Second Life: A Virtual World for International Extension Programming

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Abstract

The Internet has been one of the fastest adoptions in human history (Rogers, 2003). Over 1.4 billion people worldwide are now connected (International Telecommunications Union, 2008). The Internet connects worldwide partners like never before through e-mail and Web sites. The next step in the evolution of international communication is the creation and use of virtual worlds like Second Life®. Virtual worlds are expected to have a huge impact on business, society, and personal lives (LaMonica, 2006).

Second Life® is a multi-user virtual environment; a three dimensional world in which participants can interact in real time through a virtual representative called an avatar. An avatar is a visual representation of the user. Hair, skin color, clothing, and accessories are all chosen by the user. The user can have his/her avatar walk, fly, drive vehicles, and even ride horses. However, the potential for Second Life® as a tool for international agricultural and extension education derives from features that allow a user to converse with other avatars, sit down for presentations and meetings, and attend educational courses and workshops.

Second Life® is currently being used as an educational tool by more than 300 universities including Harvard and Duke (Sussman, 2007). Professors are creating virtual environments to enhance the learning experience for their students. For example, a professor teaching chemistry was able to walk his students through a 3-D molecule online (Bradley, 2007). Agricultural education could take advantage of the same features to teach a global class of students participating virtually how to properly transplant crops. According to Antanacci and Modaress (2008, p. 116), “students engaged in educational games or simulations are interpreting, analyzing, discovering, evaluating, acting, and problem solving.”
Second Life® can have a tremendous impact on the quality of distance education courses. Currently, distance education creates challenges around social interaction between students and faculty (Thurmond & Wambach, 2004). Building a Second Life® classroom and allowing classmates to interact within that setting reintroduces some of the aspects of a traditional learning experience while still maintaining the convenience and low costs of learning at a distance. Interaction between students from different countries may facilitate the development of future collaborations.

Nonformal educational organizations are also integrating Second Life® into their normal operations. The U.S. Cooperative Extension Service has purchased a virtual island in Second Life® named Morrill Island, which is used to conduct “in-world” meetings every month. If an International Extension Island was purchased and promoted, any extension educator with access to the Internet could utilize an unprecedented pool of expertise to meet the needs of their communities. Countries with adequate technological infrastructure may even be able to take advantage of Second Life® to jointly deliver educational short courses based on common issues, such as water usage, across the globe. In 2007, 69% of Second Life® users were from outside the United States (Linden Lab).

Virtual applications, such as Second Life®, can increase the development of knowledge, educate multicultural audiences, utilize innovative program planning and delivery methods, reduce financial expenditures, and enhance program quality. Educators can collaborate virtually with partners and organizations worldwide in classroom teaching, course and program development, professional seminars, research and research conferences, and multi-national meetings. The nature and content of agricultural and extension education must be restructured to address growing global issues. The use of Second Life® is an innovative step in that direction.

**Key Words:** international, education, virtual, Second Life, programming