

# THE VIRTUAL WORLDS BEST PRACTICES IN EDUCATION CONFERENCE

## Reconnaissance with the Lab: A Critical Conversation with VWBPE

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*During this year's conference, we built on the themes of Reconnaissance in virtual world education that had surfaced over the course of the conference.*

*VWBPE primarily serves educators who utilize Second Life as a virtual environment for education, and Linden Lab provides the environment for these educators. In order for this type of innovative tool to be used to meet the needs of educators, a collaborative effort is an ideal solution in order to effect changes many educators and non-profits require to address challenges they face.*

*Many educators have returned to Virtual Worlds this past year as they struggled to offer their students quality online learning environments around the challenges of the pandemic. It was reassuring to be able to have a conversation with Linden Lab around specific issues of Second Life and education. The tone of their participation in VWBPE Reconnaissance 2021 has left hope that their goal was to meet the needs of the education community, to make the community happy. This conversation started with that reminder.*

*Guests from Linden Lab were Brett Linden, VP of Marketing, and Grumpity Linden, VP of Product. Together they focus on both the acquisition of new users and the retention of existing users for the virtual world. Their roles are of critical important to educators. Read the conversation report below.*

*Please see the link that follows for more information on our guests: [Linden Lab Guests](#)*

### **Overview of the Main Topics or Ideas**

The session covered six critical areas that had come up over the span of the conference: 1) Safety, Security and Grievers and how a single instructor or institution manage, 2) Accessibility for students with a disability, as well as Second Language Learners or those who need to use text for other reasons, 3) Improved onboarding, 4) Marketing for Education, 5) Cost and 6) How to get Help and Provide Feedback to Linden Lab.

### **Elaboration of Ideas that Fit a “Best Practices” Category**

Many of the topics could be considered under the topic of Best Practice. Safety, security for students, and managing grievers as an individual instructor or institution are critical issues that can leave an instructor or institution at risk. Linden Lab understands this and has been working to make sure that educators, and others, have a voice on what those issues look like. They recommended educators attend the Governance User Group, held every third Tuesday and led by Tommy and Kristen Linden. This is a forum where such issues can be addressed.

They also suggested that educators contact Madori Linden. Madori was identified as the Linden Lab direct contact for questions from educators as well as someone who can collect problems educators are having. It is her role to bring them to the appropriate Linden Lab staff for these to be addressed.

Grumpity also reviewed the RegAPI (Registry Configuration Application Program Interface) program, which allows users to control who can and cannot access their regions, as well as the groups students are in. This approach has been used with several educational entities in Second Life very successfully. It is relatively easy for a class setting, where the instructor can limit access. This is an API where the instructor or institution builds a form that interfaces with Linden Lab's registration system.

Students are given a key where they can create a Linden Lab account. When they create that account, the instructors can set groups, access, and have a few other controls. The instructor or institution estate is only available to those accounts. This insulates the environment from outside grieving, as well as students having access to areas Inworld that you would prefer

they do not explore. Additionally, if you want to do this for the university or college where you teach, you can require a login to the institution before the student can create an account. It is important to note that this is not an organizational single sign-on extension and is done through a webpage. This could be a webpage hosted inside the learning management system (LMS) or within a page that requires a sign-on, wherever is convenient for you and your students.

After the extensive concerns grievers have caused via voice, Linden Lab has worked with their voice service provider to make sure they can take out voice grievers immediately, for larger events. They assured the participants that issues such as this can be addressed more quickly now.

### **Elaboration of Ideas that Fit a “Potential Pitfalls” category**

Several topics could be considered potential pitfalls. Accessibility for students with a disability, as well as Second Language Learners or those who need to use text for other reasons, is a critical issue and not easy to address. The Linden Lab representatives commended Gentle Heron of Virtual Ability, Inc. for providing a persistent reminder that they need to do better.

They assured the participants that they have spent over a year on slow progress with teacher development. As they have made progress, they feel they are in a much better place to review their feature infrastructure. Because they rely on third-party tools that require integration, they are in a better place to look at the new tool that exists and are interested in the most successful way for that third-party to maintain the tool. They do not have a definitive road map but feel confident they are in a good place to make sure they use an accessibility lens when they plan changes.

This is another area where they ask that educators contact Grumpity or Madori directly with ideas. They believe that having accessibility key to the tool is important and assured us we can count on them to stay on this issue and encouraged the educational community to keep asking. They recommended creating a ranked order list of needs / preferences to help them as they examine features to investigate and develop.

The point was made that many different people use Second Life in many ways. The Lab must keep all the

different communities, who have different abilities as well as limitations, in mind. Accessibility is critical for many, but without access, educators cannot bring students here. This supports the educational need for accessibility.

### **Elaboration of Ideas that Fit a “Recommendations” Category**

Several topics could be considered recommendations. The third area discussed was improved onboarding. This included a brief discussion of a new community gateway that is not being created by the Lab, but they are trying to support by sharing what they know about onboarding. This is a new community group, not a feature of the software. The Lab wants to support groups that are interested in improving the onboarding process, as they believe it is helpful in getting started when you have someone “show you the ropes.” Both Rockcliffe University and Virtual Ability have a new user onboarding area through the community gateway program.

Linden Lab is working on a new onboarding experience. Their goal is a clean, modern look that is more logical and simpler so that Second Life doesn't seem so overwhelming to new residents. The aim is to shorten the path to avatar customization and help with what people need to be successful. They want to teach more than how do you move, by teaching essential skills such as how to communicate, and how to manage the culture of Second Life. This is in process but not quite ready, however, there are new avatars on the way.

The Lab shared that there is work going on to have a partnership that would allow a streaming solution for Second Life. This would address the questions around browser-capable grids to assist students with technology issues such as Chromebooks and a mobile app. This has advanced quite a bit in the last year, but they are not able to announce anything yet. They believe that the nature of SL is such that a mobile experience is going to be less than ideal on a phone but adapting to a tablet is the next step. They are still exploring a mobile option. The audience reminded us that the Lumiya viewer app for mobile phones was very helpful when away from home and it was the only option. It was not optimal, but useful and important.

## **Elaboration of Any Other Main Ideas Discussed**

Marketing to education was the fourth area of interest to many. As VP of Marketing, Brett shared a lot going on. They are gearing up for a new general consumer campaign to reinvigorate the brand. Recently they have updated the Second Life logo and ramped up social media, including a social media outreach.

Brett noted that an area of opportunity would be to share examples of successes as well as novel uses of education in Second Life. He invited educators to contact them about our experiences that are newsworthy so the Lab can leverage our stories with the journalists Brett speaks to. It is a prime time, due to the pandemic. The Lab has had more media coverage in the past year in recognition of what Second Life has contributed to the idea of a virtual world than they have had in the last decade.

He is very interested in celebrating what is going on in education. The Linden Lab Marketing team have promotional levers they can pull and would love to feature education at the weekly Lab Gab. Another marketing tool that educational groups should be included in is the Destination Guide. Please use the email below to let them know if your group needs to be added to it.

Brett emphasized that the Linden Lab marketing team is interested in ideas, comments, criticisms, or praise from the educational community.

The discussion moved on to cost. Grumpity was quick to state that there were some dark times when the educational discount was taken away. It has been reinstated and Grumpity was clear there is no intention to increase the cost for education and nonprofits. This was well received by the audience. She also explained that moving to the cloud did not make the cost go down, despite relieving the need for hardware replacement now and in the future. Moving to the cloud has a cost and did not improve the day-to-day operation cost. Much has improved, and it has allowed the Lab to focus on Second Life and not servers. But there was not a cost savings benefit.

The final topic addressed how to get in touch with the Lab, how to get help, videos, the wiki being outdated, and are they considering having an Educational Liaison. Brett shared that it has been a year since their last video refresh when Strawberry Linden joined the team and

lent her expertise with seven or eight videos that were translated into multiple languages. These are on the Second Life YouTube channel. There are more planned, but they would like to hear from educators if there are specific videos needed.

Other issues such as making help easier to find, improving search, making it easier to add people to groups, voice directionality, and integration with learning management system apps such as Moodle were mentioned. There are always going to be issues the educational community needs addressed. Madori Linden is the contact person for any and all issues for educators.

There is a discussion at the Lab about starting a Discord group for communication. They are open to having an educator user group, and several agreed that would be helpful for communication. The newly formed Virtual Worlds Education Consortium (VWEC) was mentioned. The Lab feels it is very important to liaise with the educational community.

## **Conclusions Reached by the Facilitator/ Assistant Based on the Discussion**

As the session wrapped up both Linden guests expressed these conversations were very helpful for them and noted the diverse issues that were brought up. They expressed that they are aware of the issues and want to fix them. The audience shared how pleased they were that the Lab is interested in education again.

VWBPE has been dedicated to returning to a time when educators' work was valued by Linden Lab and the Lab had a genuine relationship with the educational community. It takes a great deal of work behind the scenes and much thought and time have gone into making these conversations happen.

At this Quadrivium our paths met, between vendor and educational community. We shared space, both at the conference site and on the YouTube stream, and quality time, developing harmony between the Lab and our educational community. The technology (science) of Second Life allows us to meet our students' needs through both innovative approaches and practical solutions. It was clear that if our instructors, institutions, and instructional designers can work closely with the Lab, the innovative work we do for our students benefit will be better supported.

It has been a very challenging year for everyone. Our educators have faced rapid change that was necessary for the safety of students, instructors, and staff. The pandemic was not something most could predict and directly affected everyone. Many have been able to take advantage of their experience in virtual worlds to make their students' experience rich through it all. Many attendees expressed that having time to work with Linden Lab Senior Staff to understand plans and how to solve problems was very valuable and a true Reconnaissance.

**Resources Discussed by Participants (references, tools, etc)**

- Governance User Group
- [http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Governance\\_User\\_Group](http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Governance_User_Group)
- RegAPI  
<http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Regapi>
- Second Life Community Gateway  
[http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Linden\\_Lab\\_Official:Community\\_Gateway](http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Linden_Lab_Official:Community_Gateway)
- Second Life Destination Guide  
<https://secondlife.com/destinations/learning>
- Second Life Educational Discount  
<https://community.secondlife.com/blogs/entry/3818-second-life-to-expand-support-reduce-prices-for-education-nonprofits/>
- Second Life YouTube Channel  
<https://www.youtube.com/user/Secondlife/playlists>
- Second Life YouTube Channel - English  
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD237D0E11AC1F341>