- Michael DeMers
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"Using Virtual Worlds to get students to think in full sentences" submitted by Dr. Michael N. DeMers, New Mexico State University

- Posted by Global Kids on October 14, 2008 at 4:15pm in Aha Moments
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1. What is a descriptive title of your best practice?
Using Virtual Worlds to get students to think in full sentences.

2. Organization/Institution Name
New Mexico State University

3. Project Name
Geography 481 class

4. Names of project lead(s) at your organization
Dr. Michael N. DeMers (aka Gadget Loon in Second Life)

5. Contact Information

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6. In which of the following settings does your project take place
College

7. Which of the following will your best practice explore?
Outcomes
Distance learning
Skill development

8. Which virtual world(s) or gaming environment are you utilizing in the program being described?
Second Life

9. Why did you choose that specific platform or community for your project?
I was planning on using Second Life as a means of having my students get together to talk about their projects. But instead they wanted to use it as a study hall.

10. What are the learning objectives of your project?
The learning objective was to form an online learning community to enhance the social presence aspect of learning. Even for f-2-f students there seems to be a decrease in interaction and research shows that social interaction is a key factor in student success.

11. In 100 words or less, please write a description of your project and how it leverages virtual worlds for learning.
After the surprise of learning that the students wanted to use SL for a study group, I was amazed at the consistency of attendance. The students and I would gather every sunday evening for 60 to 90 minutes to review PowerPoint slides they had selected and I displayed in-world using a whiteboard. This worked so well because the students could get together without having to travel at all.

12. Best Practice: Please describe one key element of your program's success that you learned during the process and would like to share with the RezEd community.
During the review sessions I did the following. 1. Required text (no voice was allowed). 2. Displayed the frames the students themselves selected from the f-2-f lecture as ones they were having difficulty with. 3. Asked them to review the slides before showing 4. Put up the slides and employed the Socratic Method and asked them to describe and verbally explain things. The result of using text only was utterly astonishing. I did it at first because some didn't have the equipment. Later, I discovered, that requiring the students to "write out" their answers in full sentences was a wonderful preparation for the essay exams. Prior to this I was always frustrated that the students seemed to know the material, displayed the "aha" reaction, but did terribly on the exams because they weren't thinking in full sentences and paragraphs during the lecture. In Second Life they had to think in the same terms in which the exams would be given. It was fabulous. Their exam scores showed the improvement as well.

13. What would need to be in place (in terms of skills, staffing, infrastructure, systems, etc.) for someone else to reproduce your best practice?
Not much, that's the beauty of this. I used a five linden display board, in a portion of Aggieland (NMSU's Second Life Island), where I built an outdoor amphitheater with very simple tools. As long as you have a computer that is compatible with Second Life (not a huge deal) and an hour or two to set things up, you should be good to go.

14. Please write a short anecdote that reflects this best practice.
I remember asking a question about a very complex diagram (specifics aren't relevant here) relating to estimating (interpolating) missing topographic values. When I asked the students about the graphic I got a five minute silence. Eventually one student said, "um elevation." That was it. One word. My response was "You're fishing." But at that point I knew that they lacked a detailed understanding of the diagram, its purpose, and its use. We spent 30 minutes on this. In my face to face lecture I probably spent 5 or 10 minutes tops. It's very fast to deliver information verbally in some cases, but the resulting depth of learning is often pretty shallow.

15. Please include the URLs of any photo(s), video(s), or sound file(s) that are specific to the program you are describing.