OUTLOOK Ohio University News & Information
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NEWS

Ohio University hosts one of the largest educational technology conferences

Utilizes Second Life technology to meet conference needs

ATHENS, Ohio (March 7, 2007) -- Just last month, one of the largest educational technology conferences, eTech Ohio, was held at Ohio University. Don't be surprised if you didn't see the participants on campus -- the conference was hosted in Second Life at the Ohio University Without Boundaries virtual campus. Second Life is a popular 3-D virtual world where people explore, create, build, collaborate and participate in activities as part of a 65,000 acre virtual society.

Through Ohio University and the Virtual Immersive Technologies for Arts and Learning Laboratory, this was the first time eTech Ohio utilized this technology to host its conference. The VITAL Lab is a multidisciplinary research and development unit that is a collaboration of the Russ College of Engineering and Technology, the College of Education, the College of Fine Arts and OUWB.

For eTech Ohio's first-ever Second Life conference, the learning center at OUWB's virtual campus was decorated with poster boards for select presentations and exhibits.

Among them were posters showcasing the VITAL Lab's work with area middle schools; using serious games to teach scientific concepts in a hands-on, interactive manner. As a leader in Second Life's application to education, Ohio University was the first to extend the technology to middle school students; previously, no one younger than 13 was even permitted to log on.

"The new technology we adopted not only expanded the reach of eTech Ohio so that people from as far away as Sweden could tune into the event, but it also enabled remote presenters to virtually be there through avatar representations," said Chang Liu, who has spearheaded Ohio University's Second Life involvement.

One of the remote presenters was Christopher Keesey, project manager for OUWB. During a panel session titled "Adopting the Second Life Virtual Environment in Teaching and Learning," Keesey gave a remote virtual tour of the university's Second Life campus.

"It was actually quite surreal giving a tour from 'in world' knowing that there were people in the real world, in a room 90 miles away, watching my avatar on a screen and following me around the campus," he said. Facilitated by Liu, the panel discussed the advantages and barriers of using Second Life in education presenting projects and examples of teaching aids created at Ohio University.

One such project integrates Second Life learning environments into the

classroom. The STEAM project, or Science and Technology Enrichment for Appalachian Middle-Schoolers, is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation. The project is currently working with six area middle schools, including Alexander, Federal Hocking, Athens, Miller, Belpre and Roseville. Panelist Joshua Schendel said he was encouraged by the reaction to Second Life.

"Some of the educators I met at the conference were so excited by what I had developed that signing up for our mailing list wasn't enough," he said. "They gave me their e-mail addresses and requested I keep them informed of my new developments directly."

Along with fellow graduate student and panelist Bruce Bilyeu, Schendel develops learning tools in Second Life for the area middle schools. Bilyeu, who has developed a virtual science lab in Second Life, presented his work during a session and helped man VITAL lab's floor booth during the three-day conference.

"A lot of the teachers that saw Second Life for the first time thought it was a great way to bring technology the kids would love into the classroom," he said.

Graduate student Scott Nykl presented "Using Engaging and Interactive Technology to Teach Hard-to-Teach Science Concepts." Participants were led through various STEAM project developments, including test-driving a car and exploring the hands-on virtual learning of scientific concepts such as force and momentum, velocity and acceleration. Another session, led by graduate fellow Mark Smearcheck, explored the integration of educational gaming into eighth-grade science standards. This included game creation techniques, methods for integration of games into science curriculum, student opinions and teacher observations. In her presentations, Teresa Franklin, associate professor of instructional technology, first explored the use of blogs, wikis and podcasts in the classroom, with examples of how these new online environments can improve student achievement and literacy.

Her second presentation addressed teacher concerns over how new learning environments will change the connection between school and home. Among these concerns is how a teacher can meet the demands of teaching and e-mail overload.

Other panelists included: David Chelberg, associate professor in the School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science; Cable Green, director of technology for the Ohio Learning Network; and Sarah Korte, eighth-grade science teacher at Alexander Middle School.

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