# SECTION Model and Second Life

## Introduction

Bates and Poole explains the SECTIONS model in the following order: students, ease of use, cost, teaching and learning, interactivity, organizational issues, novelty and speed. Penn State is, one among many universities, exploring the use of the virtual world in distance education courses. Second Life is a 3D environment that creates real world simulations and allows students to create avatars similar to their own self to be used to move around and interact in the virtual world. Currently, Penn State uses Second Life for many resources for both current and prospective students, and advisors. General use of the Second Life has been to create worlds for students to interact, hold meetings, and create social communities to feel more a part of the university. Bates and Poole stated how virtual worlds offer more profound opportunities so students can interact between students and instructors through the use of computers (Bates & Poole, 2003). Professors use it to simulate real-world activities and learning objectives. For example, at Penn state, they use Second Life for business to create business affordance, virtual real estate, and business simulations; economics to create activities with cooperation, commerce and values, social science to create criminal justice in world offenders, political, religious simulations; humanities creating virtual art and theater; and science creating biological evolution and physics principles in action (Second Life at Penn State, How to get involved). Second Life is the combination of multimedia to combine combination of text, still graphics, and animation (Bates & Poole, 2003). In analyzing the use of Second Life I will explore the use of the technology and discuss how second life applies to the SECTIONS model.

## Second Life applied to SECTIONS Model

S in the models stands for students. In this students and certain demographics of the learner must be evaluated to determine the best learning method for the student. In the access of technology for the distance education must be taking into consideration. The students’ ability to access computers, learning centers, labs or alternative places will affect their ability to perform in the course. Another aspect is the students learning style. Students have different styles so the styles should also be considered when designing the course “designing courses that offer more than one approach to teaching and learning within the same course” (Bates & Poole, p. 86). **S** for students in regards to Second Life at Penn state allows student to have counseling session and attend workshops with students and faculty (What is Penn State Doing in Second Life?). In one of the Penn State Spanish class meaning students express how Second Life gave them the opportunity to visit Spanish speaking islands and learn more about the culture (Read Comments of students who participated in the Penn State University Spanish). Second Life allows what Moore and Kearlsey describe as a way to apply academic content to real-life and home issues by allowing simulating to integrated in their study with everyday life (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Fahy explains the strengths such as: accommodation of learning styles, effective case studies and simulations promoting high thinking skills, realism, interactivity, individualization, group-based face-to-face instruction and high levels of learner control (Fahy, 2004).

E in the mode refers to the ease of use of the technology. Students should be able to use the technology of the course without having to take up time to learn the technology. Bate & Poole states how the basic interface or website should be user friendly which means structured in a way that is easy for the student to navigate and layout and graphics do not take up time or slow the internet when loading (p. 89). Also reliability of the technology is important that “ course materials sit on a reliable server, with high-speed access and twenty-four hours, seven-days a-week reliability” (p.90). E is for the ease of use and reliability of Second Life. Penn State has experience some technical issues in the use of second life. At some point the system can be unavailable or experience outages. Also some labs are unable to access the system for the exception of using a flash drive (7 Things you should know about Second Life at Penn State).

C is for cost as far as what are the cost factors that will be consider by the professor and university when choosing the technology for the course. The first factor is the items of expenditure which could include licenses, copyright permission, photocopy, and printed materials for developing the course (Bates & Poole, 2003). Second, is the delivery cost which is how the number of students will affect the cost of delivery the materials. Websites, graphics, multimedia materials are fixed cost therefore the number of students in the course will not increase the cost of the materials (Bates & Poole, 2003). C is for cost which Penn state purchased a Second Life platform that is used for distance education courses, professor use it to advise students and their a teen isle for prospective students. The university purchased space for $2, 750 to have towers and isle decorated like the Penn State campus (VanderMeulen, 2007). Bates & Poole discuss how a possible benefit in cost is “teachers or institutions in spending more money up front for interactive learning materials if this leads to less and less demand for teachers and student interaction” (p. 94).

T is for the effectiveness of teaching and learning. How the use of technology and how it affects the teacher’s approach in teaching and the students learning content and skills in the course. Student assessment strategies are used to also improve or enhance the course. T is for teaching and learning in Second Life allows students to put in practical skill on the course materials. Second life allows them to experience real-life simulations relating to case studies in the course. The social interaction can assist in their learning. In a Spanish course at Penn State a professor noted how it encouraged the students to write more and they were able to experience the Spanish culture (VanderMeulen, 2007). Second life can encourage what Bates and Poole explains as competency-based learning which promotes students to do more problems solving, creativity and innovation (Bates & Poole, 2003). It also allows for essential skills to be developed and strengthen with the real-life simulations (Bates & Poole, 2003). McGreal discusses how white boards, IM, and file sharing are important technologies used in distance education and even in second life these technologies can be used (McGreal, 2004).

I is for interaction between the learner and learning materials, learner and the instruction and then the learner with other learners. The quality of the interaction assists instructors in evaluating the technology to be used in the course. I is for interaction in Second life that can be with the instructor, students, and people from all over the world. Student can go on virtual field trips, museums or simulations of other countries (7 Things You Should Know About Second Life at Penn State). Penn State World is allows students to have virtual tailgates, music performance, counseling sessions, workshops, and group interactions (What is Penn State Doing in Second Life?). Moore and Kearsley that interaction promotes emotional support and gives students opportunity to meet and discuss course work and counseling with professors also provides student support and can be conducted in Second life (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

O is for organizational issues and support which is needed to balance the workload for technology-based teaching. The lack of support can result in technical issues with student and developing materials for the course. O is for organizational issues in second life. The university uses second life as an admission tool for prospective students. Penn State has a teen isle that provides a tour of the campus and the admission process (What is Penn State Doing in Second Life?).

N is for novelty or the ensuring that the technology has been properly tested. N is for novelty and the technical support needing for second life. Each spaces must be tested and setup by Educational Gaming Commons. EGC also assist in planning on how the space can be used (Second Life at Penn State, How to get involved).

The last S is for speed which is the amount of time used to implement or make changes to technology and materials for the course. S is for speed of how second life can be implemented into the course. Professor is able to create an isle or space in second life by submitting information to the EGC. However, when there is an upgrade to the client that can cause some technical issues (7 Things You Should Know About Second Life at Penn State).

## Conclusion

Students often express the need for new way to learn in distance education courses. Second life allows students at a distance to be more a part of the university. Second life does fit the SECTIONS model however it does have some concerns with the E for ease of use of the model. Penn State introduces some technical issues with Second Life in its reliability. The system can sometimes be unavailable or experience outages which can cause a setback for students in the course. Penn State advises professors to have a backup plan for the course for the cases. In spite of the possibility of reliability setbacks Second life does provide students with a new advantage to learning at a distance by allowing more social interaction, practical experience through simulations, and innovative approaches to learning the course materials.

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