center several other forums have been identified including:

1. A peer assessed presentation at the prestigious annual Academy of Marketing Summer Educators conference
2. A peer assessed article in the Academy of Management Learning and Education Journal
3. Coverage in the popular and practitioner press

7. Rationale for the project:

With the rise of social networks, individuals are now branding themselves with pictures, movies, and words. In a communication environment in which cues to physical identity are removed, how do you represent yourself? Secondlife™ is the first online environment to fully use avatars and three-dimensional forms of expression. In essence it is a world that visually mirrors real-life. Individual represent themselves with three-dimensional characters. This provides an opportunity to teach students about personal identity and representation online. When you have the opportunity to create an alternate persona is it like your physical one? Or do you represent yourself in an imaginary way? Secondlife™ enables us to answer these questions. In addition to personal identity, marketers and advertisers are also flocking to Secondlife™ to sell real and virtual products. This new environment provides an opportunity to explore both the individual and advertising brand. How similar is the way people brand themselves to traditional advertising? Has culture today become a commercial culture in which the individual is a product, just like a bar of soap? What type of ethical behavior occurs in a virtual world? These are the type of questions that we want to explore with students as they experience the alternate world of Secondlife™.

Secondlife™ is a fast growing unique environment that is increasingly relevant to business and communications students whose future employers are attempting to understand. We believe this class will provide students with the knowledge and experience of advertising themselves and clients (in the form of pro bono consultancy projects) effectively. Secondlife™ also has relevance in other disciplines including entrepreneurship, technology management, international business, design, communication, advertising, computing and innovation. Many real businesses have developed inside of the Secondlife™ platform and many are using it to innovate
products and services with customer input. We expect therefore that the outcomes of our experience will be useful in informing the development of other courses in and outside of our respective fields. Demonstrating the learning outcomes, approaches and experiences of teaching in such a unique environment is therefore expected to enable other faculty members to perform more effectively.

The applicants are uniquely qualified for work of this kind. Dr Susan B. Barnes, is a professor in the Department of Communication and Associate Director of the Social Computing Lab (social.it.rit.edu) here at RIT. For over the past decade, Dr. Barnes has been researching and writing about the Internet and social behavior. She is the author of Online Connections: Internet Interpersonal Relationships (Hampton Press, 2001), Web Research: Selecting, Evaluating, Citing (with Marie Radford and Linda Barr, Allyn & Bacon, 2002), and Computer-Mediated Communication: Human-to-Human Communication Across the Internet (Allyn & Bacon, 2003). Dr. Barnes has presented and published numerous articles and book chapters on computer related topics, including interpersonal computing, computers in organizations, virtual communities, and the history of graphical user interfaces. She has worked as a personal technology columnist for the Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester, New York’s city newspaper. Dr Neil Hair is an assistant professor at the Saunders College of Business and has extensive experience researching electronic communities as a virtual ethnographer. He has previously conducted pedagogical research which explores the importance of experiential learning and social environments to business students’ perceptions of effective learning experiences. He is also an expert in the use of personal construct theory interviews and critical incident techniques online and off. Dr Hair is the current holder of the Provosts award for excellence in teaching.

8. Timetable for the development of the project:

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<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Target date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of the curriculum</td>
<td>Complete. See enc. Syllabus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of the Secondlife™ class</td>
<td>Complete. Sponsored by the NMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class materials</td>
<td>End of Fall quarter 20071</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class offered</td>
<td>Winter quarter 20072</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Ongoing Winter and Spring quarter 20073</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write up and dissemination</td>
<td>End of Spring quarter 20073</td>
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