Bridging the gap – engaging distance education students in a virtual world

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Background

• SIS dominates library education provision in Australia
• Large faculty, range of specialisations, 100 subjects (all distance education)
• Review of faculty and curriculum in 2008 resulted in new courses, and online delivery
• Designed to improve student experience, reduce attrition, consolidate position in the LIS education market place
DE: facing the challenges

• DE suits our student profile
• Fits with CSU commitment to regional education
• But entails challenges
  – Communication difficulties
  – Lack of student motivation
  – High drop out
  – Supporting students at a distance
  – Student isolation, lack of community
Bridging the gap

• Need to build connections, increase student engagement
• Fully online learning environment provides opportunities to exploit affordances of ed tech and social networking
• Student-centred curriculum enables active and collaborative learning
• OLE helps address two major issues: amount of reading required, and lack of communal student experience
Students now read, listen .....
...... watch, interact

Consider

What impact do you think the internet has had on the information cycle? How does this affect the traditional information agencies and their role? To answer these questions think about the following:

- Does it make a difference if the creator, publisher and distributor of information is the same person? That is, is it still a cycle?
- Are there still consumers of the information and, if so, has the way they use information changed?
- Does the fact that more information is available "free" on the internet mean that the role of authorised agencies (libraries, archives etc) has lessened - or, simply, changed? Why or why not?

For further investigation ...

Watch

Clay Shirky's talk on your tube titled "How cognitive surplus will change the world" (13:39) in which he explores how digital technology combined with human generosity enables people to collaborate in the sharing of information.

Clay Shirky: How cognitive surplus will change ...
... and network
... some participate in the SIS Second Life Learning Centre
... where they meet, discuss, debate, role play
in groups
or one-to-one
present assignments
... professional development
... and party
Second life getting started

- Standard training kit provided for all subjects (reduces workload for academics and is a resource for students)
- Small group tutorials to start the program
Challenges

• Steep learning curve
• SL has busy interface, not user-friendly
• Needs a fair amount of commitment, time and mind, from staff and students if it is to work
• Can be hard for students who don’t have good internet or fast computer
Evaluation

• Formal investigation after a year asked
  – How did faculty feel about the Second Life experience?
  – How did students feel about the Second Life experience?
  – Based on student and academic feedback, what recommendations can be made to improve student and staff experiences, and learning outcomes in Second Life?
Findings

• Time consuming ... but benefits of connection and sharing spaces make it worthwhile

• Use often superficial (time constraints) ... activities need careful planning and integration (not an add on)

• Students preferred it for communication to the asynchronous forum tool, more intimate

• Desire for one-to-one or small group guidance a powerful motivator

• Worth extending its use to other subjects
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• Image: Hampden Bridge, Wagga Wagga, photo Jake Wallis