

## Virtual worlds an outlet for learning, teaching

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ALBANY, Ohio ? Eighthgraders Amber McLaughlin and Morgan Spaulding had a pretty exhausting science class.

They sailed along a rushing river in an inner tube, dodging shifting glaciers and steep cliff edges, all the while answering multiple-choice questions about soil erosion.

When they finally floated to the ocean, they decided to fly up to the roof of a building to play Energy Golf, a game that quizzed them on thermal, magnetic and electric power.

Then they didn't like what they were wearing, so they looked for new outfits. All this took less than an hour.

The Alexander Middle School students were using a program designed on the Internet-based world Second Life by Ohio University graduate students as part of a \$1.7 million National Science Foundation grant.

Second Life is a virtual, 3-D community where people can create personalities, buy and sell land and goods and go to bars and restaurants. It even has its own currency, the Linden dollar.

Last month, the university opened its virtual campus on Second Life to the public, joining Princeton, Harvard and a few other institutions in the virtual world.

The OU campus consists of two connected islands purchased for \$1,800. The university pays an additional \$200 monthly service fee.

OU educators consulted with classroom teachers to determine the hardest concepts for their students to grasp. Graduate students designed programs around those concepts.

Amber, 13, said using programs such as the Rafting Adventure and Energy Golf help her understand the lesson faster.

"I was like, ?Wow,? " she said. "You can read it in a book, but I think it helps to see it. You know it happens, but why does it happen? "

The students were in a special teen Second Life community that has background checks and content controls.

Educators and programmers at Ohio University say the virtual world enhances how students learn. Instead of reading about retail marketing, for example, they can operate their own virtual store.

"Anything you can think of or create, you can do," said Christopher Keeseey, project manager for Ohio University Without Boundaries, a program that has been key in integrating the real and virtual campuses.

Some university classes meet in Second Life, and there?s a student center and an arts and music center.

Paul Shovlin?s junior-level English composition class meets roughly once a week in Second Life, although classmates are physically in the same room as well.

"When we?re sitting around together, it is kind of weird," he said. "But because of the visual elements, it does suck you in fast. You?ll hear mouses clicking. You?ll hear someone chuckle when someone cracks a joke."

The graduate teaching assistant said he uses Second Life to explore how meeting in different environments affects how people communicate and exchange ideas.

"Literacy is not just reading and writing anymore," he said.

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