

E-learning a virtual reality

ADRIAN MA
CUP Ontario Bureau Chief

WATERLOO, ONT (CUP)—Ontario’s colleges and universities struggle to find more space for students after a consecutive year of higher-than-expected enrolment rates, but administrators in California believe they may have found a solution—in cyberspace.

Charles Reed, Chancellor of the California State University system (comprised of 23 campuses and more than 400 000 students), says virtual worlds, like the currently popular Second Life, could solve the enrolment dilemma by turning students into telecommuters. Students would meet on campus once a week and then use classroom simulations to perform their coursework.

“It’s not an either-or thing,” said Reed at last February’s Worldwide Education and Research Conference in San Francisco. “We need the ‘high touch,’ but we need the high-tech at the same time.”

Second Life is a 3-D virtual world where users can interact, build spaces and participate in a functioning economy. Universities and colleges around the world have jumped on the bandwagon, establishing virtual campuses, libraries and classrooms.

The University of British Columbia, LaSalle College in Québec, and Hamilton’s Mohawk College and McMaster University, are a few of the Canadian schools using Second Life.

“It obviously is still growing, and the opportunities are limitless,” said Lucy Sheung, a manager at McMaster’s

Faculty of Engineering, via e-mail.

A couple months ago, McMaster’s engineering department unveiled the new Café Fireball, a Moroccan-style building that provides a space for virtual visitors to sip CG espresso and chat about news in engineering technology. There’s also information about the school’s academic programs available for viewing and a podcast listening station.

Sheung said that while some American schools are offering classes in Second Life, there are no similar plans at McMaster for the time being. But the potential for lecturing students in cyberspace definitely remains.

“It’s a good tool to engage a tech-savvy young audience—very innovative and creative,” Sheung said.

Mohawk College built a virtual library in Second Life to increase interaction with their students. Jason Lee, President of the Mohawk Students’ Association, says utilizing the virtual world was an innovative move on the part of the school.

“We have to realize things are changing,” Lee said, adding that using virtual classrooms could provide more opportunities for students, especially part-time and international students, who may find it difficult to be at the physical campus. Lee said it’s just a matter of time until most Canadian schools embrace the virtual culture.

But, Darren Wershler-Henry, an assistant professor of communication studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, is skeptical how far universities can take it.

“If you’re going to do something [like simulate a classroom online] you need a computer lab with instant, high-speed access,” he said. “And the Second Life servers can, at maximum, handle 50–100 users.”

Wershler-Henry also said there are myriad of policy issues the University would have to contend with, like protecting students’ privacy on the Internet, and ethical questions about purchasing university space and establishing classes in a corporate-owned virtual world (Second Life is owned by privately held American company Linden Lab).

“Not only are you working in a kind of lawless anarchy, but there’s the exploitation of laissez-faire capitalism,” he said.

Instead, Wershler-Henry pointed to Arden—a virtual reality project spearheaded by IT professors at Indiana University. It’s a synthetic world influenced by the plays of William Shakespeare, where academics and students meet together to interact and conduct research experiments. The funding is through the Indiana University and the MacArthur foundation. As it stands, the program isn’t open to the public and may never develop into more than an academic petri dish.

“The question is, how do you come up with the correct mix of stuff? It’d be good for meeting with other students in classrooms around the world, and you can use virtual space as a kind of collective memory, but in terms of a straight substitution, that would never happen,” Wershler-Henry said.

University of Winnipeg goes smoke-free

Smoking cessation information and programs will also be made available

SANDY KLOWAK
The Uniter

WINNIPEG (CUP)—As of 2 April, the University of Winnipeg is a smoke-free campus—every square metre of it.

The new policy, unanimously recommended by the University’s Workplace Safety and Health Committee, stipulates that no smoking will be allowed anywhere on University property. The only exception will be Aboriginal smudging ceremonies, for which permission will be granted on a case-by-case basis.

The outdoor smoking ban has been on the agenda for over two years, explained Vice-President (Human Resources) Laurel Repski. The Workplace Safety and Health

Committee—a group of students, support staff, faculty and management—has been the driving force behind the policy change.

“We think this really is a step in the right direction for the University,” Repski said, adding that it will create a healthier environment for smokers and non-smokers alike.

According to Lisa Ferguson of the Canadian Council for Tobacco Control, even smoking outdoors can be hazardous. She quoted a study done on the University of Maryland campus in Baltimore, USA, which came to the conclusion that students or faculty passing through an outdoor cloud of smoke would encounter detectable levels at about seven metres from a smoker, and

irritating levels at four metres.

But, the hazy cloud often present at school entrances doesn’t bother some.

“I’m not blowing smoke in the non-smokers’ faces,” argued U of W English major Vanessa Meekis, who said she doesn’t see the need for the change.

Meekis predicted that the ban will be ignored, and that smokers will still be seen outside campus doors, especially in the winter months.

But David Mauro, Director of Security & Community Ambassador Services, said there’s always a period where people have to adjust to the new rules.

“We’re not taking a heavy-handed approach. We’ll just be asking for their co-operation,” he said.

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