Provost’s Learning Innovations Grant for Faculty
Request for Full Proposal
2009-2010

Project Title:
Commercializing Virtual Worlds

Applicant(s):

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Dept.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Neil Hair</td>
<td>56322</td>
<td>College Saunders College of Business</td>
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Title of Project:

Commercializing Virtual Worlds

1. Summary:

This PLIG proposal is to design and teach a new blended class on 'Commercializing Virtual Worlds’ within one of the world's leading Web 2.0 / social networks – Secondlife™. Specifically it will assist students in the development and creation of real business entities that they will go on to implement in the virtual world as part of this unique class offering. The impact of Web 2.0 / social networking business models in the past five years represents a significant development in the acceptance and commercialization of online worlds. Secondlife™ is arguably the world’s largest with upwards of 1.3 million members and continues to report accelerated growth rates. These factors create an ideal opportunity to take advantage of this environment in the form of a unique teaching innovation – enabling students in commercializing a virtual world.

Other innovations reported on regularly in this environment are those of teaching. A recent project sponsored by a PLIG in 2007 saw the design and implementation of an Online Advertising course that was heralded as hugely successful by faculty and students alike. This proposal builds on the learning that took place during that class, offered in the winter of 2007 and specifically builds on the student feedback received at the end of the course and in exit interviews. This proposal intends to take advantage of the development of RIT’s existing island in Secondlife™, Secondlife™ ready computer labs at Saunders College of Business, and RIT’s Online Learning department for technical assistance. A ‘blended’ approach to class will be adopted which will see the theory of commercialization taught in a regular face to face environment, and students experiential activities that apply this theory to the virtual world of Secondlife™. What makes this proposal unique is that no course on commercializing Secondlife™ has ever been taught previously. The nature of this course proposal is also unique as will be shown in the remainder of this proposal.

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. The proposal will specifically target undergraduate students in both communication and business programs who have an interest in marketing, advertising, communications, entrepreneurship and business strategy. The course is anticipated for offering in the Winter quarter of 2009 for 40 students. It is a course that will fit with a number of existing majors in the Saunders college of business. This is a new course that will be taught as a special topics course (otherwise known as Seminar in Marketing). 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:

Neil Hair PLIG Proposal 2009
I anticipate a number of issues, based on prior experience teaching classes in Secondlife™.

1. Significant external publicity opportunities showcasing our results and experience.
2. The use of the RIT Island in Secondlife™, specifically the Saunders virtual college of business, the virtual Wallace Library, and the innovation space where students will ‘build’ their businesses.
3. The continued development of pedagogical empirical data that demonstrates the effectiveness of teaching in such environments.
4. Materials unique to RIT that can form the basis of a number of case studies of real in-world commercial activities for use in other classes.

On learning:

1. The world’s first class taught on commercializing virtual worlds.
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 exit interviews.
4. Entrepreneurial skills sets that demonstrate students abilities to build and launch their own enterprises within a virtual world setting.

5. The anticipated impact on student success:

Following on from previous successes teaching 'Online Advertising' in Secondlife™, significant personal opportunities are anticipated for participating students. A number of students from the 'Online Advertising' class went on to form personal businesses in Secondlife™, others used the experience as evidence for aptitude in these environments and have taken jobs in virtual gaming companies. A number of students also took advantage of the resulting publicity when finding employment (the local Democrat and Chronicle newspaper and the Rochester Business Journal followed the previous class). Other intended consequences include the development of a number of Secondlife™ businesses that are owned and operated by those students enrolled showcasing their successes. This would further enhance the reputation the institute has in terra forming such virtual worlds into commercial entities.

6. Measuring the impact and reporting of findings:

Measuring the impact:

This proposal will continue to build on the research findings from the 2007 PLIG proposal. A number of opportunities to promote prior endeavors and research findings have arisen in recent years. This includes presentations at two prestigious international conferences. Two articles are currently under first round review and second round review at leading marketing journals.

The evaluation of these experiences will be triangulated in a number of ways that compliment the 2007 proposal 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 and proved particularly insightful in evaluating the 2007 PLIG grant. 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 commercializing Secondlife™. Secondly, Dr Hair will in-depth interview enrolled students on a one to one basis exploring their individual learning issues. These interviews last no more than 90 minutes and yield highly rich data about the overall learning experience.

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. Coverage in the popular and practitioner press.
2. A number of conference and journal articles looking at the nature of the course and the student experience.
3. The development of a number of cases where students have commercialized Secondlife™.

7. Rationale for the project:

Secondlife™ has a proven record in facilitating rich, meaningful and memorable learning experiences. Whilst many have used the environment to teach classes, through virtual lectures and in practical seminars no one has yet developed a class that shows how to commercialize successful business entities from within. This project, and associated publicity, will continue to demonstrate RIT as a unique category of one university and the Saunders college of business as an experiential school that focuses on student success, practical training and on student led innovation and creativity.

The applicant is uniquely qualified for work of this kind. 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, including teaching in Secondlife™. He is also an expert in the use of personal construct theory interviews and critical incident techniques online.
and off. Dr Hair is a former holder of the Provosts award for excellence in teaching and 2008’s Online Learning’s Exemplary Online Faculty Award.

The learning outcomes from the previous PLIG proposal in 2007 were demonstrated in the following formative student course evaluations;

1. A rigor score of 4.4 out of 5.
2. An overall effectiveness score of 4.7 out of 5.
3. Instructor met the objectives listed in the syllabus score of 4.5 out of 5.
4. I would recommend this class / instructor score of 4.7 out of 5.

This proposal will build on the momentum gained from the previous project.

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 20091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class offered</td>
<td>Winter quarter 20092 OR Summer 20094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>Ongoing quarter course offered and following Quarter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write up and dissemination</td>
<td>End of Fall 20101.</td>
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Requested support:

1 course release at Adjunct rate for course development.
Technical assistance from a student co-op in online learning. 7 hours a week @ $11 for 7 weeks.
$50 (x260 Linden Dollar exchange rate) x 5 teams. $250 (65,000 Linden Dollars) for enterprise start up funding.