
Classrooms Without Walls



STRATEGIES:
TECHNOLOGY

For new teachers and experienced teachers alike, knowing how to connect with and motivate students is a never-ending task. Many students, especially those who are “digital natives” (born after the transition from analog sources of information and entertainment), find computer gaming to be an absorbing and engaging activity. Gaming can engage students in higher-level cognitive thinking such as interpreting, analyzing, discovering, evaluating, acting, and problem solving (Antonacci & Modress, 2008).

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Teachers need to be technologically savvy not only to keep up with students, but also to stay a few steps ahead. One gaming experience in particular, the Massive Multi-User Virtual Environment (MMUVE) called Second Life (SL), provides a universally accessible virtual world where students and teachers can meet, explore, and engage without the limitations of a “brick and mortar” classroom (Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007). Despite its potential to be a very powerful pedagogical tool, SL has a steep learning curve before students can take advantage of its capabilities. A strong background in a MMUVE such as Second Life will allow a teacher to act as guide and mentor in the use of the gaming environment. Thus, a teacher who is well-versed in SL can ensure that students reach a level of comfort that will allow them to take part in a myriad of instructional strategies.

The environment itself is non-threatening, and the student has a greater level of freedom to experiment with the language without self-consciousness. In the virtual classroom, speaking through an avatar with gestures and body movements and being included in the social environment of SL can motivate students to actively participate (Deutschmann, Panichi, & Molka-Danielsen, 2009).

Second Life is an example of the tools and simulations available to help teachers engage and motivate students. The use of SL as a virtual classroom supports a variety of instructional strategies that are effective with English language learners (ELLs).

- For first-time teachers of English as a second or other language (TESOL), especially those who are teaching online, the rich 3D environment of SL allows students to interact through their own uniquely designed representatives called avatars. Students and teacher alike can use the individual avatars to walk, run, and even fly through virtual cities, museums, and classrooms.
- Assignments can be given to students to explore the multitude of locations, called islands, as well as fulfill specific tasks and report back on their experiences.
- Another strategy is to use avatars in role-playing scenarios to increase and assess student comprehension of the content being

presented. A powerful example of this comes from medical students whose avatars take on particular characteristics, such as limited mobility or the neurological conditions they are studying, to increase their understanding (Boulos et al., 2007).

- As each student enters the virtual world using an avatar, they are given the freedom to appear to others as they wish. He or she has the freedom to explore, discover new situations, enter new locations, and ask questions about those experiences. An example of a classroom scenario is to ask students to report on aspects of the virtual world regarding who, what, when, where, and why (the 5 Ws) of the people, places, and situations they encounter (Delwiche, 2006).
- Word walls are another strategy used in many English language classrooms. In Second Life, the lists of core words and phrases are not limited to downloadable documents or PowerPoint® presentations. Instead, a teacher can create editable, searchable virtual word walls that can be easily accessed by students whenever (day or night) they visit the virtual classroom.

Grabbing student attention and holding on to it is a challenge all teachers face, especially new teachers. Incorporating student interests and the activities they already enjoy in teaching strategies can be a good way to engage them. MMUVEs like Second Life give teachers powerful tools to involve and motivate students in virtual classrooms that are limited only by imagination. 🍎

References

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