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NATIONAL NEWS

'Second Life' Struggles to Catch On With Educators

Education Week

By: Katie Ash

June 15, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2011/06/15/03secondlife.h04.html?tkn=PXXFmKSy3aBtBm1GkuBWmRZZ0HiifwNx142s&cmp=clp-edweek>

Teachers from around the country are gathering together to visit the Alamo in San Antonio, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and the Louvre in France in the span of a few hours without shelling out a dime. They are traveling back in time to Paris in 1900 and meeting in treehouses to share tips with other teachers without setting foot outside their homes or schools. Those are the kinds of virtual experiences, made possible by a computer and a high-speed Internet connection, that first attracted educators to [Second Life](#), technology experts say. In the immersive online world, started in 2003, participants interact as avatars—virtual stand-ins for real people.

Initially, there was a lot of excitement about the possibilities of using Second Life as a professional-development tool for educators. The International Society for Technology in Education, or ISTE, for one, set up shop on Second Life, touting its potential benefits and calling on educators to join the community.

But, for a number of reasons, those expectations have largely fallen short, offering cautionary lessons about using technology for professional development.

To begin with, a lack of time, money, and up-to-date technology posed significant challenges. Plus, the amount of training required to become proficient in Second Life discouraged many teachers from thinking of it as a useful and efficient professional-development tool.

“There’s always going to be a real desire for people to connect that way, but Second Life is not always the most accessible or the most stable platform,” says Jennifer Ragan-Fore, who runs the Second Life program for ISTE.

Jessica Medaille, the senior director of membership development for ISTE, adds that “folks who were more tech-savvy and tech-hungry were willing to do whatever it took to envision a world where a classroom full of educators could come from different backgrounds [to meet]. But there are often many hurdles to make that really viable.”

Hosting Virtual Events

Second Life, which was created by the San Francisco-based company Linden Lab, provides a virtual space for users to interact with one another through avatars. Residents, as they are called in Second Life, can interact with other residents, socialize with one another, and attend events being held in Second Life, as well as buy and sell virtual property and goods to one another with actual—not virtual—money.

The Washington-based ISTE has harnessed the power of Second Life since 2006 and hosts a wide variety of events “in world” for teachers.

But Medaille says that Second Life’s strength, in part, is also its biggest problem. “There are so many possibilities,” she says. “In some ways, it’s really great, and in other ways, it makes it even harder for somebody who is coming in to know what they’re

supposed to do.”

In addition to the steep learning curve of understanding how to control your avatar and move around the island, the designated space where ISTE holds events, the platform itself is a heavy application that requires at least 512 megabytes, according to the Second Life website, as well as a steady, high-speed Internet connection, says Ragan-Fore.

Social-networking sites and Web 2.0 tools such as Twitter, blogs, and wikis are better suited for the kind of “drop in and drop out” professional development that many teachers are looking for these days, says Ragan-Fore.

“People want to be on the go,” she says, “and it’s hard to access [Second Life] on a wireless or even mobile connection.”

‘Friends in Real Life’

Still, ISTE has decided to maintain a strong presence in Second Life despite scaling back on some of its initial projects in the virtual world, Ragan-Fore and Medaille say. The immersive environment and the passion of those involved with it make Second Life a unique and powerful professional development and networking tool, they say.

The organization hosts a monthly speaker series, weekly social gatherings, and regular tours, in which people attend as avatars, and volunteers run the ISTE Island facilities, where newbies can go to learn how to navigate and use the educational aspects of Second Life.

“One of the things that was very powerful about the community that still exists for us ... is there is a lot of camaraderie in helping people learn the tool and make connections,” says Ragan-Fore. About 6,500 people have joined the ISTE Second Life group, although many more visit the island and participate in ISTE’s Second Life events.

Michael Trump, an instructional technology facilitator for the 28,000-student Cabarrus County school system in Concord, N.C., is one of the volunteers who help out on ISTE Island, the organization’s space in Second Life.

“The way things are set up today, it is much easier to get started and become active in events, but you really need someone that knows what they are doing—a buddy—to help you along at first,” he says. “That’s part of my role on ISTE Island.”

Trump uses Second Life to attend lectures, workshops, and events such as space station tours, diving instruction, and entire virtual conferences.

“I especially like the fact that I can attend events while I’m at home, relaxing in my PJs, sipping coffee,” he says. “Once you become familiar with navigating in Second Life, your comfort level greatly increases. ... It makes it very easy to walk up to someone and start a conversation, make a new contact, and possibly even become friends in real life.”

Building Community

Jessica Brogley, the district technology coordinator for the 872-student New Glarus school system in Wisconsin and an adjunct educational technology professor for Marian University, in Fond du Lac, Wis., also volunteers on ISTE Island.

“I’m continuously shocked that Second Life isn’t a more popular means of professional development,” she says. “Not only do you learn, you network with other professionals and gain a sense of how fun gaming can be.”

Although it does take the right technology, as well as some time to get used to your avatar, the benefits of being in Second Life far outweigh the negatives, she says.

“I’ve met many people in Second Life that are forward-thinking teachers that not only understand their content, but they are not afraid to explore new ways to reach students,” she says.

“It’s very personal. You get to know people, and you get to care about people,” says Tom Layton, a retired teacher who now volunteers on Second Life for the University of Oregon, in Eugene.

For the past year, Layton has been working with the university on an initiative called [Project DIRECT](#)—or Distance Innovations for Rural Educators through Communication Technologies—that brings together a group of 20 rural educators to form a learning community in Second Life.

“If you’re a rural English teacher, there might not be [another English teacher] for 50 miles,” he says. With Second Life, he says, geography is no longer a barrier for meeting people and sharing ideas. Teachers from around the world can gather in the same virtual space to discuss curricula, instructional strategies, and other tricks of the trade, he points out.

Many of the events held for educators in Second Life are large seminars in which dozens of avatars can meet to hear a presentation or speaker. Although that approach has its benefits, Layton says he’s taken a different tack with this particular project.

“We’re much more interested in building communities,” he says. The project is currently funded by a two-year, \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which has one year left, but when it ends, Layton hopes the community the rural educators have formed will live on.

Presentations and Lectures

Chris O’Neal, an educational technology consultant based in Lake Monticello, Va., says he uses Second Life mostly as a tool for presentations and lectures on ed-tech topics.

“It’s so interactive. I can take participants on a virtual tour, pull them to specific sections of a website, show them video clips, walk them through steps, and open up documents for them,” he says. “A lot of us have done Skype sessions [or webinars], but it’s not the same as being in a virtual world.”

In particular, Second Life provides a way for teachers to connect even in tough financial times, says O’Neal. “There’s so much travel that’s been frozen for teachers,” he says. Second Life provides an affordable way for teachers to connect and explore professional-development opportunities they may not otherwise be able to afford.

Lori Weedo and Lauren Thurman, two instructional technology teachers in the 42,000-student Escambia County school district, in Pensacola, Fla., created and have managed [Second Life Educators of Escambia County Island](#), or SLEEC, in Second Life for two years.

Weedo and Thurman’s first experience with Second Life was through the National Educational Computing Conference, now called the ISTE conference, hosted by ISTE in 2008. Although the educators were not physically present at the conference in San Antonio, they were able to attend sessions via Second Life, says Thurman.

“We felt like we were really there in the auditorium with other avatars,” she says. That year, her district had set aside money for professional development, and Thurman and Weedo suggested using it to set up an island in Second Life where educators throughout the district could meet.

“It was huge for us because it was during a time when there really was a [budget] crunch, and there wasn’t much money to travel. We found it really valuable that we could continue to learn,” she says.

About 3,500 teachers are in the Escambia County district, and all are welcome in SLEEC Island.

Hosting professional development virtually has helped teachers attend more events, Weedo says, by cutting back on the amount of time it takes to commute to a physical space.

SLEEC Island now offers four-week professional-development sessions focused on integrating technology into the classroom.

“Next year, we plan to do some [professional development] using both face-to-face and Second Life,” says Thurman.

In addition to the time and money saved on professional development, Second Life helps teachers, especially those who tend to be reticent during professional-development sessions, find their voice and participate more, says Thurman.

“People who may have been quietly sitting in a room, who might be a little bit shy, aren’t quite as shy [in Second Life],” she says.

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FLORIDA NEWS

Dear Arne: About those teacher evaluations ...

St. Petersburg Times

By: Ron Matus

August 3, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook/content/dear-arne-about-those-teacher-evaluations>

It’s a given: most teacher evaluation systems are lame. Change is overdue. But shouldn’t we see what works and what doesn’t with pilot projects (i.e., Hillsborough) before going whole hog (i.e., Florida)? So goes the argument in this combination [letter/policy memo](#) that a New York principal and University of Colorado professor Kevin Welner (who directs the National Education Policy Center) recently sent U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan (at Duncan’s invitation). They wrote:

There is no question that educator evaluation systems based in large part on student test scores are uncharted waters. Yet the statewide systems are not pilots; they are full-blown mandates imposed on all public schools. What we are engaging in is a national experiment that is costly in public dollars attached to high-stakes consequences for educators and students alike ...

Just as no pharmaceutical would be brought to market without first being tested for effectiveness and for adverse reactions, neither should a practice with the potential to profoundly impact the lives of the nation’s students and their teachers.

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More teachers are younger, non-traditional, study finds

Orlando Sentinel

By: Erica Rodriguez

August, 2 2011

http://blogs.orlandosentinel.com/news_education_edblog/2011/08/more-teachers-are-younger-non-traditional-study-finds.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+SentinelSchoolZone+%28Sentinel+School+Zone%29

More teachers are entering the profession after spending time in non-teaching professions and are less experienced than before, according to a new study from the National Center for Education Information.

The study surveyed more than 1,000 randomly-selected school teachers and found that teachers are younger and less experienced than in 2005. The number of teachers with 25 years or more of experience dropped 10 percent while the number of teachers with five or fewer years of experience increased to fill the gap of those retiring educators.

The number of teachers younger than 30 doubled since 2005 and make up 22 percent of those surveyed according to the findings.

The changes mark a dramatic shift in the teaching force, said Emily Feistritzer, who authored the study and is president of the NCEI.

Because of the new perspective the younger, more varied teachers bring to the profession it could mean that even greater changes are in store for education.

“Nowhere are the differences between alternatively-prepared and traditionally-prepared teachers more pronounced than in attitudes about what would improve American education and what would make teaching more a profession,” she said in a press release.

Not surprisingly, the study also found teachers strongly oppose many education reforms like ending tenure and evaluating a teacher’s effectiveness on student achievement data.

[You can read the full report here.](#)

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Meeting in Tampa, state Education Board hears both complaints and ideas for saving money

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeffrey S. Solochek and Marlene Sokol

August 2, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/meeting-in-tampa-state-education-board-hears-both-complaints-and-ideas-for/1183920>

TAMPA - Gathered to discuss school funding, Florida's Board of Education spent much of Tuesday listening to complaints.

Superintendents and teachers' leaders lamented unfunded mandates from the Legislature. A charter school operator implored the board to treat charters as partners. A champion of state-funded preschools asked for better accountability. And there was concern about work conditions.

"Morale is at an all-time low in our districts," said Lee Swift, chairman of the Charlotte County School Board.

Earlier, Hillsborough County superintendent MaryEllen Elia said, "We all know that money will not necessarily improve education. We also know you have to have resources to meet the needs of every student."

Board members looked to Elia and others for ideas to increase efficiencies. They heard several, including cutting the amount of unused sick leave employees get paid at retirement, renegotiating contracts and expanding virtual school.

Within the discussion came pointed questions that might lay the groundwork for debate in the 2012 legislative session.

Board member Gary Chartrand asked if the state should again consider class sizes.

Chairwoman Kathleen Shanahan asked if the state should fund education based on course completion rather than enrollment. She raised questions about tenure for community college professors. And she suggested philanthropic organizations might underwrite some programs for at-risk students.

The emphasis on money is necessary, officials said. Legislative actions closed a mounting deficit this year, said Amy Baker, the state's chief economist. But the economy isn't expected to improve much until 2013.

Charter school proponents said their model goes a long way in containing costs. "Everybody within the charter world knows money matters," said Jon Hage, president of Charter Schools USA. "Competition works."

But Andy Ford, president of the Florida Education Association, decried the current climate for teachers: "The idea that you can improve our schools by cutting and consolidating and cracking the whip is a fantasy that is shortchanging our children."

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Needy families offered cheap Internet service, computers

By: Laura Isensee

Miami Herald

August 2, 2011

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/08/02/v-fullstory/2342521/needy-families-offered-cheap-internet.html>

It's not just about Google for that research project.

Nearly everything Miami-Dade students — and their parents — need for school can be done online.

Check homework assignments. Work on extra tutoring. View digital textbooks. Check children's grades. Or email their teachers.

But 72 percent of families in the county's neediest neighborhoods didn't have Internet service at home in 2008, when Miami-Dade County Public Schools last did a survey.

A program launching this week in partnership with the Comcast cable provider seeks to change that. Families with children who qualify for free school lunches can sign up for low-cost, high-speed Internet, buy a computer at a discount and take free Internet training.

"Access to the Internet is akin to a civil rights issue for the 21st Century," said David Cohen, Comcast executive vice president. "It's that access that enables people in poorer areas to equalize access to a quality education, quality healthcare and vocational opportunities."

As part of its merger with NBC Universal earlier this year, Comcast is required to provide 2.5 million low-income households with high-speed Internet for less than \$10 a month; computers for less than \$150 a month; and digital literacy training, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

Superintendent Alberto Carvalho and others will launch the Internet Essentials program Thursday at Phillis Wheatley Elementary School in Miami.

Miami-Dade marks the second kick-off for the program, which Comcast debuted in Chicago earlier this year with plans to eventually offer it in 4,000 school districts across the country.

It isn't the first local attempt to close the digital divide. But the latest strategy targets the three main challenges facing families who don't have Internet access, Cohen said: The cost of a computer; the cost of high-speed Internet (usually about \$50 a month); and digital illiteracy — not understanding how the Internet works or why it is important.

"We hope attacking all three of those barriers in a single integrated program is the best way to move the needle," Cohen said.

The company has pledged to offer the program for three school years. Cohen declined to say how much it will cost the company, but said it was a "seven-figure plus commitment."

The company will guarantee the price for high-speed Internet service — \$9.95 a month — as long as a family has a child who receives a free lunch in the National School Lunch Program and lives within Comcast's service area. (Comcast is not available in some parts of South Florida, such as Miami Beach.)

ELIGIBILITY

For the 2011-2012 school year, a family of four making \$29,055 a year would qualify — about 60 percent of the 300,000-plus students in Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Among those students: Aura Herrera's two sons, Roger, 10, and Marco, 5, who attend Morningside Elementary School. The family doesn't have Internet or a computer at home. So when Roger needs to work on a school project — like researching snakes — or when Marco wants to practice his numbers in an online exercise, the boys go to the library to use a computer.

"Since everything is so advanced, it's very important," Herrera said of the Internet. "Before things weren't so advanced."

On a recent afternoon, Herrera checked out two laptops at Lemon City Branch Library on Northeast 61st Street — one for her and one for Marco. He played games. She tried to check an email from her nieces in Guatemala, who are eager for their aunt to join Facebook.

At the county branch, people can only use the laptops inside the library for an hour at a time, up to two hours a day.

Other programs that provide computers, training and Internet access have also tried to close the digital gap. In Miami Beach, city residents can get discounts on computers and receive free wireless Internet service, although it's not accessible above the second floor of a building.

The Elevate Miami initiative, led by the city of Miami, has installed 350 computers with Internet access in parks and senior centers since 2004. The program has evolved over the years, at times partnering with the Miami-Dade school district to distribute computers. But funding has fallen.

ANOTHER EFFORT

In another effort funded with federal money, the Miami-Dade school district aims to distribute 6,000 refurbished computers — \$25 each for families — and establish 10,000 one-year free Internet connections to qualifying students in poor-performing schools. The program started in the 2010-2011 school year and will continue for a second year. Eligible parents will be notified.

"One of the things that we found when we were trying to get people to enroll, parents would often ask, why do I need this?" said Deborah Karcher, chief information officer for Miami-Dade Public Schools.

"The kids are helping us answer that question better than anybody. The kids are telling their parents, 'This is what I'm looking at, this is what I'm learning,'" she said

STATE NEWS

Detroit Board of Education president Anthony Adams resigns

The Detroit News

By: Jennifer Chambers

August 2, 2011

<http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20110802/SCHOOLS/108020412/1026/Detroit-Board-of-Education-president-Anthony-Adams-resigns>

Detroit— Detroit Board of Education president Anthony Adams resigned Tuesday from the 11-member school board, citing the need to focus on his private business interests in the city.

"I have been contemplating this for quite a while," Adams said Tuesday.

He said he thinks it's "necessary for the person running for my district to start serving that district," referring to a school board candidate who filed to fill his seat.

Adams, a former deputy mayor to Kwame Kilpatrick, said in May he would not seek another term.

Tyrone Winfrey will become the board's next president, Adams said, based on board rules.

Board members Carla Scott and Terry Catchings also are not seeking re-election.

Adams has said his decision not to run has nothing to do with the state's newly revised emergency manager law, which stripped power from the school board while Detroit Public Schools is run by a state-appointed emergency manager.

State lawmakers rewrote Michigan's emergency manager law in March, giving sweeping authority to the district's emergency manager.

Under the law, emergency managers may terminate union contracts, suspend collective bargaining for five years and strip local governments of much of their power.

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Louisiana education chief changing charter school oversight

Associated Press

By: Staff

August 2, 2011

<http://www.kplctv.com/story/15197426/education-chief-changing-charter-school-oversight>

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - Louisiana is changing the way it oversees its charter schools.

The beefed-up oversight sought by Acting Superintendent of Education Ollie Tyler comes in response to allegations of rape and sexual incidents between students at a New Orleans charter school - Abramson Science and Technology School - that led to the firing of 2 state employees.

Under preliminary plans described by Tyler, the state-run Recovery School District will more directly monitor independently-run charter schools contracting with the state. Meanwhile, the RSD and state education department will conduct annual on-site reviews of charter schools.

Tyler outlined the recommended changes Tuesday in an e-mail to members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. A final plan will be complete by Sept. 1.

BESE has temporarily shut down Abramson pending an investigation.

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Half of Oregon's schools falling short of targets

Associated Press

By: Staff

August 2, 2011

<http://washingtonexaminer.com/news/2011/08/half-oregons-schools-falling-short-targets>

Half of Oregon's 1,200 public schools fall short of performance targets required under the No Child Left Behind law, according to a state report released Tuesday.

But the state school superintendent, Susan Castillo, said the federal government raised those targets and student performance on state tests actually improved from last year, The Oregonian reported (<http://bit.ly/r5rVRz>).

Ratings under No Child Left Behind regulations "do not reflect the growth and innovation taking place in Oregon schools," Castillo said. "I will continue to fight for reforms to these federal regulations."

Other states are seeing similar high failure rates. In Arizona this year, 42 percent of schools missed federal targets. In New Mexico, 87 percent did.

The law, enacted 10 years ago, requires schools to get a rising share of students to pass state tests, culminating with a target that 100 percent of students pass grade-level reading and math tests in 2014.

Schools are judged not only on their overall results but also their pass rates among designated groups, including low-income

students, minority students and those learning English as a second language.

Oregon bumped up its targets this year, asking schools to get about 70 percent of students to pass the tests, up from about 60 percent the previous three years. A separate change significantly raised the score needed to pass the state math test in elementary and middle school.

Crystal Greene, acting communications director for the Oregon Department of Education, which issues the ratings, said the ratings matter but are a blunt way to gauge school performance.

"Is a school necessarily failing because one group of students doesn't reach this new higher bar in the first year?" Greene asked. "I would not necessarily label them as failing."

For most schools, a poor rating brings no consequence apart from bad publicity. But for schools that receive federal anti-poverty funds, missing targets two consecutive years brings an escalating series of sanctions, starting with the requirement that students be offered a free bus ride and priority transfer rights to another school in the district.

A record 80 Oregon schools that serve a concentration of low-income students will have to offer students a priority transfer to another school or free after-school tutoring because they repeatedly missed performance targets.

Twenty-seven of them are in the three-county Portland metro area, including Portland's Jefferson High and Hosford Middle School, Beaverton's Raleigh Hills School, Reedville Elementary in Aloha and Kelly Creek Elementary in Gresham.

Aloha-Huber Principal Scott Drue said his faculty didn't take the inadequate rating as a blow.

"We take it as a positive that we met in everything else" except special education reading scores, he said. "It means we need to drill down deeper and find out who exactly these kids are and what they need."

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