

ABSTRAKTI

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## ***Students' experiences and ideas of the library services in a virtual world at the Turku university of applied sciences***

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### **Introduction**

This abstract presents two projects of the library and the degree programme of library and information services at the Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS), in which a virtual world, Second Life (SL), was used. The common aim of the projects was in accordance with the strategic plan of the TUAS to improve student counseling and tutoring with social media. Further the projects examined the possibilities of virtual worlds in teaching and learning information literacy (IL) skills, and explored what role virtual reality could play in library and information service (LIS) education.

Using Second Life in educational context is motivated in the literature by its possibilities in simulation creation, distance learning, visualization and role-playing. It provides a more economical and a safer way to try and learn different things, which in real life could not be possible, or would be too expensive to realize. One of the arguments to use a virtual world is that it increases the sense of presence and immersion, which may promote learning in online distance education (Holmberg et al. 2009, 178; Savin-Baden 2010, 7-8). Libraries have been active in SL since Linden Lab launched it in 2003. According to Elliott & Proberts (2011) librarians have regarded it as important to gain understanding about virtual worlds, while it has been forecasted that the amount of users of 3D worlds increases (Gartner 2007). Libraries organize in SL different events and seminars, such as book discussions, author visits, virtual art and history exhibits. They create contacts and partnerships with vendors, other libraries, and educational organizations, develop reference services and instruction (Holmberg et al. 2009, 179; Tsoubrakakou & Gaitanou 2011, 54).

While the focus for the TUAS library in developing the virtual services is on instruction in IL skills and promoting the use of e-resources, the different functionalities in the library's Second Life area were planned to trigger learning of IL skills and the use of e-resources. The triggers, such as the IL learning path on water-lilies, were seen as affordances or clues in the environment that indicate possibilities for action according to the affordance theory (e.g. Sadler & Given 2007; Ruhleder 2002; Björneborg 2011).

### **Teaching and learning information literacy skills in Second Life**

A pilot group of students (25 students) from the degree program in social services attended a four-hour introduction to IL skills in Second Life. After the course the students' opinions and thoughts were gathered with a questionnaire. Some of the students experienced that they had

learned about seeking information in a new way while the others preferred more traditional training of IL skills. Technical difficulties in using the SL environment caused that the learning experience was not optimal. The findings suggest that virtual environments may enhance learning of IL skills of those students who are interested in, or have a positive attitude towards the virtual environments and unconventional ways of seeking and finding information.

### **Future librarians in Second Life**

Information specialist of the TUAS library familiarized the LIS students (12 students) and their teacher with the use of Second Life once a week during a 12 week period. Between the sessions the students worked in groups on three themes. The first group made a SWOT-analysis of the utilization of SL in higher education. The strengths of SL according to the students are in its possibilities in role playing, simulation creation and implementation within distance education. When considering the weaknesses of SL, the students evaluated the SL application as a little bit outdated, also the audiovisual level could have been better, and the interface itself was perceived as clumsy. The user-created content, possibilities to vary teaching and learning, and the different tools for communication were regarded as opportunities. The threats to Second Life's future were connected with the rapid technological development.

The second group of students gave proposals for improvement from the point of view of the area's appearance, access to information sources and collections in Second Life and internet, and instruction in information seeking. Generally, the students regarded the library's area as pleasant, also the signs in the area were clear. The students highlighted the use of more imagination and utilization of 3D-possibilities in order to enhance the library's area. This group conducted also a short multiple choice questionnaire as an e-survey on the use and opinions of SL among the LIS students at TUAS. 23 students of whom 14 were familiar with SL and, 5 used it, answered the questionnaire. Two main reasons why the students did not use SL was according to the survey the fact that the students did not experience using SL as meaningful and that they did not know anybody who uses it. To the question: What would make you interested in using SL? the answers chosen most frequently were: useful contents, possibilities to use SL in distance education and if my friends would use SL.

The students of the third group concretized their theme to a Second Life seminar. During the project they learned how to create the facilities for the seminar and how to use different software applications for the presentations and the performances. Organising an event in SL gave the students practice in planning and carrying out a seminar in real life. They had to establish the theme, select the place, plan the programme, invite the speakers and other performers, take care of the marketing and hosting of the seminar, and even arrange virtual refreshments for the attendees.

### **Conclusions**

In spite of the technical problems connected with the quite significant hardware and software requirements of Second Life, during the projects the students got an insight into how a virtual world, such as SL, can be utilized in the context of LIS education, libraries and learning of IL skills. The LIS students participating in the project experienced the cooperation with the library staff positively. While being an optional course, the SL project gave LIS students an opportunity to become acquainted with and work together with the students enrolled in different years in an environment new to everybody. Looking at the SL projects from the point of view the library, the library has, in addition to the enhancement suggestions of the library's area and the functionalities, got experience in teaching in SL. Through the projects the library also developed its profile from a traditional services library to a participatory medium that can support students' learning in a new way (cf. Björneborg 2011).

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