

Creative Writing in Second Life

An Evaluation of:

CRWR 439D – 001 – Special Projects in Creative Writing – 2009W – Chong; and

CRWR 439D – 004 and 539M – 002 – Special Projects in Creative Writing – 2009W – Chong



Prepared by Carol Munro, MA
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3.
Background; Methodology; Limitations	6.
Findings:	
1. Why participant chose to take the Fiction in Second Life	7.
2. What participants liked most about learning in Second Life	8.
3. What participants liked least about learning in Second Life	
4. Would participants take another creative writing course in Second Life?	9.
5. Would participants recommend learning in Second Life to others?	10.
6. How well did the Second Life format allow participants to discuss their work	
7. How interaction in the Second Life environment compared to a real life class	13.
8. What participants learned about themselves through the process of creating their Avatars	14.
9. Did what participants learned about themselves influence their story telling skills?	15.
10. How the identities assumed impacted participant's interaction in the virtual classroom	14.
11. How the identities assumed impacted what participants chose to write about	
12. Did participants explore the Second Life environment outside of the virtual classroom?	16.
13. How did feedback in this format compare to feedback in a real life classroom?	
14. How participants compared studying with the instructor in Second Life compared to real life	17.
15. Participant's level of comfort with the text-chat format	
16. Participant recommendations to improve course format	
17. The perspectives of the course instructor and TA	18.
Appendix A: Participant Questionnaire	20.
Appendix B: Participant Comments (deleted for publication)	

*Cover picture is a snapshot of the UBC Second Life classroom taken by Christine Leclerc

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report constitutes an evaluation of two sessions of creative writing workshops offered through UBC in 2009/2010. The workshops were unusual in that they were delivered in the online environment of Second Life.

Workshop participants created alter egos, known as Avatars and met weekly in a virtual classroom created for the purposes of the workshop.

Key findings from this evaluation more or less fall into four categories: 1) Marketability – how well the course attracts participants. 2) Technology – how easy or difficult is it for participants to access and use the Second Life system. 3) Interaction – how well does the course allow students to discuss their work in a convivial environment. 4) Learning – did the course provide adequate opportunities for learning from peers and the instructor.

Key Findings

Marketability

- There is an interest in learning in virtual worlds and it may be that provision of similar creative writing opportunities to learn could increase the number of distance learning students
- Participants like the anonymity afforded by the format; the ability to “speak” at any time in the virtual classroom and the “fun” aspects of participating through an Avatar
- The majority of participants were satisfied enough with the learning experience to say that they would consider taking another creative writing course in Second Life. As well, the majority of participants would recommend the Second Life format to others.
- The course instructor and TA found the virtual classroom to be a viable way of recreating workshop learning experiences.

Technology

- Learning in Second Life requires computers with capability to manage the system as well as high speed internet connections. In addition, the text chat format requires reasonably fast keyboarding skills.
- The majority of participants were comfortable with the text chat format; however an inability to type quickly was a barrier to full participation. Some dissatisfaction was expressed with what amounted to “jumbled” comments when everyone was making comments at once; however this was apparently mitigated by the ability to copy and paste an entire discussion for reference.

- The course instructor and TA learned how to deal with some of the technological difficulties in the course of developing and running the class. The use of voice chat was not successful.

Interaction

- The format does not allow for the level of personal engagement that can happen in a real life situation, but the benefits of anonymity may balance this out. Many participants felt more able to give and receive frank feedback than in a real life environment.
- The majority of participants indicated that
 - The discussions were lively and interesting and they felt as if they had created community to a certain extent in Second Life.
 - They received the type of feedback they were looking for
 - The interaction was intimate enough for them to feel comfortable expressing their views
 - The interaction helped them to accept the views of others.
- Most participants did not believe that the identities they assumed impacted their interaction with others in the virtual classroom.
- The course instructor and TA agreed that the discussion was engaging and the quality of peer feedback was high.

Learning

- With respect to giving and receiving feedback and utilizing the feedback to improve their writing, the majority of participants felt that the Second Life environment was almost as good, just as good, as or better than in a real life classroom. While some respondents commented that they missed the interaction of a real life learning experience, this seems to have been balanced somewhat by the advantages of anonymity.
- While most participants did not feel that they had learned much about themselves in the process of creating an alter ego (Avatar) a few did indicate an increase in self-awareness
- A few participants indicated that the anonymity afforded by the format gave them confidence to show some writing that they would not have brought to a real life classroom. Two participants indicated that the Second Life experience had impacted what they chose to write about.
- Participants who had studied with Kevin Chong, the instructor in real life, were as impressed with his teaching skills just as much in the virtual learning environment.

- Some participants expressed disappointment that they did not receive written comments from their peers following a workshop session.
- Both the course instructor and TA indicated that this first effort to provide a workshop in Second Life was a good learning experience for themselves and for the students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are respectfully offered, based on the findings:

- Ensure that prospective participants have access to adequate technology and reasonably good keyboarding skills
- Experiment with ways of enabling participants to take turns providing feedback in text-chat while still encouraging lively discussion. Perhaps a “round”, followed by a free-for-all?
- Encourage participants (perhaps require) to provide written comments to their peers following workshop sessions
- Consider recommendations offered by course participants through the evaluation questionnaire
- Collect some demographic data from participants that will assist in clarifying the target market for Second Life learning.

Conclusion

This look at the first creative writing workshop to be offered by UBC using the virtual classroom shows that there is good potential for this format to become an integral part of the distance learning program. The enthusiasm of many participants and the instructors and the level of satisfaction with the level of learning in the workshops is a good indication of the future possibilities.

As with any form of learning, it is “not for everyone”, but for those with reasonably good computer skills and an interest in learning via the World Wide Web, learning in Second Life appears to be an exciting new alternative.

BACKGROUND

This report constitutes an evaluation of two sessions of distance creative writing workshops which were delivered in the online environment of Second Life.

Workshop sessions took place from Sept. 11th to December 4th, 2009 and January 8th to April 9th, 2010. Participants met weekly in the UBC virtual classroom in Second Life on Fridays from 3:00 – 5:00 pm. Participants regularly submitted their creative writing and learning occurred through a collaborative peer review process as well as guidance and feedback from the instructor.

The workshops were designed to not only allow students who live to far away from UBC to attend a creative writing workshop, but also to explore the role-playing nature of virtual worlds with the idea that this exploration could then be applied to the creation of literary genres including fiction, playwriting, screenplay and writing for New Media.

In the Second Life virtual world, users create alter egos known as Avatars that they use to explore virtual environments, interact with each other, attend concerts, go dancing, meet for coffee and visit attractions.

Businesses and academic institutions in the “first world” have already taken advantage of Second Life as a setting for virtual gatherings and classes. IBM has used the world for meetings and collaborations. Educational institutions, including New York University and Harvard Law School, have offered courses dealing with new media in Second Life. Writing classes are already being offered on a Second Life region known as “Book Island.” Accredited colleges and universities are joining Second Life at a rate that makes it difficult to keep track of the exact number of them, but a recent count has the figure at over 120.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative and participatory evaluation was designed to assess the impact of the Second Life virtual classroom on student learning.

An online questionnaire was developed in consultation with the course instructor, Kevin Chong and TA, Christine Leclerc. The evaluator contacted participants prior to the end of the workshop sessions, letting them know that they would receive a link to the online questionnaire and inviting them to participate. Links to the questionnaire were sent out following the last class of each of the two sessions. The evaluator and course instructor followed up with encouragement to those who were slow to participate.

Data collected from course participants was collated and analyzed by the evaluator for the purpose of this report. Where it made sense to do so, data for Group 1 and Group 2 were compared.

The evaluator created her own Avatar and attended some of the Second Life classes to observe. In addition, at the end of the second session, she gathered feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the course format from both Kevin and Christine.

LIMITATIONS

This qualitative evaluation relies on the feedback from 16 of 20 participants, the course instruction and the Teaching Assistant (TA).

FINDINGS

What follows summarizes the responses to the online questionnaire from course participants (Appendix A). All comments received are appended to this report (Appendix B).

1. Why participants chose to take the Fiction in Second Life rather than an onsite course

The most frequently reported reason for enrolling in this course was an interest in the concept.

- 2 questionnaire respondents chose the course because it fit with their schedule
- 2 respondents wanted to take a course taught by Kevin Chong
- 3 respondents were looking for creative writing courses from a distance 8 (53%) respondents were intrigued by the concept of learning in Second Life



"I am extremely interested in the internet as a medium for academia and was intrigued by engaging via an avatar".

"I was curious about the online world aspect...thought it might inspire some great ideas for writing and/or introduce new ways of discussing and workshopping pieces."

It was noted that more participants in Group 2 were excited about trying out the online format than Group 1. It might be worth gathering some demographic information in a future evaluation of a similar course, to find out more about the ideal target group for this type of learning.

58% of all participants had not previously taken courses by distance, so it may be that for some, the format was intriguing enough to convince them to engage in distance learning for the first time.

For all but one respondent, this was a first experience in taking a course using the Second Life format. 68% of respondents had not visited Second Life prior to taking this course. Of those who had visited Second Life, all but two had very limited experience with the online world.

When asked what had attracted them to the Second Life format, the majority (63%) were attracted by the novelty of the concept.



“...I was curious about how I would perceive critiques if I didn’t know anything about who was giving them.”

“I was interested to see how the virtual format might change the type of submissions I would feel comfortable handing in.”

2. What participants liked most about the Second Life format

Overall, the most appealing aspect of the Second Life format was the freedom afforded by the anonymity of the format.

- Most respondents (75%) liked the anonymity which enabled them to give and receive frank feedback more easily than in real life:
-
- 2 respondents mentioned typical advantages of a distance learning format – being able to work from home and not having to interact socially with classmates
- 3 respondents indicated that they enjoyed the “fun” aspects of the format – creating and changing the look of their avatar; “engaging but not pressured”.
- 3 respondents specifically referred to advantages of the online chat format – being able to “speak” at any time; being able to copy, paste and print out comments and the ability to express ideas without feeling as if one was interrupting.



“The nature of the feedback was more to the point than in some FL workshops (less flattering for social nicety sake)”

“I felt free to give any opinion without feeling people would pre-judge my opinions based on race/ethnicity/religion/physical appearance.”

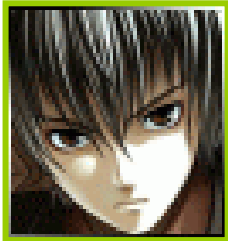
“I liked that people were honest about my work.”

3. What participants like least about the Second Life format

Four main themes emerged from comments made by 12 respondents:

- The system does not really allow for “turn taking” so at times, comments become somewhat jumbled (6 comments). One respondent did say that he/she could easily compensate for this by saving the entire conversation to read later.

- 5 respondents referred to difficulties with technology – slow internet connections, and computers freezing or crashing
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- 5 respondents missed the personal interaction that takes place in a real life setting
- Two respondents commented that their slow keyboarding skills inhibited their ability to participate fully.



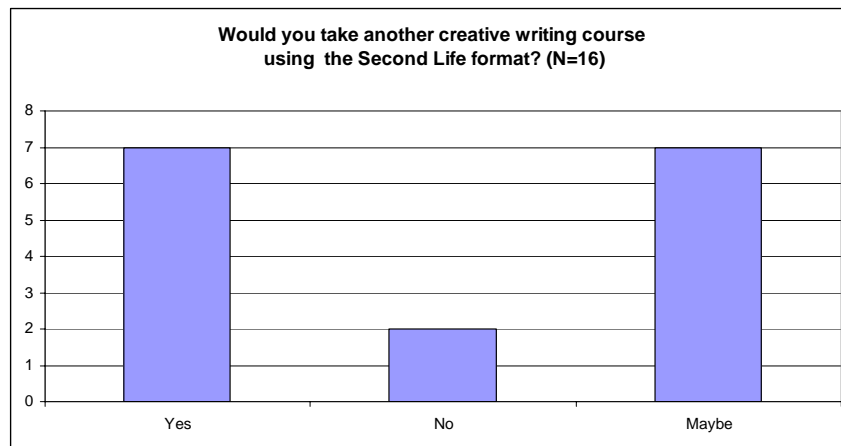
“As you can’t tell who is going to type what, and when, sometimes the comments get a bit jumbled”

I didn’t feel like I could engage with the other avatars and respond as if they were real people

“Users such as myself with sub-par computers could be frustrated by lagging, crashes and freezing”

4. Would participants take another creative writing course in Second Life?

Of the 6 respondents from the first group, 2 indicated that they would not take another Second Life course and 4 indicated that they might. Group 2 was more positive with 7 of 10 respondents saying that they would take another course and three saying that they might.



Respondents were asked to comment on their answer choices. Comments from both groups were mostly positive. Those from Group 2 were much more enthusiastic than from Group 1.

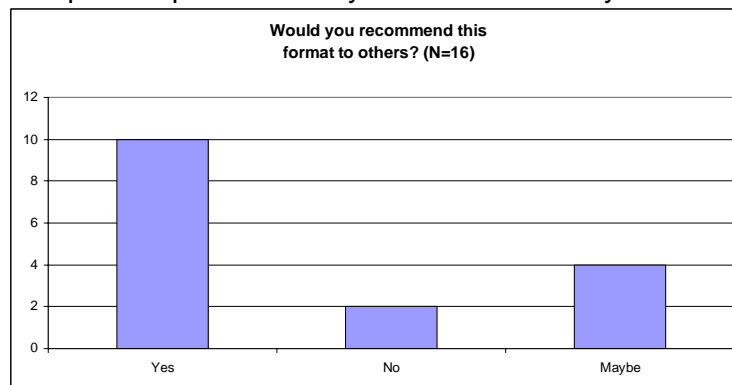


Group 1 comment: *“There are aspects that I liked and disliked, but I think the experience is worth repeating.”*

Group 2 comment: *“I thought it was great and one of the better learning experiences I have had in my classes.”*

5. Would participants recommend this course format to others?

Responses from Group 1 were evenly split with 2 respondents saying “yes”; two saying “no” and 2 saying “maybe. Again, Group 2 participants were more positive. 8 of 10 respondents in Groups 2 responded with “yes” and 2 with “maybe”.



Respondents were asked to comment on their answer choices. Comments from both groups were mostly positive and again those from Group 2 were much more enthusiastic than from Group 1.



Group 1 comment: *“Would recommend for people who are fast, chatty typists and used to a real time chat format.”*

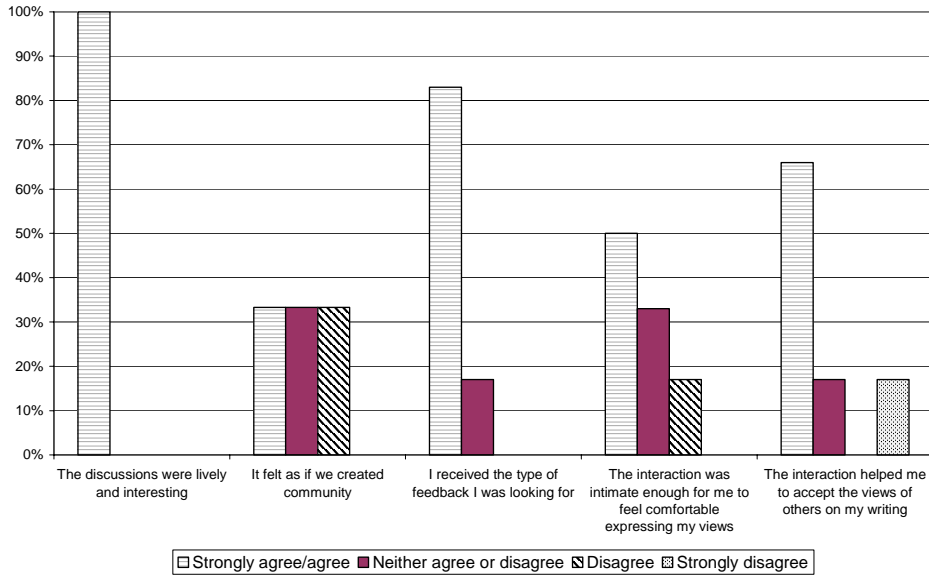
Group 2 comment *“It was fun and the classroom setting worked. The student and instructor comments were great and very helpful and honest.”*

6. How well the Second Life Format allowed participants to discuss their work

Group 1 participants were in full agreement that the online discussions were lively and interesting. Feelings about how well the group created community were mixed and 50% of respondents indicated that the interaction was intimate enough for them to feel

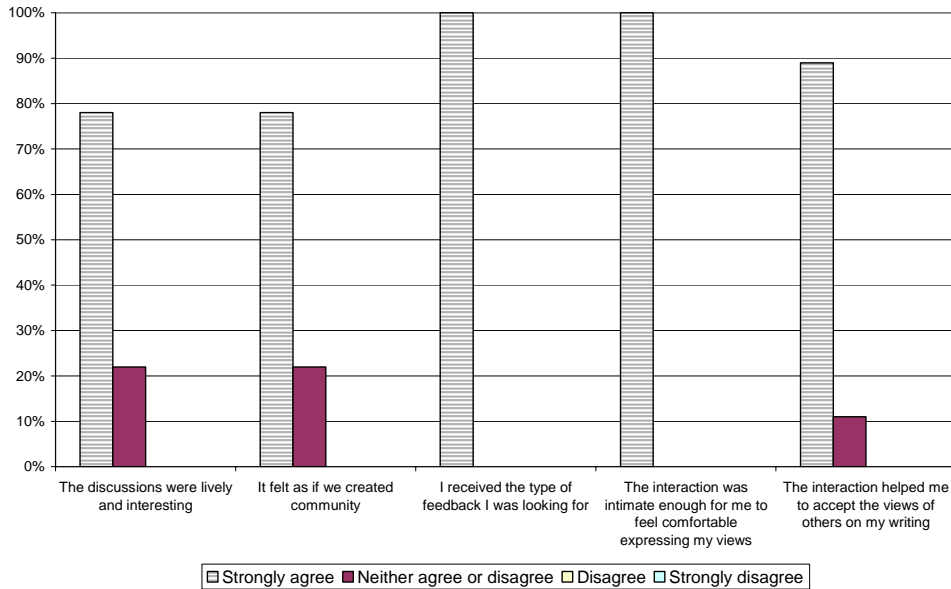
comfortable expressing their views. 60% of respondents indicated that the interaction helped them to accept the views of others on their writing.

How well Second Life allowed participants to discuss their work - Group 1 (N=6)



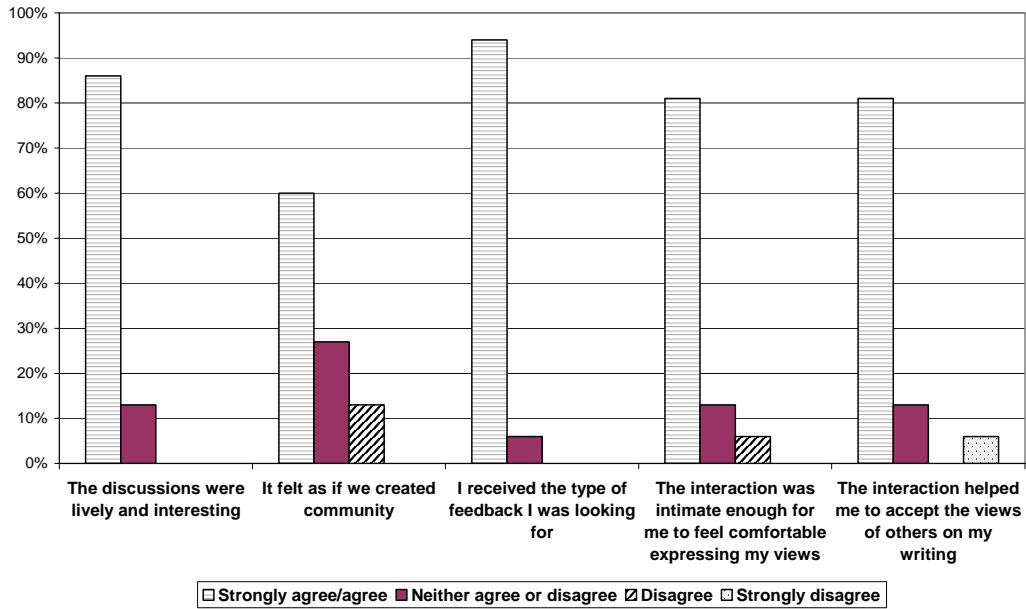
Responses from Group 2 were very positive.

How well the Second Life sessions allowed participants to discuss their work - Group 2 (N=9)



Overall, the format appears to have worked well for the majority of participants. The few comments made relative to this question did not show any particular trend.

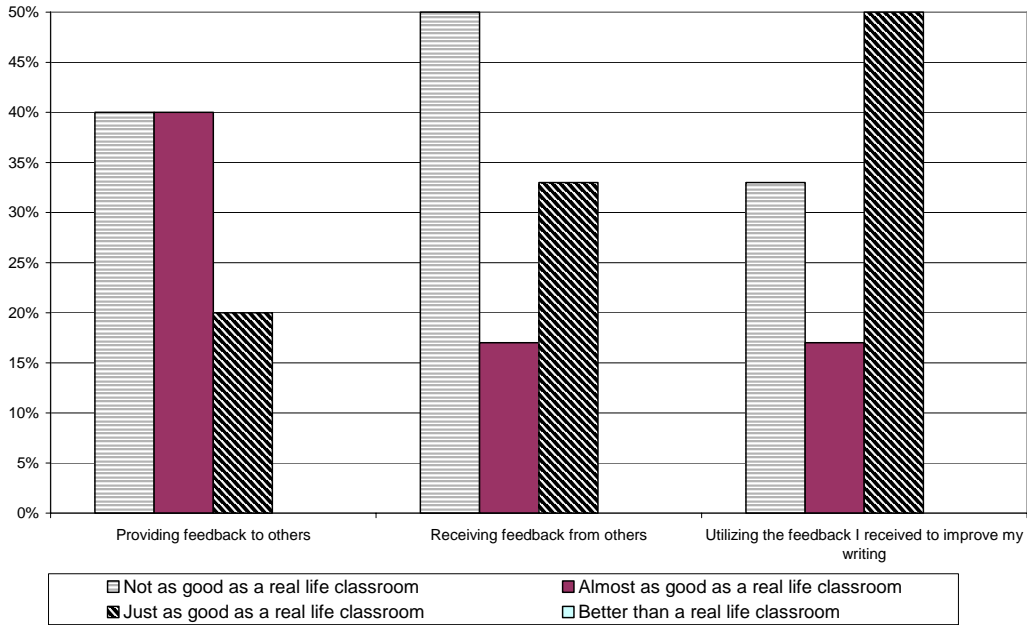
**How well the Second Life sessions allowed participants to discuss their work (N=15)
Group 1 and Group 2**



7. How interaction in the Second Life environment compared to a real life class

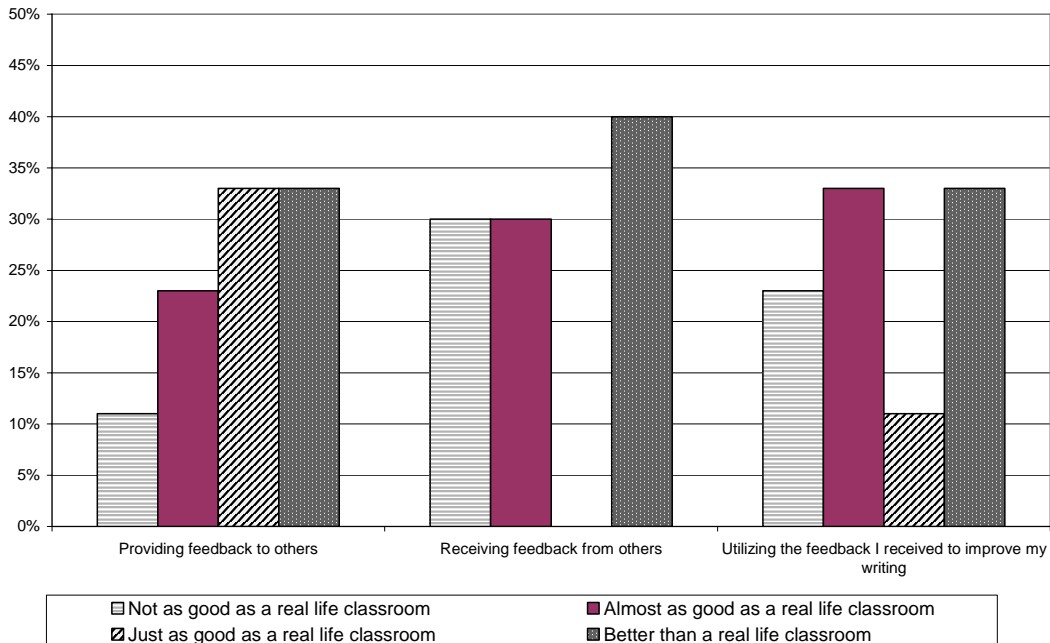
Responses from Group 1 were mixed. 60% of respondents felt that the environment was just as good or almost as good as in real life. 50% believed that receiving and utilizing feedback was just as good or almost as good as in real life.

How interaction compared to a real life class. Group 1 (N=6)



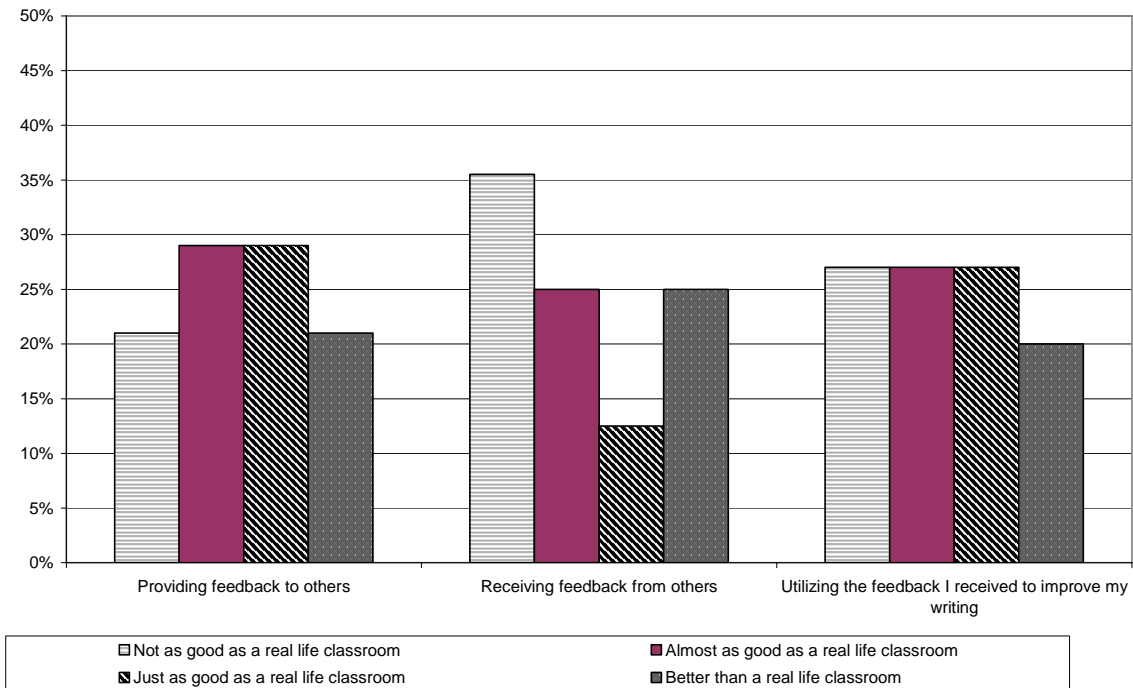
Interestingly, some participants in Group 2 preferred the Second Life format to a real life classroom, particularly in the area of receiving feedback from others:

How interaction compared to a real life class. Group 2 (N=10)



Overall, it appears that the majority of all respondents were at least as comfortable providing, receiving and utilizing feedback in Second Life as in a real life setting.

How interaction compared to a real life class
Group 1 and Group 2 (N=16)

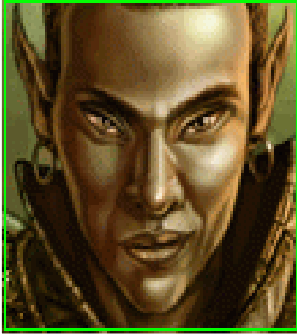


- Two respondents from the first group and one from the second group commented that they would like to have received written comments from peers outside of the virtual classroom.
- One respondent said that he/she would like to have had the opportunity to do re-writes and re-submit these to the group for follow-up.
- One respondent referred specifically to an advantage of the distance format: "People don't know you so they focus more on your piece than what they know of you. This is good in terms of criticism of your work".

8. What participants learned about themselves through the process of creating their Avatars.

16 participants responded to this question. 50% of participants indicated that they had not really learned anything new about themselves. Other comments were more related to the process itself, rather than how it affected them.

Three participants in Group 2 articulated an awareness of having learned something new in the process:



“...: in the real world we are a lot more wary of other people's feelings.

“How much I reflect my avatar, as people said when we met. Now I think I could extend the role playing further.”

“I learned that creating a character can be a lot more intricate. If thinking about my avatar as a character I'm writing about, then 'living' that character provides me with a lot more avenues to think about what kinds of things I need to make this character substantial and real to the story”

9. Did what they learned about themselves in the process of creating their Avatars lead to any reflection that may have influenced participant's story telling or character development skills?

20% of participants in Group 1 and 30% of participants in Group 2 responded “Yes” to this question; 60% of both groups responded with “No”. 20% of Group 1 and 10% of Group 2 were “not sure”.

In retrospect, this question was not well worded and could be changed or eliminated in another administration of the participant questionnaire. A few comments received on this question did not reveal much. However, one respondent commented that it was a great exercise to get into the mindset of the character and take him or her to the next level of being. Another respondent said that it allowed him/her to become “more in-depth with my character and think of particular details I might have skipped over otherwise”.

10. How did the assumed identities impact participant's interaction with others in the virtual classroom?

63% of 16 respondents did not believe that the identity they assumed had any impact. Three respondents felt more confident in the virtual classroom and two respondents articulated that they were more honest in giving feedback. This may have been due at least as much to the anonymity afforded in the environment as to confidence because of the Avatar identities.

11. How the identities assumed impacted what participant's chose to write about?

69% of 13 respondents believed the identities they assumed had no impact on what they chose to write about. 4 respondents indicated that the anonymity gave them confidence to show writing that they would be reluctant to bring forward in a real life class (more risqué; more controversial). 2 respondents said that what they decided to write about was actually influenced by the SL environment:



“I wrote some of my stories in reaction to how I perceived others in the class.”

“The ideas of SL created a lot of new and interesting ideas to write about in this environment. Just exploring the virtual world of SL can inspire stories and characters. It led me to write about virtual worlds.”

12. Did participants explore the Second Life environment outside of the virtual classroom?

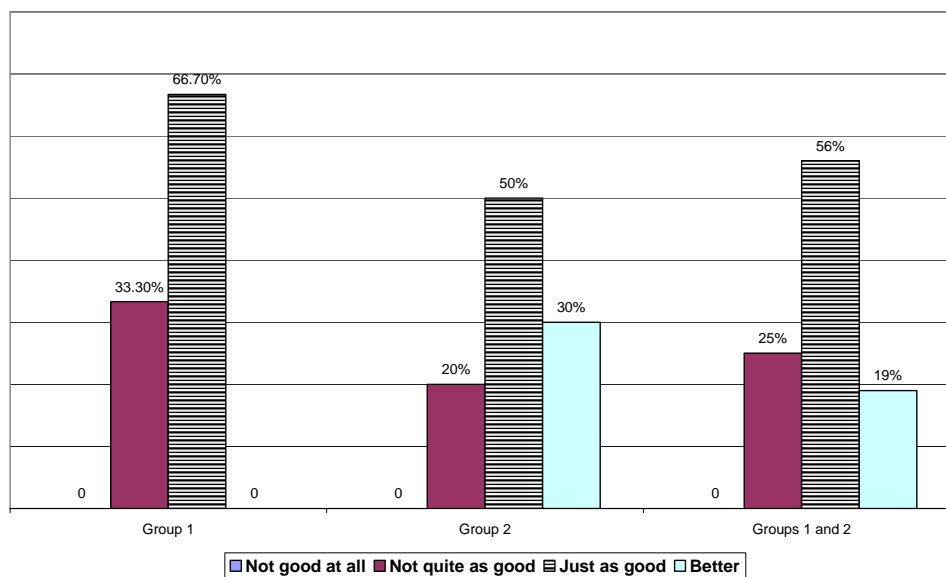
66% of Group 1 respondents and 30% of Group 2 respondents did some exploration of Second Life outside the classroom environment.

Those responding in the affirmative were asked to describe any ways in which this might have impacted their writing. 3 respondents indicated that it had no impact. Two respondents (one from each group) indicated that the exploration of SL had provided them with inspiration or ideas for their writing.

13. How participants compared feedback received in this class to that in a real life classroom situation

Overall, the majority of participants believed that feedback was just as good or better than in a real life classroom situation:

How participants compared Second Life feedback on their work to that in a real life classroom



As could be expected, comments related to the advantages of the more personal contact afforded in a real life classroom as well as the advantages of the anonymity provided in the Second Life format.



“People can express more and convey more meaning when we can hear their voices and see their facial expressions.”

“The honesty was wonderful; also there was not grandstanding going on.”

“It was good and not quite as good as real life in a couple of ways. The people who did comment commented very thoughtfully and thoroughly.”

In addition, two participants mentioned that they missed getting written feedback and one commented on the advantage of being able to copy and paste the entire discussion thread of a workshop for reference.

14. How participants compared studying with the instructor, Kevin Chong, in real life to working with him in Second Life

4 participants (two from Group 1 and two from Group 2) had studied with Kevin in a real life classroom. All four agreed that he was a fine instructor in both settings and one respondent noted that Kevin handled the Second Life workshop in a similar way to a real life setting.

15. How comfortable participants were with the text-chat format

The majority of 16 respondents in both groups (81% overall) were comfortable with the text-chat format. The lack of ability to type quickly enough to participate fully was an issue for four participants. One participant from Group 1, which tried the voice chat option on Second Life was not comfortable with that format. One participant was not at all satisfied: “Ideas came and went without any support for them and they came from everybody at the same time.”

16. Participant recommendations for improve the course format.

5 suggestions were made by participants in Group 1 and 9 by participants in Group 2. Two participants suggested pursuing the capability to use voice chat. Two participants suggested having some sort of rules or guidelines for chatting, e.g. one person talks at time. The remaining comments are varied and likely worth consideration. The reader is directed to page 37 in Appendix B to view these comments in their entirety.

THE PERSPECTIVES OF COURSE INSTRUCTOR & TA.

Feedback from course instructor Kevin Chong and TA, Christine Leclerc indicates that overall, they enjoyed working in the Second Life format; they learned from the experience and have an interest in further exploring the Second Life Environment for the purpose of teaching.

What worked well

Kevin Chong:

- I think our photo-scavenger hunt worked well. And I liked the texture of our workshop conversations; the way our conversations progressed or went into tangents was very similar to a real workshop. The quality of the feedback was high. And as much as I like the social element of a workshop, I also think social niceties can blunt criticism; this happens less in an anonymous workshop.
- I also liked Christine's in-class exercises.
- I'm pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoy teaching this class. Our conversations really feel like in-class workshops in real life.
- I also think that SL has allowed students to write about role-playing, alternate worlds, and incorporate genres like sci-fi and fantasy in a more uninhibited way

Christine Leclerc:

- I agree with Kevin that the criticism seemed more blunt, but in a productive way, in the Second Life classroom. It also seemed that conversations that might have ended due to social awkwardness lasted longer in Second Life, which allowed for more perspective volleys, in my opinion.
- I found the discussions engaging and think the scavenger hunt and breakout session went well.

What didn't work so well?

Kevin Chong

- Voice chat. At times, text chatting didn't work so well for some students. I wish we had a few more ways of getting the students involved in SL. I also wish students wouldn't pop into class late... that's also a first life problem.
- While having all the students appear as avatars while text-chatting makes you feel as though you're in class, I can't say I know the students as well as I would if it were face-to-face. I miss this, though one student remarked to me that he enjoyed not knowing the other students, because in a real class, he'd tune out comments from students whose personalities clashed with their own. I think this is a valid point.

Christine Leclerc

- Sometimes people let their avatars nod off (I'm guilty of this as well), and I think it would be cool if students could develop a set of gestures to get further "into

character." It would be nice if we were to animate the avatars more through non-automatic gestures.

What was learned in the first class that was used successfully in the second session

Kevin Chong

- In general, I felt I learned how to better conduct workshops in SL from the first term.

Christine Leclerc

- I learned how to removing griefers the first time around, which helped the second time around. I also became more comfortable with the social aspect of Second Life in the second semester, which made me feel more at ease: I stopped trying to glean for social cues that just aren't there!

Ideas about what to do differently in a future class

Kevin Chong

- One thing that was missing from the class is a sense of students building a community beyond the class the way you would in real life. I'm not sure how I would encourage students to stay in touch.

Christine Leclerc

- Have a class in a castle, or the bottom of the ocean as Kevin once suggested. I also think it would be interesting if there were the occasional seemingly random dramatic intervention (i.e. a sword fight outside, or an unconventional Snow White stops by while trying to escape the wrath of her stepmother, etc.).

Appendix A – Participant Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to gather feedback on your experience with the Fiction Writing on Second Life format - for the main purpose of evaluating the program.

As you will see, the majority of the questions are open-ended. This means that you will need to take time to reflect upon your answers, and that the process of responding may not be as quick as you might have wished! In attempt to mitigate the "burden", I have posted the survey in such a way that you don't have to respond in one "sitting". You can complete part of the survey, then return to it later to add more - provided that you use the same computer you started with.

Although completing the questionnaire in a thoughtful way might take you an hour or so, I am hoping that the process of responding will be beneficial in that it will provide you with opportunities to reflect upon and learn from the experience of participating in the Second Life learning format in ways that will impact positively on your writing in the future.

As a participant in this new form of distance learning, your feedback is important and will be much appreciated.

If you have any questions about the evaluation, you can contact me at carolonmayne@shaw.ca .

Please complete your questionnaire by:

Thank you for your participation

Regards
Carol Munro (aka Hattie Ziplon)
carolonmayne@shaw.ca

1. Why did you choose to take this course via distance learning rather than an onsite course?
2. Have you taken other distance learning courses in the past? If you answered "Yes", which other distance learning courses have you taken?
3. Is this your first experience with distance learning using the Second Life format?
4. What attracted you to the Second Life format?
5. Had you visited Second Life prior to taking this course? If you answered "Yes" please tell me about your previous experience with Second Life
6. What did you like most about using the Second Life format for this course?

7. What did you like least about using the Second Life format for this course?
8. Would you take another creative writing course using the Second Life format? Please comment.
9. Would you recommend this format to others?
10. How well did the Second Life sessions allow you to discuss your work?
11. How did the interaction compare to other course formats?
12. What, if anything did you learn about yourself through the process of creating your Avatar?
13. If you learned something about yourself through creating your Avatar, did this lead to any reflection that might have influenced your story telling or character development skills?
14. Please comment on how the identity you assumed impacted on how you interacted with others in the virtual classroom
15. Please comment on how the identity you assumed and/or the Second Life environment impacted what you chose to write about in this course.
16. Please comment on how the appearance or the identities assumed by others in the course impacted your view of them and/or their writing.
17. During the time you were involved in this course did you explore the Second Life world outside of the virtual classroom?
18. How would you compare the feedback you received in this course to feedback you receive in a real life classroom situation?
19. If you have studied with Kevin Chong in real life, how would you compare the experience to that of studying with Keith in Second Life?
20. Please comment on how comfortable you were with the text-chat format?
21. Do you have any recommendations about how to improve the format of this course?
22. Do you have any comments on the evaluation format?