Tourism education in a virtual world
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OUTLINE
The short course in Virtual Tourism is one of the three English workshops which Turismo Sant Ignasi's undergraduate students take as a part of the first semester of the third year of their degree. The workshops involve students in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). This type of learning is increasingly seen as 'a modern form of educational delivery, designed to even better equip the learner with knowledge and skills suitable for the global age' (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008:10).

In this version of CLIL, emphasis was placed on the ability of the students to use English as a working language to accomplish tasks and learn more about case studies of people using virtual words in the Tourism sector. Virtual worlds are becoming popular places for people to spend time in. Meadows stated that 'more than 50 million people…chose to spend time as their avatar in virtual worlds' in 2008 (Meadows, 2008:85), and they are increasingly becoming attractive places for educational organisations through the 'sense of place' they offer, which is missing in other forms of online learning (Rufer-Bach, 2009:29).

Through field trips and attendance at events in the most popular virtual world, *Second Life* (http://www.secondlife.com), the students experienced for themselves what it is like to be a tourist in a vitual world, and could also see how real life tourism organisations are using Second Life for market research, promotional and other reasons.

This course is the first of its kind, although a number of other University schools of Tourism are currently or about to teach or involve students in similar courses. These include the International Hotel Management Institute in Switzerland and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Hotel and Tourism Management.

More will surely follow. Tourism aside, at the moment, there are over 200 educational organisations worldwide using Second Life on more than 1200 virtual islands. The international analysts Gartner (http://www.gartner.com/) predicts that 80% of active Internet users will have an avatar or a presence in virtual environment like Second Life by the end of 2011. (http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=503861). Second Life is also and attractive place for educators because of the flexible and cross-cultural nature of the environment. As in mentioned in the official guide for educators interested in using this platform, "The Second Life world is a very sociable place, with tens of thousands of Residents in-world at any time… the are almost unlimited possibilities, few restrictions, and a lot of creativity." (Rufer-Bach 2009:9). This is also echoed by others such as Guest, who states that in Second Life "when you are innovative you have even more opportunity than in the real world." (Guest, 2007:334).

The Virtual Tourism workshop was a blended learning course. Students were asked to undertake a series of exploratory tasks in Second Life which focused upon a self-directed approach to learning. They then posted their reflections on forums on a website specially set up for the course (http://www.virtualtourism.info) which utilizes a MOODLE virtual learning environment (VLE).

COMPETENCIES
The use of the 2D platform complemented the 3D one and afforded a necessary way of demonstrating the development of competencies. The specific competencies that the students developed during this course were:

- Research and knowledge management
- Understanding of diversity
- Cultural sensitivity of knowledge

Evidence of learning and competency development came out of the reflections that the students posted in the VLE forums, and also from the interviews that were undertaken with a number of the students at the end of the course. These were recorded and are available for listening to in their entirety here: http://virtuallytourism.posterous.com/.

The student interviews and feedback forms show that, on the whole, the course was successful. Despite technical problems that caused some students frustration, they adapted well and learned how to use the environment quickly. The students were asked to access Second Life either from home or using computers in the self-access centre at the university (CDT). The course tutor was also on hand twice a week to help them out with any technical difficulties or other doubts or questions they might have had, and when necessary, some asked for help in this way. However, most of the students helped each other, working in small groups while undertaking the tasks. This was a factor that had not been predicted, but which was a pleasant surprise. This social aspect of online learning reflects the research about what really happens in virtual worlds and video games: '60% of gamers are playing with friends' according to survey data mentioned by Palfrey and Gasser (2008:215), and is often ignored by the popular press.

CONCLUSION
If some social commentators and educators are to be believed, then 'Virtual Worlds are on the path to becoming the most powerful source of personal meaning in the contemporary world' (Castronova, 2007:207) and schools and other educational organisations need to do more to 'encourage kids to learn by doing in digital environments' (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008:247).

Evaluating the Virtual Tourism course and its effect on the students, it can be said that the experience was generally positive. The course also opens up new possibilities, which our and other university schools or tourism will have to decide whether they want to pursue more fully.

What lessons have been learned from running the course?

1. The technology in the Self-Access Centre was not designed for running 3D Virtual worlds. The computers there have the minimum specification required for doing so and a better online experience would result if this technology were upgraded with better graphics cards and more memory.
2. A greater focus should have been placed on events and on getting the students to meet and speak to people in real time. Guided tours of areas could be organised and the students themselves could also be asked to create an itinerary or record a tour for others to follow.
3. There is also an opportunity here for a school of Tourism to make a real mark in the virtual world of Second Life and promote itself as an innovative force. This would involve the university creating a permanent presence in-world and using this presence to attract publicity and to establish itself at the forefront of distance learning in Tourism that surely will become an important factor in the future.

Whatever decisions are taken about research paths to follow, it certainly seems that we are just at the beginning of a new educational journey and a branch of tourism education that could well become significant.

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