

Education graduate students inhabit TejanoTech virtual island in Second Life

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(Oct. 15, 2009)--As UTSA vaults boldly into the virtual world of Second Life as a part of a new UT System initiative, one of the project team campus leaders, Carmen Fies, is no stranger to living in virtual worlds.

An assistant professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching of the College of Education and Human Development (COEHD), Fies is familiar with Second Life. Over the summer, she opened the virtual world to her students in a four-week graduate curriculum and instruction course on mentoring. In the class, students create an avatar, a three-dimensional computer model representation of themselves in a virtual world. The students inhabited Tejano Tech, a virtual island that they augmented and improved by adding buildings and landscapes.

"What people should know about this world is that although it's virtual, it's very much linked to the real world," said Fies. "It has the characteristics of community, and it's about social interaction and other cultures. It's another teaching tool in a bag of tools."

Amy Muniz, an elementary school teacher close to graduation, was apprehensive at the start of the class but became more accepting as the class went on. "I think I have a more open mind as I've realized that lots of people are doing this," said Muniz. "I was surprised to learn that people could feature their artwork or showcase their music. Overall, it's made me more open to the whole virtual world technology."

Ed Valenzuela, a COEHD web specialist, used Second Life to showcase "Retrospective Crossings," an art exhibit featuring photos he took during his previous career as a photojournalist. Valenzuela did the exhibit to show his retrospective photos crossing the virtual world frontier. "Second Life is a very inexpensive environment where you can convey education and learning without physically being there," said Valenzuela.



Top photo: UTSA graduate student Amy Muniz
Bottom photo: Graduate class using Second Life

The use of Second Life at UTSA is starting to spread in COEHD. Faculty members and the college's dean, Betty Merchant, have a growing interest in the online world after learning more about it in recent professional development sessions.

"I think our college can be the national trendsetter in this area because of the focus on the multicultural aspects of the community," said Merchant. "It takes a lot of courage, effort and energy to learn this technology, then figure out how this can improve the teaching and learning process for children."

>> To learn more about Second Life and UTSA's Virtual Learning Community Initiative, the UTSA community is invited to attend a demonstration at 9 a.m., Friday, Oct. 16 in the Main Building Auditorium (0.106) on the UTSA Main Campus.