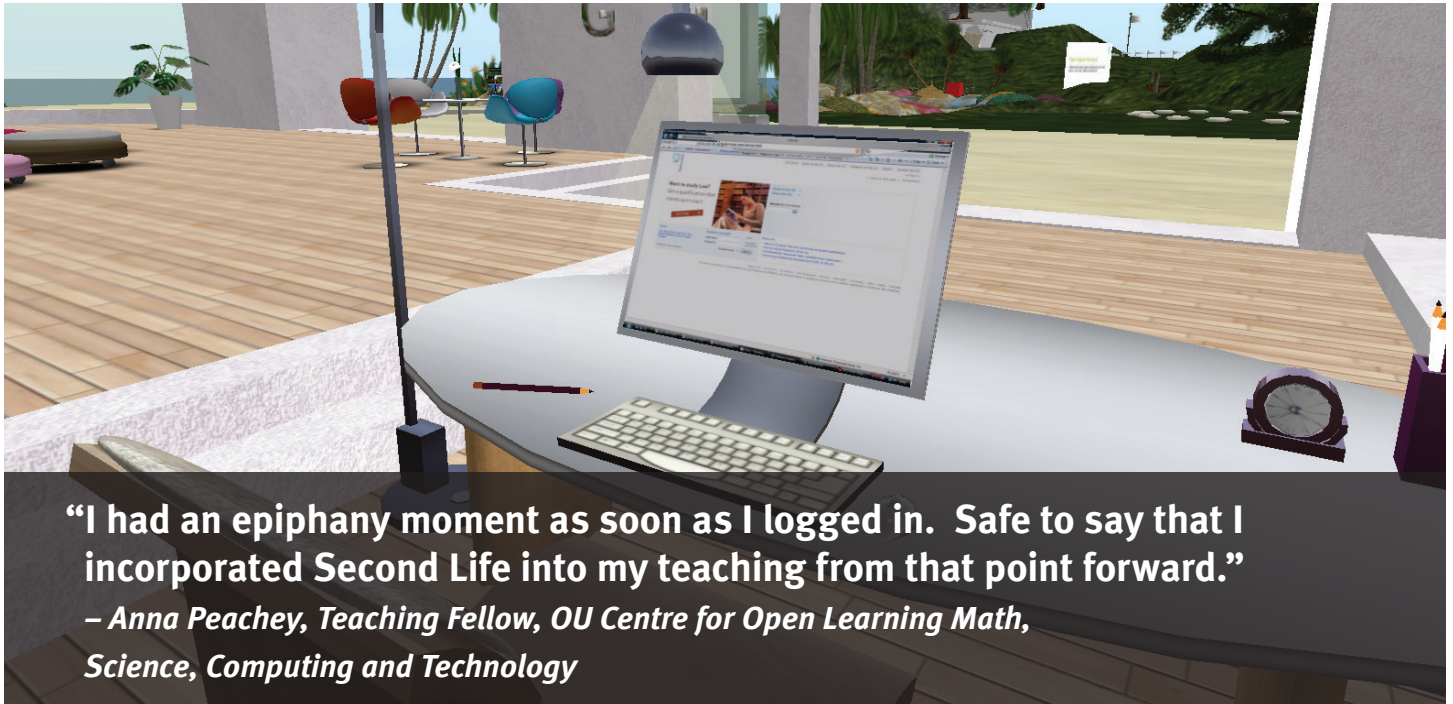




## The Open University's Place for Us: Providing Geographically Dispersed Students & Faculty A Place to Meet and Learn Together

The Open University in Second Life



**“I had an epiphany moment as soon as I logged in. Safe to say that I incorporated Second Life into my teaching from that point forward.”**

*– Anna Peachey, Teaching Fellow, OU Centre for Open Learning Math, Science, Computing and Technology*

### Executive Summary:

Funded by a Royal Charter in 1969, the Open University (OU) is the largest university in the United Kingdom and the only one dedicated to providing quality university education to the public through visionary distance learning. Over 2 million people have studied with the Open University and there are currently over 150,000 undergraduate and more than 30,000 postgraduate students enrolled in OU programs. For 70 per cent of students who are balancing full-time jobs and their studies, a flexible schedule is a first priority. Although there is only one physical campus - in Milton Keynes, England - OU students living outside of the Milton Keynes area, or the UK, can participate in classes via local tutorials, postal and telephone tuition, the Internet and now Second Life. The OU campus in Second Life offers something completely new and invigorating for this varied and widely dispersed student body - a chance to meet, work and live together in a virtual community.

In one 7-day period the OU recorded 130 unique visitors spending a combined total of 216 hours in their virtual campus, Open Life.



### How it Began: Delivering Immersive Distance Learning Without Driving the Distance

The OU's mission is "to be a world leader in the design, content and delivery of supported open and distance learning through academic research, pedagogic innovation and



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collaborative partnership.” Thus, for decades, OU staff have been at the forefront of innovation in distance and e-learning. It was the visionary instructor Jacquie Bennett at OU who first discovered a new dimension for education - Second Life. Two years later the first OU island was unveiled.

Teaching Fellow with the Centre for Open Learning in Maths, Science, Computing and Technology, Anna Peachey, said her friend and colleague believed the discovery was an important emerging technology with enormous potential to impact traditional education. “Jacquie kept telling me I should go and look at Second Life, so eventually, in October ’06, I did. I had an epiphany moment as soon as I logged in. Safe to say that I incorporated Second Life into my teaching from that point forward.” Before she taught in Second Life,

Peachey, who lives in rural Devon, would drive up to one and a half hours each way to spend a Saturday morning in a physical classroom. Of 18 students, 3 or 4 might show up. In Second Life, Peachey now reaches nearly triple the student attendance at 10 and 15 students per session and can forgo the commute.

### Thoughtful Planning to Ease Students into the Virtual World

Dr. Shailey Minocha, Senior Lecturer of Human-Computer Interaction at the OU, has been conducting extensive interviews in Second Life. She has discovered that a gradual transition from familiar to fantastical is the path to building spaces that put students at ease initially.

New visitors to the OU campus are greeted at The NOUbie Center (an OU take on “newbie” or a person new to Second Life). Student volunteers help “NOUbie” students learn how to function within Second Life and familiarize themselves with the six OU environments: Open University, OU Ocean, OUtopia, Open University HRD and Deep Think I & II.

Peachey explained, “Students volunteer to be buddies, and there is usually at least one student buddy in-world, so if you show up at the newbie building needing help, you just click on an active picture and it sends an IM and the buddy comes over.”



Minocha leads student tours of spaces beyond the OU campus, such as the Virtual Hallucinations Island, where psychology students can experience first hand the phenomena of mental illness or disorders as described by patients.

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was built to accommodate this. Sixty spots were quickly leased and there is a waitlist of students lobbying for more.

The students have not only adopted Second Life as their classroom and their home, but also their venue for student-planned events. In fact, there are now

**OUtopia: Virtual Student Residences to Foster Social Interactions**

The OU’s virtual campus program has caught on with such zeal that Peachey constructed OUtopia, which officially opened in April 2009, to accommodate demand for student housing. “I noticed that when people come in-world they often feel the need to have a home, a house or an apartment. So I decided to offer ‘halls of residence’ that students could rent for free for a short period when they first start in SL.” This quickly became the focus for a community who wanted longer term rentals and the new island



over 200 OU events and conferences held in Second Life each year.

Of course, education is not just about classrooms or lecture halls. It’s about establishing friendships and future



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professional networks, and those relationships flourish best in a social setting. For OU students, many of whom are physically disabled, are care-takers or work full-time, the ability to participate in a social community of peers from the comfort of home is invigorating. The village green, the “Open Arms” English pub, personal residences and beach area have become vibrant hubs of activity and persistent places for students to just “hang out”.

#### Even Teachers Can Learn in Second Life

After seeing the success of student interaction in Second Life, the OU’s Human Resources Department realized that it could also be used for staff training. Steph Broadribb, OU Assistant Director of HR Development, works with HR Project Officer Chris Carter on a program aimed at developing staff skills necessary to effectively give and receive feedback.

a high level of energy. Often they don’t want to stop at the end of the activity!”

After the pilot workshop in September 2008, participants said they’ve never been prompted to “think so much” about the way they say things and approach delicate situations. Three more staff development events have been conducted since, and several more are in the works.

#### Fertile Ground Remains for OU Advances in Contextual Learning Curriculum

Role-playing could also facilitate curriculum to train humanitarian workers. Peachey and Helen Yanacopulos, a Senior Lecturer in International Development, have collaborated on a paper entitled “Integrating Second Life in Humanitarian and Development Training.” It examines the opportunity for mixed-reality learning in Second Life for humanitarian



“One of the major impacts has been the ability to get groups of staff practicing role-play skills in a confident manner,” Broadribb said. “This had been a problem for us in real life as many staff would disengage with the activity and often refuse to take part. With Second Life, participants get very engaged, with

and development workers in direct relation to their Open University course: Working with Conflict: Tools, Skills and Dialogue. They believe that role-playing in Second Life can help students develop sharper and more effective negotiation and collaborative skills to thrive in difficult real life conditions.



Training workers to manage combat or natural disaster is prohibitively expensive and logistically challenging. Peachey and Yanacopulos suggest that training programs in Second Life can foster a new form of deep, cost effective learning: “by enabling students to suspend their own attitudes and beliefs, well-managed role plays can encourage exploration of attitude and actions beyond the personal and familiar in a safe environment.”

Now entering its fourth year in Second Life with plans for further expansion, the OU continues to prove that learning in the virtual world has resulted in tremendous real world success for students, faculty, and administrators.

## Links

- Summary of OU’s programs in Second Life:  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/colmsct/activities/details/detail.php?itemId=478b5caf2c3f7>
- To visit Open University:  
[http://slurl.com/secondlife/Open University/104/37/25](http://slurl.com/secondlife/Open%20University/104/37/25)
- To visit OUtopia:  
<http://slurl.com/secondlife/OUtopia/84/57/30>



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**About Second Life, by Linden Lab**

Developed and launched by Linden Lab in 2003, Second Life is the world's leading 3D virtual world environment. It enables its users - known as Residents - to create content, interact with others, launch businesses, collaborate and educate. With a thriving inworld economy that saw over \$360 million USD transacted in 2008, and a broad user base that includes everyone from consumers and educators to medical researchers and large enterprises, Second Life has become one of the largest hubs of user-generated content (UGC) in the world.

Linden Lab, founded in 1999 by Chairman of the Board Philip Rosedale and headquartered in San Francisco, develops revolutionary, immersive technologies that change the way people communicate, interact, learn and create. Privately held and profitable, Linden Lab is led by CEO Mark Kingdon, and has more than 300 employees across the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

**Linden Lab**

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