Virtual WIL: A Collaborative approach to Work Integrated Learning using a virtual world

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XX (XX) School of xx has invested in creating a whole-of-school model for Work Integrated Learning (WIL). The WIL model situates the student at the core of the placement experience and includes pre-practicum theoretical learning, assessment and support during the experience. This paper presents the model paying particular attention to using Virtual Worlds (VW) specifically Second Life (SL) and its role in the WIL student experience. It discusses increasing industry partners’ satisfaction and collaboration through projects involving post graduate interview simulations and virtual preceptor-student ‘meet and greets’.

In response to the global upward trend of the adoption of VWs as an educational platform XX established Interaction Island in SL in 2009. Offering experiences in a virtual environment overcomes the geographical constraints of a multi campus university such as XX and provides a cost effective learning platform for staff and students. This paper reports on 2 virtual WIL projects launched on Interaction Island in 2012. The first project provides the opportunity for students to improve their recruitment performances through practice interview simulations. Invited academics and representatives from industry partners comprise the recruitment panel. This WIL project provides an opportunity for industry partners to promote their Health Care Facility (HCF) whilst students have the benefit of increasing market knowledge and improving their interview performance through rehearsal. The second project actively links preceptors with third year Bachelor of Nursing (BN) students prior to and following their clinical placement. These meet and greet sessions have an educational component where students have the opportunity to develop realistic placement objectives in collaboration with their placement preceptor. Future planned projects will seek to further integrate virtual WIL aligned activities into School wide curricula and be inclusive of a wider selection from industry partners and all academic years of study.

Keywords: Virtual world, SecondLife, collaboration, WIL

Introduction

The successful practical preparation of undergraduate nurses continues to be a contentious issue despite the move away from a hospital based apprenticeship model to tertiary based education featuring Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences. This move intended to enhance critical thinking and increased professional standing has left some with the view that practical skills and nursing knowledge is left wanting (Grealish & Smale, 2011). It is generally agreed that WIL is a shared responsibility between the health care organisations and higher education providers (McCormack, Pancini, & Tout, 2010). A recognised aim of WIL is to provide a standardised experience for the learner (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Presto, 2008) though achieving this goal is difficult where the footprint of XXX, a regional university, spans across multiple health services and states. In an era where there is a global nursing shortage (De Gieter, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2011) effective WIL can help lessen workforce burden and improve recruitment and retention rates of graduate nurses (Bennett, Jones, Brown, & Barlow, 2012; Patrick, et al., 2008). This paper describes how through the use of a Virtual World (VW) Second Life (SL) there can be a positive influence on the WIL experiences in an undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing (BN) curriculum.

Virtual Worlds

A VW is a computer simulated three dimensional (3-D) mutli-media environment (Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007). Users of SL adopt the characteristics of an avatar (3-D representation of self) that is capable of movement, action, speech and text chatting. Interaction with other avatars is synchronous and as such a VW is capable of offering social characteristics of teaching and learning usually only afforded in a face to face environment (Bronack, Sanders, Cheney, Reidl, Tashner, & Matzen, 2008). Avatars have a long association with gaming and are now being researched for use in education. The immersive and authentic nature of VWs offers students a level of active engagement in an environment that is pedagogically sound and safe (Falloon,
2010). Through avatar abilities of gesturing and movement a sense of presence is further developed (Salmon, 2009). A growing body of research supports the use of VWs as a learning format with results that suggest that it can provide profound immersion (Warburton, 2009) whereby students using SL report authentic behaviours representative of real world (Johnson, Vorderstrasse, & Shaw, 2009).

The United States of America based 2007 Horizon Report predicted that the use of VWs would be taken up over the coming years at a pace similar to the uptake of the Web in the 1990s (News Media Consortium, 2007). These predictions have been realised it would seem as SL, a virtual platform developed by Linden Labs has currently over 20 million registered users. SL is globally the most popular VW available (Boulos, et al., 2007; Johnson, et al., 2009) and is recognised as being the most popular VW platform to use in tertiary education (Dalgarno, Lee, Carlson, Gregory, & Tynan, 2011). Just over three quarters of UK universities are actively developing in or utilizing SL (Warburton, 2009). Early reports from a scoping study in Australia mirror international results and demonstrate not only an increasing uptake of this technology but also the breadth of course content delivered or explored in this environment has expanded (Dalgarno, et al., 2011). XXX’s staff and students continue to advance the adoption of this technology into the mainstream education arena and are exceeding initial intentions of the island build which were “…to encourage staff to explore the next phase of the Internet-based information and communications technology revolution….“ (Discover SCU, 2009, p. 1).

Background to Work Integrated Learning

The current WIL experiences offered by many international and Australian universities for BN students have similar features of multiple block rotations (from one to six weeks) in variety of health care facilities (HCF). The two most common models of WIL in a BN are the cluster model and preceptor model. The cluster model sees up to ten students allocated to a HCF and overseen by a Registered Nurse (RN) known as a Clinical Teacher (CT) or Facilitator (Sanderson & Lea, 2012). Students often work with a different preceptor (an RN) at the HCF. Within the preceptor model, students are paired with a preceptor RN and work corresponding shifts (Croxon & Maginnis, 2009).

Problems with current Work integrated Learning practices

The nationalisation of the nursing regulatory authority and the partial deregulation of the higher education sector combined with an ongoing global shortage of nurses has meant that HCFs are partnered with multiple Universities (Grealish & Smale, 2011). This means that students from varied tertiary organisations have their WIL experience at the same HCF. This can have a negative effect on individual WIL experiences. Preceptors particularly those working within a cluster model are exposed to multiple curricula and mentor many students, each of whom has their own personal life and learning history. This can translate into a preceptor exercising caution and limiting a student’s WIL opportunities. This notion is consistent with studies that have identified that when students are ‘let in’ (Elock, 2007) or have a sense of ‘belonging’ (Levett-Jones, 2008) they are more likely to engage or be allowed to engage in a WIL experience. There are novel attempts to improve the student’s WIL experience and improve recruitment opportunities by offering students internships or paid positions within the HCF (see Cantrell & Browne, 2006; Nelson, Godfrey, & Purdy, 2004). These opportunities are limited for regional students due to the lack of HCFs and positions within them. Travelling away from home for WIL is likely for students studying at a regional university where the demands of meeting compulsory WIL curricula extend beyond the capacity of local HCFs. It is easy to draw comparisons with the mining industry’s Fly In Fly Out (FIFO) jobs where community acceptance and retention of the workers are vexed (Beach & Cliff, 2003). Regional students who must travel for WIL have limited opportunity to develop an organisational commitment (De Gieter, et al., 2011) and can struggle to attain a sense of belonging and may feel isolated (Lea, Cruickshank, Paliadelis, Parmenter, Sanderson, & Thornberry, 2008). Furthermore, recruitment of graduating nurses is difficult if a student does not have an enjoyable experience or indeed has no exposure to a HCF they are less likely to apply for a post graduate position (Courtney, Edwards, Smith, & Finlayson, 2002). In these times of nursing shortage an opportunity to improve WIL experiences and increase the recruitment pool should be highly regarded.

Virtual WIL projects

WIL experiences are strengthened with improved coordination and communication between stakeholders (Patrick, et al., 2008). The use of SL offers engagement opportunities between students and HCFs that are not afforded with other communicative technology. Being able to offer equitable access is another goal of WIL and by overcoming geographical constraints and by being cost effective, the use of SL as part of WIL ensures an
equitable experience for all students (Patrick, et al., 2008). The following offers a concise description of two sub-projects of a larger research project at XXX where the use of SL is being utilised to improve WIL for all stakeholders.

The aim of the first sub-project is to increase communication between ground level stakeholders of the BN WIL program. Given the premise that pre WIL meetings strengthen the likelihood of a positive WIL for students and HCFs (Patrick, et al., 2008) in this project students, CTs and preceptors meet in SL prior to WIL experiences. Traditionally these meetings have not occurred because it is logistically problematic and costly to arrange face to face meetings or via traditional communication tools. Using SL as the platform to host pre WIL engagement creates a safe environment where shared objectives can be identified and professional relationships can be forged. Capitalising on the immersive nature of SL means that students who have to travel for their WIL experience can now meet their preceptors and CTs prior to commencing. SL also creates the opportunity for students to meet with preceptors from their allocated HCF as well as those from others.

The second sub-project extends the notion of collaborative WIL and the need for increased communication between the HCF and university. This project complements traditional methods of preparing graduating BN students for post graduate interviews at XXX (written assessments) by offering what is regarded as the benchmark for interview preparation, the mock interview (Hansen, Oliphant, Oliphant, & Hansen, 2009). By presenting the opportunity to rehearse in a simulated interview in SL, the costly difficulties of being able to offer each student across three campuses an equitable experience are overcome. Participating academics and representatives from HCFs act as virtual panel members. Another unique facet of this project is recording each simulation. Recording the simulations is useful for panel moderation and as a tool for student reflection and group debriefing.

Conclusion

Outcomes of the two projects will be discussed at the 2012 Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) national conference. The efficacy and functionality of the technology from each user group’s perspective will be presented. Parameters that are seen to shape successful adaption of a VW into WIL programs will be acknowledged with the envisaged wider uptake in contemporary curricula across XXX’s School of XX to be discussed. Broader adaption of this technology includes interprofessional WIL opportunities whereby communities of learners have the opportunity to engage collaboratively.

References


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