

## EXTRACT OF PAPER PRESENTED AT ISTE CONFERENCE APRIL 2008

**How Virtual Classrooms are changing the Face of Education:**

**Using Virtual Classrooms in Today's University Environment**

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### **Abstract**

While the fundamental principles of education still provide the foundation of how educators guide their students in Australian Universities, the tools provided by new technology offer enormous opportunities to enhance education. This paper explores common and emerging social computing tools used in Universities today. To some extent these tools are 'old hat' because of the rate of change of technology. Newer tools will be explored in more detail which may challenge the concept of traditional education.

The question of the effective use of tools in higher education is discussed. The virtual world of *Second Life* will be examined as to whether it can enhance the learning experience for higher education students. Currently in Australia, there are very few institutions using *Second Life* as an instructional tool. Some international institutions have been implementing the use of *Second Life* for several years.

The paper addresses the following questions: What are these tools and how are they being implemented? What is the future of Universities as we know them? What skills do future educators require? Who are using virtual worlds? How effective are these tools?

### **Introduction**

Institutions in Australia have been providing distance education via online provisions for a considerable period now, but the technology for providing this teaching has been changing at a rapid pace. Almost as soon as one technology is mastered by the educator and their students, the technology changes and a new tool has to be learnt and integrated.

There are some tools that have been used for quite some time now such as email, discussions groups, blogs and wikis that are still being utilised, maybe even more so than when they were first introduced. This could possibly be because of the ease in which it is for the educators and students to use these tools. However, there are new technologies emerging all the time and "we have to imagine teaching students to use technology that hasn't even been invented yet" (Brown 2007).

## **Background**

We have a tradition of education spreading well over 2000 years and in Australia an education system for more than 200 years. While the new technologies can help us apply the developed principles of education more effectively, they do not replace the basic philosophy. In times of rapid change it is fruitful to look behind as well as forward. We must reflect on our history. The great philosophers; Socrates, Plato and Aristotle should be remembered and the pedagogy around how they taught compared with the modern ways of teaching using virtual classroom tools in Higher Education. Aristotle was a student of Plato, who was a student of Socrates. They all taught through critical reasoning, commitment to truth using examples of their own life (Kermerling, 2006). Is the current form of education a better way of teaching or can virtual worlds revitalise critical reasoning and collaboration in an educational experience? Virtual worlds are different from the current systems because they emulate face to face collaboration and critical thinking. Virtual worlds, in particular Second Life, are an electronic presence that imitates real life in the form of personal presence (through someone's avatar that is able to talk, walk, run, sit, dance, fly, drive, ride, teleport and do a number of other gestures, changes appearance and interact with other avatars), see and interact with land formations, trees, buildings, water, grass, daylight and the different seasons.

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