Learning Ethics through Virtual Fieldtrips: Teaching Ethical Theories through Virtual Experiences

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Teaching ethical reasoning is considered an important component of the undergraduate learning experience. A recent approach to teaching using experiential learning is through virtual worlds such as Second Life. We discuss how ethics may be taught using experiential learning in the virtual world of Second Life. Participants in the class in this example were eleven undergraduate honors students. The course involved presentations in ethical theories such as Buddhism and Utilitarianism. Students completed assignments based on experiences in Second Life that were then linked to ethical theories discussed. The observations and analyses they completed demonstrated that the experiential learnings provided opportunities to apply concepts and theories in a virtual and real world. Interestingly, the students found evidence of residents of the virtual world of Second Life to hold ethical principles which influenced their actions. However, there were other instances where residents adhered to few ethical principles other than self interest. Suggestions are made about the importance of introducing ethics to a virtual world such as Second Life.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2007) have identified essential learning outcomes for undergraduate education. They proposed 15 essential learning outcomes. One outcome is Ethical Reasoning. They define ethical reasoning as the following:

Reasoning about right and wrong human conduct. It requires students to be able to assess their own ethical values and the social context of problems, recognize ethical issues in a variety of settings, think about how different ethical perspectives might be applied to ethical dilemmas and consider the ramifications of alternative actions. Students' ethical self-identity evolves as they practice ethical decision-making skills and learn how to describe and analyze positions on ethical issues.

Ethical Reasoning is separated into five categories: ethical self-awareness; understanding different ethical perspectives/concepts; ethical issue recognition; application of ethical perspectives/concepts; and evaluation of different ethical perspectives/concepts. They further proposed that acquisition of various complexities of understanding, application, and evaluation be considered in teaching ethics to undergraduates. No recommendations are proposed as to the format for teaching ethical reasoning.

Methods of teaching ethics have varied widely without any unified agreement on what constitutes a "best practices" approach (Canary, 2007; Castleberry, 2007; Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2005; Kyle, 2008). Some of the methods used in teaching ethics include: role-playing, review of vignettes, reflection, informational field trips (visiting a prison), and written case analyses. Smith, Fryer-Edwards, Deikema, and Braddock (2004) suggested that the intent of ethics education is to increase sensitivity and understanding of ethical issues and develop an ability to use reasoning to solve ethical issues. The question remains as to the best approach for teaching ethics. An additional question is, what are foundational issues in the development of best teaching practices for ethics education?

One approach that has been proposed for teaching various topics is experiential learning (Kayes, 2002; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004). Experiential learning allows for the use of simulation and role playing based on experiencing real world issues within a closed and somewhat protected environment. O'Sullivan and Copper (2003) critiqued traditional teaching and stated, "The traditional method of lecturing to classes is not always the most successful approach. Encouraging students to formulate their own ideas, draw conclusions from experimental evidence, and participate in other similar activities can be more effective" (p. 448). Van Sickle and Kubinec (2003) further concluded, "People need experiences if they are really going to understand and apply what they know" (p. 260).

Kolb (1984) proposed that experiential learning is composed of six assumptions: learning is considered a process; learning comes from experience; learning requires the person to integrate opposing points of view; learning involves an interaction between the person and the environment; and the outcome of learning is knowledge creation. Theoretically and practically, the instructor can integrate learning using experiential activities with reflection and analysis. Boud (2001) described reflection in the following way: "Reflection involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it as a way to make sense of what has occurred. It involves exploring

often messy and confused events and focusing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them" (p. 10).

Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrath and Trivedi (2009) proposed that a virtual world such as Second Life is ideal for using experiential learning. The use of a virtual world in learning is increasing for several reasons. Virtual worlds such as Second Life provide opportunities to experience both similar and different real world experiences. In Second Life (SL) one can fly with his/her avatar. However, many other activities of real life may be replicated in a virtual world such as SL. There is a robust economy with the buying and selling of items such as clothing, furniture, housing, etc. Second Life provides extensive opportunities for social interaction. Such social interaction may take place in a virtual bar or on a dance floor. Social interaction also may take place in a small group meeting or through informal or formal meetings of members of education or social groups.

There has been a steady increase in the use and incorporation of virtual worlds such as Second Life in teaching in higher education (Burgess, Slate, Rojas-LeBouef, & LaPraire, 2010; Penfold, 2008; Salt, Atkins, & Blackall, 2008). Burgess et al. described multi-user virtual environments (MUVEs) as "3-D environments that support exploration, simulation, role-play, interaction and experimentation via avatars, or 3-D self-representation" (p. 84). A key benefit of using MUVEs is the feeling of presence, through avatars, which translates into a feeling of being connected to others (Burgess, et al., 2010). The applications of virtual worlds such as SL range from more traditional distance education applications to simulations that would be difficult to replicate in the real world. Simulations have been of particular interest to educators. There are many examples of programs including: medicine, providing instruction on diabetes (Wiecha et al., 2010); nursing, simulating a particular procedure (Skiba, 2007); psychology, experiencing social interactions as a women or man; and social services, developing a plan for service learning (Maxim, Sable, & Cristiano, 2009). Penfold (2008) provides another example of using SL in higher education. He incorporated SL into teaching travel and tourism to undergraduates. Virtual hotels and yachts were constructed to give students virtual experiences in these environments in which they eventually will work. Delwiche (2006) used a virtual world to teach qualitative research, ethnography, to undergraduates. Specifically, he involved students in evaluating behaviors, cultural practices, and motivations of those participating in the virtual world. The benefit of using virtual worlds in teaching in higher education continues to be documented, and the potential for its use is open-ended. Despite several disciplines using virtual worlds to teach in higher education, the use of virtual worlds in teaching ethics in higher education has not been reported.

The introduction of ethics to various disciplines is widespread, and there is recognition of the importance of teaching ethics, either as a stand alone course or inserted into foundation courses (Castleberry, 2007; Corey et al., 2005). Teaching ethics in different disciplines frequently involves introduction to principles and theories followed by the application to real life issues or practice (Canary, 2007; Corey et al., 2005). The development of an ethics course for undergraduate honors students followed a similar approach, and it fit into the AAC&U (2007) essential learning outcomes which focused on Ethical Reasoning. Instruction focused first on the presentation and understanding of ethical theories/principles and moral psychology. The second part of the course focused on specific ethical/moral dilemmas such as sexual morality, abortion, suicide, etc. An experiential method was used through the introduction of a virtual world. Rather than subject students to real life circumstances that involve potential ethical/moral issues, the use of Second Life (a virtual world) was used to simulate many social interactions/situations that potentially involve ethical/ moral dilemmas.

Ethics Class Format

This undergraduate course, Ethical Development: Comparisons in Virtual World and Real World Ethical Issues, had 11 students who received instruction in moral psychology and ethical philosophical theories. Initial introduction of the course content and the virtual world of Second Life was completed in person in a computer lab. We explained the format of the class (it was scheduled to be a three-day-a-week 50-minute class): the class would meet in Second Life two days a week, and the third day would be devoted to spending time in Second Life completing assignments. During the first class meeting students were introduced to Second Life and provided with information on how to set up an account and design an avatar. Students reported that they did not have any experience in Second Life; however, they entered the virtual world, quickly set up an account, and designed an avatar. They were able to complete this task in less than 15 minutes and then began to search sites for clothing beyond the standard available to new members of Second Life. The remainder of the class was held in Second Life on an island owned by the College of Education at The University of Alabama. The setting was an open classroom, located in the sky. We used a PowerPoint board to present lectures, and we conducted discussions both verbally (voice) and through text: Second Life supports both verbal and text communication.

Students were exposed to Western, Eastern, and Middle Eastern philosophical theories of ethics. Most students did not have previous experience with ethical/moral theories of ethics. The Eastern ethical theories covered included Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Western theories included Virtue ethics, Natural Law, and Utilitarianism. Islamic ethics was the Middle Eastern Theory that was presented. Presentation on these various theories included introduction of major concepts. Discussions centered on the application of the concepts in virtual and real worlds.

In this paper we provide examples of how ethical/moral concepts found in theories may apply in a virtual world and compare them to similar issues in the real world. Additionally, we provide examples of common ethical/moral issues that were addressed including sexual morality, abortion, suicide and euthanasia, morality in the family, ethics in business, etc. Also, we link student comments to the AAC&U (2007) Ethical Reasoning outcomes (understanding different ethical perspectives/concepts, ethical issue recognition, application of ethical perspectives/concepts, and evaluation of different ethical perspectives/concepts).

The format of the course involved first meeting in the real world and introducing Second Life, a virtual world. The class was scheduled to meet three times a week. The first two classes of the week were devoted to presentation of, and the third class involved "field trips" into a virtual world, Second Life. Based on the student "field trips," they were assigned to explore and answer questions related to the presentations and readings.

Student Analyses and Reflections

Student assignment for examples linking and analyzing the philosophical perspective of Buddhism to the virtual world of Second Life was stated as such: "Consider the Eightfold Path in Buddhism and how they contribute to achieving and understanding the Four Noble Truths. What are concrete examples can you find in Second Life (interviews or observations) of the Eightfold Path, e.g. right conduct, right speech, right effort, etc.?"

Buddhist Ethics Applied to a Virtual World and Real World

One student was able to differentiate what he/she thought were concepts from Buddhist ethics as they applied to a virtual world (see Appendix A for complete text). For example, he/she did not connect concepts of Right View, Right Speech to Second Life. However,

he/she did find a connection with Right Action and even noting that some governments (real life) are investigating theft in Second Life, the loss of $10,000 in U.S. currency. The student was able to apply ethical perspectives from Buddhism in his/her examples and evaluated each perspective as it applied or did not apply (AAC&U, 2007). Also, the concept of Right Livelihood was identified in Second Life, specifically the construction and selling of weapons. This student clearly linked virtual world experiences with real life experiences as they related to Buddhist ethics, loss of money through theft, and construction of weapons.

Utilitarian Ethics Applied in a Virtual World and Real Life

Students were assigned the following question after discussion of the Western ethical theory of Utilitarianism: "Can you find examples in groups in Second Life that illustrate the Greatest Happiness Principle in Utilitarian theory?" The Greatest Happiness Principle is to eliminate/reduce pain and seek the greatest happiness for the most people.

One student (see Appendix B for complete text) began his/her exploration into the application of Utilitarianism in Second Life with a considerable amount of skepticism and evaluation of different ethical perspectives/concepts (AAC&U, 2007). He/she was able to discover whole communities in Second Life that were essentially founded on Utilitarian principles of the Greatest Good (Happiness), applying the essential learning outcome of ethical reasoning (application of ethical perspectives). He/she still maintains some skepticism about the usefulness of Utilitarianism with a conclusion that such beliefs are not spread throughout regions of this virtual world. His/her experiences possibly could be an experience with the microcosm of real world depictions of the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number principle.

Application of Moral Dilemma, Sexual Morality, in a Virtual World and Real World

Students had an opportunity to apply ethical theories to real life dilemmas that may be played out in Second Life. The assignment they were to address stated: The exercise this week is to discover and identify at least three examples of the following potential common sexual moral issues that can be found in Second Life and compare them to real life examples. Also, discuss at least how two ethical theories can be applied to these sexual moral issues: (a) premarital sex; (b) extramarital sex; (c) consent-rape; (d) homosexuality; (e) pedophilia; (f) pornography; (g) bestiality; and (h) incest. One student responded with the following observations about this assignment:

One of the common sexual morality issues that I have heard of being an issue is that of extramarital affairs, or relationships. This can be looked at in two separate ways: one being that if someone is married in real life, is it cheating for them to have romantic relationships in Second Life; the other being that if some who chose to marry in Second Life may have romantic relationships in Second Life outside of their chosen partner. In my opinion the first situation of extramarital affairs is more serious because by entertaining the thoughts of romantic relationships with others, the individual is considering cheating in real life on some level. However, this cheating in Second Life is less serious than in real life, because no actual sexual actions are carried out.

The student further linked ethical issues in a virtual world to ethical theories:

Of the ethical principles that deal with sexually morality, virtue ethics relates the most with the issues of pornography, extramarital affairs, and homosexuality the ideals of honesty and trust. If someone is consumed with honesty and trust they are less likely to participate in these activities, either virtually or in real life.

With concerns to natural law, the actions of pornography and homosexuality would break natural law more so than extramarital affairs. The fact that natural law focuses on the procreation primarily, any sexually related things in a virtual world would go against natural law.

The use of a moral dilemma such as sexual morality provides a unique opportunity to use a virtual world to explore ethical/moral behavior through experiential observations (hopefully not through actual experiences). The student notes the distinct intersection between a virtual world and real life ethics when he/she identifies the potentially moral issue of extramarital affairs: being married in real life and entering Second Life and engaging in sexual relations with other avatars (Ethical Reasoning essential learning outcome-ethical issue recognition). The idea of entertaining thoughts of extramarital affairs in a virtual world may translate into the connection between thoughts and action. How ethical is it for someone to fantasize in a virtual world about sexual relations outside a marriage? Acting on the fantasy is a reasonable ethical question.

Another student further discusses how a virtual world may be a place to begin to explore sexual preferences like homosexuality without the negative consequences of real life "coming out" (see Appendix C for complete text). The student was able to employ and demonstrate several components of Ethical Reasoning (ethical issue recognition and application of ethical perspectives/concepts). The student links concern over real life disclosure of his/her sexual preference as it relates to Natural Law ethics and Virtue ethics. Interesting the student notes the potential different interpretations of what is ethical based on the theory which is an interesting way to introduce the complexity of ethical thinking (understanding different ethical perspectives/concepts).

Summary and Conclusions

Students in this honors class, which was taught in the virtual world of Second Life, had an opportunity to integrate theories and concepts of ethical theories with experiential learnings through interactions and observations. The observations and analyses they completed demonstrated that the experiential learnings provided opportunities to: apply concepts and theories in a virtual and real world; show ethical issue recognition; demonstrate the skills to differentiate ethical perspectives/concepts; and evaluate different ethical perspectives/concepts (AAC&U, 2007). Interestingly, the students found evidence of residents of the virtual world of Second Life to hold ethical principles that influenced their actions. However, there were other instances where residents adhered to few ethical principles other than self interest, e.g. griefers. A virtual world such as Second Life provides unique opportunities to observe how humans demonstrate ethical or unethical behaviors in a minimally controlled environment and one with minimum consequences. The important question is whether more formal efforts need to be pursued in providing and promoting ethical behavior.

The experience of using a virtual world such as Second Life had significant benefits as has been noted. A question that a few students raised was whether a virtual world truly captures similar real life issues and experiences. The discussion was positive and fit well with linking it to ethical issues. A concrete example was whether having sexual relations with an avatar in Second Life was cheating on a real life partner. Students demonstrated an advanced level of understanding and were particularly adept at analyses between ethical concepts/theories and virtual/real life experiences. There are several issues to address and changes in teaching in the future; we plan to teach the course annually. First, we left open the initial Second Life sites they might visit. Some students consistently visited the same location and interacted with the same avatars. Consequently, they did not take the opportunity to explore beyond a comfortable zone or location. A solution we may adopt is a recording of sites by students and set a minimum number of sites to visit so there is more exposure for the student. Most students

did explore and seemed to enjoy visiting a range of sites and locations in Second Life. Students did encounter periodic uncomfortable interactions, particularly in sexually explicit sites. The benefit of a virtual world compared to real world is that they could extricate themselves by simply teleporting out to another site. We did warn students that uncomfortable experiences may occur and that they can easily teleport to another location in Second Life (teleporting is a simple procedure of locating another site through the Second Life world map and clicking on the site). We processed the experience of Second Life for students at the end of the semester, and we received important feedback. Many reported it was a good opportunity to explore ethical issues in virtual worlds and real worlds. Suggestions were that we meet at times in person in a real life classroom: they felt a need to see other students and the instructors beyond seeing an avatar. Based on these suggestions we plan to employ a format of once-a-week in-person class meetings, once-a-week meetings in Second Life, and the once-a-week exploration in Second Life.

Certainly, in the not too distant future more and more of our actual real world will be intimately linked with virtual worlds. The reality of our virtual world will become the reality of our real world. A systematic structured, virtual world society may be necessary to continue on in a real life civilized society. Humans have established norms, laws, and ethics/morals throughout history, and there is no reason to not continue such inventions. We have not reached a place where humans have internal ethical/moral compasses without some form or structure to guide us. The use of a virtual world such as Second Life opens up many creative opportunities for teaching; the same can be said for future research. For example, one could study student perceptions of content understandings, ethics, and learning outcomes. A related study could be a comparison of learning outcomes between a virtual world learning experience, experiential learning, and a strictly theoretically based classroom experience.

The students' exploration of the virtual world of Second Life discovered that there exists a variety of ethical/moral perspectives or lack of such perspectives. Clearly there are individuals in Second Life who adhere to basic principles of respect for persons; however, there exists those, as in real life, that do not. An ethics course using a virtual world such as Second Life provides a medium to teach important internal mature ethical/moral perspectives that serve the individual well in any world he or she seeks to engage. There are several methods of introducing ethics in a virtual world such as Second Life. A virtual world may be a natural environment to use with current and future students who are tech savvy and embrace such a world quite readily. The opportunities for teaching experientially in

a virtual world, real life issues may be readily accomplished in such environments.

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Appendix A
Buddhist Ethics Applied to a Virtual World and Real World: Student Response

A student provided the following insight:

Before addressing the Eightfold Path, I feel that I should address the Four Noble Truths. I grant that life can be viewed as suffering and that suffering does stem from attachment to transient objects, ideas, or the self. However, I don't believe that the best course of action is to become completely detached and dispassionate. You might experience less suffering, but without suffering or pain there can be no real pleasure. And then of course the ultimate goal of the eightfold path is the end to the cycle of rebirth, a return to nirvana or oneness with the universe.

Right view- I am not certain I can think of any concrete example of right view in Second Life. Most people don't dwell on the suffering of their real life in SL. Second Life can be an escape from current predicaments, situations, and people or lack of community. Most people don't grasp the impermanence of the world nor are they aware of the Four Noble Truths.

Right Intention- I don't believe many persons on the Internet govern their thoughts and actions with right intent. Since the virtual world is less real, people should put more weight on the thoughts and intentions of individuals, yet this does not appear to prevent debauchery and ill willed pranks. I wonder if desire and temptations are not resisted as much on the Internet.

Right Speech- Not telling lies, abstaining from slanderous speech, or using words maliciously and abstaining from idle chatter that lacks purpose and depth . . . The Internet wouldn't exist without idle chatter. Of course, what really matters? Someone starts a topic on a message board presumably because it matters to them. Who decides what matters? The Internet is full of slanderous things and people offending other people. Certainly very few of the conversations on Second Life are deep or meaningful. The Internet would be a very quiet place if people only spoke when necessary.

Right Action- abstaining from robbery, fraud, dishonesty, or sexual misconduct. I would say that the rampant infidelity if not in action at least in thoughts is proof that people on second life care very little for right action. It's hard to say if virtual sex counts as a real action however certain RL governments are investigating and taking actions against SL virtual pedophilia. http://www.techcrunch.com/2007/10/30/virtual-pedophilia-report-bad-news-for-second-life/

Robbery is quite real in second life as it translates to real money in RL, albeit a lot less money. The world stock exchange was vandalized in Second life, losing 2.8 million ($10,000 Real Life dollars). http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/aug2007/tc2007089_873900.htm?chan=technology_technology+index+page_top+stories http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2006/nov/12/virtualreality_crimes_present_literal_challenge_re/

Appendix B
Utilitarian Ethics Applied in a Virtual World and Real Life: Student Response

A student responded and made the following observations on Utilitarian theory:

The concept of utilitarian theory is based on the notion of the greatest good. As such, a general component of utilitarianism is that an action's moral worth or value is directly proportional to its positive impact on the largest possible crowd. Furthermore, those who attempt to apply the idea of utilitarianism to their own lives generally do so in accordance with the Greatest Happiness Principle. This central tenet of utilitarianism advocates the consistent elimination or reduction of pain and the establishment of the greatest happiness for the largest number of people. In reality, this theory maintains relevance to foreign policy, the creation of laws, medicinal practices, and other aspects of life that focus on the preservation or achievement of the multitude's well-being. Yet, in Second Life, the applications of this theory are a bit more arbitrary, as consequences do not factor as heavily into people's decision-making process when their primary identity is not at stake.

While I maintain that the applications of the Greatest Happiness Principle may be arbitrary, I initially believed that its relevance to Second Life would be completely non-existent. With an almost unwavering degree of skepticism, I began my exercise by searching for Second Life zones under the keyword of Utilitarianism. My skepticism was affirmed when the search results related in no way to the idea of the exercise. So, instead, I searched for zones under the phrase The Greatest Good (as that is, essentially, the crux of the Greatest Happiness Principle). This search proved to be more rewarding, as the search results were comprised of numerous groups dedicated to preserving some notion of good for the Second Life community. In fact, the first group I researched (and subsequently joined) was called . . . which was designed to spread optimism, i.e., good vibes, to the Second Life community. In fact, this goal is clearly indicated in their group charter: "Why is everyone making their Av's black and evil? What is so great about being a jerk to people that you aren't already friends with? Nothin' foo. We're some good furs with good hearts. We have the ability to forgive and forget. We practice tolerance and patience, not unjust revenge. Join us for the greater good of everyone on SL and show that you care for something bigger than yourself." In spite of this very hopeful determination to work for the greater good in Second Life, it is hard to determine for sure just exactly how they attempt to achieve this goal, aside from just being nice to other avatars in Second Life.

Appendix C
Application of Moral Dilemma, Sexual Morality, in a Virtual World and Real World: Student Response

A student made the following comments in regard to sexual morality:

Since the outset of civilization, the topic of sexual relations has been the grounds of debate. This ancient, yet consistently relevant debate has focused on both the theoretical and pragmatic implications of sexual relations. Given that these implications extend to two distinct contexts for assessing human functions, conflicts often arise in the process of determining which one is more appropriate for characterizing sexual activities. Adding depth to this historically prevalent conflict is the existence of an institution like Second Life, which has created an almost purely theoretical basis for the moral implications of sex among people in general. Thus, Second Life (by offering a purely theoretical outlook) can be contrasted with the pragmatic approach to sex that is common in modern society, thereby indicating a modern approach to the classic debate of sexual moral issues. In turn, this contrast reflects much about the differing ethical outlooks on sexual relations, especially in dealing with extra-marital relations, bestiality, and homosexuality.

In regard to homosexuality, Second Life provides a much more hospitable forum than real life. In the . . . in Second Life, many female avatars present themselves as overtly homosexual. When I visited this region for a previous exercise about griefers, one of the . . . explained to me that in real life, she was less open about her sexuality, as she thought it would reflect upon her family and friends. However, Second Life offered her the opportunity to express her sexuality without it reflecting on her background as an individual. Thus, based on this instance of homosexuality, Second Life offers people the opportunity to express themselves without having to deal with any consequent damage to their reputations, as is typically a result of being similarly expressive in real life.

One explanation for why people are reluctant to acknowledge their homosexuality in real life is because many people disapprove of it in accordance with Natural Law ethics. This ethical principle suggests that humans are most ethical when they act according to their natural human instincts (particularly self-preservation). Since pro-creation is one of the most natural instincts of all animals, a sexual preference that lacks the creation aspect is logically unnatural. Thus, according to the Natural Law system of ethics, homosexuality is unethical. Yet, according to Virtue ethics, any behavior that affirms trust and fidelity and that is executed autonomously can be considered ethical. Thus, if two people consciously employ homosexual relations to ensure trust and fidelity between them, they are utilizing sound ethics according to the Virtue-based ethical system.