Creating International Agricultural Experiences in the Virtual World: An Exploration of Second Life

Leslie D. Edgar, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Arkansas
Department of Agricultural Extension and Education
205 Agriculture Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6770 Phone
(479) 575-2601 Fax
ledgar@uark.edu

René P. Miller, Ed.D.
Distance Education Consultant
8639 W 350 N
Thorntown, IN 46071
(765) 436-7165 Phone
r.miller@frontiernet.net

Don W. Edgar, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Arkansas
Department of Agricultural Extension and Education
205 Agriculture Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-2037 Phone
(479) 575-2601 Fax
dedgar@uark.edu

Abstract
The traditional approach to providing students opportunities for international experiences has become more challenging with increasing expenses. With the U.S. dollar plummeting and the trend of international education growing, different approaches should be explored to give students needed global market experience. In the mid 1990s over 89,000 students engaged in study abroad programs. Ten years later that figure had risen to nearly 225,000, and it is expected to increase substantially in the next decade to nearly 1 million. In the past five years, international airfares have risen about $100 per year but this year alone airfares are expected to rise by nearly $400. We as educators realize that international experiences are critical for our students’ success. Agriculture is international, and we must find ways for our students to gain exposure to varying cultures, practices, and thinking regardless of cost increases.

Virtual tours, virtual environments, and virtual co-operation are not new terms; however, they are under-explored in the international agricultural education setting. With expansions in technology and technology-based instruction, it is becoming increasingly easy and less cost inhibitive to provide virtual experiences for our students. Although, these opportunities cannot completely compensate for actual hands-on experiences, they can allow financially challenged
students to participate in online, real-time, three-dimensional virtual replications of an actual international experience. These virtual experiences could prove vital in: (1) increasing the numbers of students exposed to international settings; and by (2) allowing for lower cost educational experiences.

Second Life® is a 3-D virtual world that allows anyone to build an interactive experience. International learning is all about the experience, and Second Life® can be used to immerse students in any setting. While a virtual world cannot be expected to take the place of physically visiting a new environment, it can be used to expose students to many aspects of the new environment and allow them to interact instead of merely observe.

Second Life® can be used collaboratively with an international colleague by sharing virtual worlds that allow each to share the commonalities and differences of agriculture. Incorporating Second Life® into the classroom will allow students to experience virtual field trips, attend or share guest lecturers and/or student presentations. These experiences can enhance traditional classrooms. An additional attraction to using Second Life® is the ability for social interaction with students, instructors and people scattered across the globe. With a bit of creativity on the part of both the instructor and the students, the international agriculture classroom can provide enriching experiences with minimal cost.

Imagine you are an educator in the United States, and you are able to tell your students that, “Tomorrow, we will be visiting a small-scale agricultural operation in the Katine village in north-east Uganda.” What thoughts and feelings will be passing through their heads? When tomorrow arrives you log on, as a class or individually, to Second Life® where your students can experience first-hand natural techniques to managing agriculture; giving them an opportunity to experience Katine agriculture without leaving the classroom. With $100 or less, a few international contacts and an open-mind you can engage your students in an international agricultural experience without leaving your classroom.

**Keywords:** international agriculture, Second Life®, virtual tours, online experiences