

SUNY LIVE

Larry Dugan and Terry Keys

Larry Dugan (“Marcius Dowding” in Second Life) is Director of Online Learning at Finger Lakes Community College. Terry Keys (“Crash Thibaud” in Second Life) is Assistant Vice President, Educational Technology Services, at Monroe Community College. Comments on this article can be sent to the authors at <duganls@flcc.edu> and <tkeys@monroecc.edu>.

The State University of New York—Learning in Virtual Environments (SUNY LIVE) project, started as a question. If we build it, what will happen?

Second Life, a virtual world built by Linden Lab, consists of 3D virtual spaces created completely by the users. Linden Lab gives users a blank slate to use to create a “world”. Today, many institutions are exploring this world. Some have found success in delivering instruction; others have found success using Second Life as a marketing tool. Almost everyone admits that it is something different and needs to be explored further.

In 2006, educators were just beginning to hear about Second Life. The question we were asking was what would happen if the entire SUNY system (sixty-four campuses) was invited to join a six-month experience in Second Life in which they could explore, discover, and learn in a shared space. To answer this question, Monroe Community College (MCC), in partnership with Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC), secured grant funding from SUNY and the MCC Foundation to purchase an island in Second Life (named Monroe Community College) and to create this experience.

The SUNY LIVE project created an environment in which twenty-two different campuses were given land on an island, with complete control over their space to create, teach, or use as they wanted. There were requirements that they had to fulfill, but mostly it was a place to explore the possibilities that SL might offer, in a safe environment surrounded by peers. The structure of the project used the concept of a parallel universe. Participants met first in real life to learn the basics of building and managing the land. This event included presentations

from pioneers in the field, including Sarah Robbins-Bell (“Intellagirl Tully”), who coauthored *Second Life for Dummies*, and Steve Jacobs, Associate Professor at Rochester Institute of Technology and Director of the Lab for Technological Literacy. Participating campuses were allotted enough real estate to explore, build, and learn. After the initial meetings, they were set free to create. The official project lasted for six months. At the end, the group reconvened in real life to assess the feasibility of Second Life as a learning environment and to share experiences. This session featured Beth Ritter-Guth (“Desideria Stockton”), a veteran Second Life instructor and the founder of Literature Alive! in Second Life. The results were as varied as the institutions that participated.

Some of the successes took the creators by surprise. One of the first outcomes was that the group itself became a new community, a network to educators around the globe, exploring new methods to teach and learn and meeting weekly on the island. These meetings continue, more than a year after the project officially ended. These weekly sessions created collaborative opportunities that ended up reaching far past the original project. The community and extended community became the focal point for many of the participants.

Some campuses built environments that engaged their students in ways not possible in the traditional classroom. One of the most successful projects was by the SUNY Oneonta Music Project, in which music students planned, marketed, and produced four concerts in Second Life. The first two were with established Second Life artists, the final two with local student bands. Fashion shows and car shows are also planned and will be held simultaneously at the final two concerts. Second Life enabled every student in class direct, hands-on experiences in aspects of the music industry that could not occur in real life. Other projects included Buffalo State College’s fashion shows, Monroe Community College’s Music Library, and Moraine Valley Community College’s Malcolm X exhibit.

A number of the campuses quickly became frustrated with the limitations of the shared space. While they appreciated the opportunity to get their feet wet, they felt that to be successful, they needed to create their own islands. At least six of the participants ended up with their own virtual spaces and continue to develop classrooms and areas to market their institutions within Second Life. SUNY now has an island to further promote and support uses of Second Life throughout the system.

The project goes on today. The group (called SUNY Live in SL) still meets weekly on the original space, with new members joining regularly. There have been concerts, art shows, classes, and conferences. The area exists as an incubator for new ideas and as a community that focuses on the potential offered by teaching in a virtual environment.