Avatars Go to School, Letting Students Get a Feel for the Work World

Teachers and students say:

"The use of avatars and virtual worlds in classes... pulls in even reluctant learners, and encourages problem-solving and higher-order thinking as classroom knowledge is applied to real-life situations."

In Suffern, N.Y., 2,500 middle and high school students have logged into a virtual world known as Teen Second Life for lessons in subjects including math and foreign languages. Eighth-grade health students fashion avatars to challenge media and social perceptions of beauty. A social studies class visited a recreated Ellis Island to go beyond historical facts and empathize with immigrants and immigration officers through role playing.

Peggy Sheehy, a media specialist for the Ramapo Central School District, of which Suffern is a part, said such virtual worlds allowed students to learn academically as well as socially.

"They’re able to explore other options, other genders, other races, other personality types,” she said. “A very outspoken, confident person may go into Second Life and be just that, or he could take a side seat, or a student who is very shy may not feel intimidated and becomes a much more vocal part of the community."

The idea of video games in the classroom has concerned some parents, who say it can be a distraction, but many of the games are relatively new and have not been used widely enough to generate much criticism.

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