Exploring teaching and learning in real and virtual worlds
Teaching and learning in virtual worlds

My name is Kieron Sheehy and I was involved the part of the course that looks at virtual worlds, virtual and augmented worlds, and how they might be used in education.

I've a long standing interest in this area, partly inspired by my work in the field of inclusion and inclusive education, how we can remove barriers that learners, and the way that technology acts upon those barriers to either remove them or increase them.

A few years ago anyone trying to set up an educational sort of island within Second Life, or any virtual world, was seen as quite out of the ordinary, it wasn't the usual thing and it certainly didn't equate with university level education. However, within a space of about four years I think almost every university, certainly within the UK, has a space in Second Life which they're using.

One of the first universities, certainly in the UK, Europe to get going, was the Open University. We fired off with the Schome Park project in the teen grid and at the same time we had islands on our other main grid.

The reason behind my interest in virtual worlds is also to see if we can look at creating a new pedagogy, I mean very often people say well, it's traditional classroom but which kind of is a long standing form where we have walls and desks and tables, carries with it a particular way of thinking about how children learn. Now with virtual worlds we have the opportunity to look at that anew, to try different ways of doing a thing, and the Schome Park project was one way of researching that aspect, what could happen, were there new ways in which we could teach and new ways in which we could learn, but we're always a bit wary of where we're carrying from the real world practices which weren't very effective in the real world, and just transferring them into this virtual space, so were we're dressing up ineffective practices and, for my background, exclusive, that's non-inclusive practices, and carrying them with us into the virtual world.

The sorts of people who came initially were people who had access to good computers at home so that ruled out quite a few people, they didn't have to rely on using it at school because schools wouldn't allow them to use virtual worlds so it was, home background was an issue.

I think one of the interesting things about the people who came in to this project and worked together was the age range so we had younger learners, say 12 and 13, working with 17 year old people going to college, and also our post graduate students, we had here at the Open University working together on projects.

One of the things about the teen grid is that it's a restricted access zone so it is for people under 18 only, and for adults to be in there then like, for example the people in the Schome Park project, you'd have to have a full CRB check, and then the equivalent in America because it's hosted in America, and then be vetted, and then work in world. In addition to that we had report abuse buttons to see if anything went off in terms of child safety, all conversations that we held were logged and recorded, and we knew who was in world every time, all the time, so that is quite an interesting tension in the sense that for setting up an environment to try out new ways of learning and ended up imposing quite a strict regime so in addition to having the CRB check from two countries, we had sensors placed on the island so we knew who was where at any time, we recorded the interactions that went on so we knew what was said and what was done.

The Schome Park project, and the sections of it that I was involved with, produced some quite interesting findings. Firstly the real world barriers still exist, so things like poverty, access,

schools' attitudes to virtual worlds, and what counts as learning or, they cut across the board, so they had a big impact on the types of children who could engage, and young people who could engage with the project, and how successful and how much access they had. Within the actual world itself, however, lots of things came out. One thing that emerged was like the role of fun in learning. When we interviewed children and young people about what they liked, here and in other virtual world programmes that we've done, they reported that the thing they liked was they found them very enjoyable.

All the young people we talked to, all of them, have engaged in some sort of virtual life, either through Second Life, Club Penguin, World of Warcraft, or instant messaging if they weren't in the 3D virtual worlds, they're in some sort of online communication, and these have real importance and relevance to their lives, and we know now in our own lives, you know, that that's how we tend to use these technologies to communicate, and they influence and shape the way in which we learn, yet we can, that contrast quite markedly with the experience of children in their actual schools, so these technologies are typically banned, they're not allowed to be used, and they're seen as not part of school.

Now when we're looking at skills for the future, one of the things that comes out of the course as a whole is the impact of different social organisations and different ways of interacting in, on the way that children think and learn. Now we have, a relatively new phenomenon in virtual worlds. They carry with them, and are their own social organisation, they carry with them their own culture, they carry with them their own rules, and implicit norms about how to behave and what to do, and children by the million, millions upon millions, are engaging with this. Now we need to see as educators whether these spaces and cultures are positive in the effects they have, or how we can influence them, and use them to create positive educational environments for the future.