

The Virtual Classroom

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For two years, Carol Whelan, a professor of practice in the Tulane University Teacher Certification Program, has joined with a circle of academics in discussing how to bring virtual reality into the classroom.



Carol Whelan, a professor of practice in the Tulane Teacher Certification Program, appears in her virtual office in Second Life, a technology that simulates the physical world. (Illustration from Carol Whelan)

The group, composed of professors from universities across Louisiana, is pioneering the educational potential of Second Life, an innovative technology that simulates the physical world by recreating the natural and architectural environment. Whelan describes Second Life as “a virtual space, where you create an avatar that represents you, and you can go to different 'islands' and meet people and discuss topics of mutual interest.” Whelan and others in the group are using Second Life as an auxiliary online classroom space.

With funding from a Louisiana Board of Regents grant, Whelan assembled four students ? ranging across class years and majors ? into a pilot group that explores academic uses for the newly created [Tulane Regents Island](#).

Occasionally the group will meet in the virtual conference room adjacent to Whelan's online "office" space, which is furnished to resemble her Tulane office. (In the same way, the Tulane island contains facsimile versions of Newcomb and Gibson halls.) Whelan believes there is a benefit to a virtual space evoking the sense of place of the university because it encourages preparedness and a mindset geared toward learning.

For Whelan, the primary benefit of the Second Life software is its capacity to connect people separated by rush hour traffic, an unexpected storm or simply by distance, as well as to facilitate productive collaboration in a way that Skype, Blackboard or e-mail alone cannot.

"Second Life is an enhanced version of online learning," says Whelan. "While I prefer working face-to-face with students when it is possible, communicating, collaborating and teaching in a virtual space such as Second Life can be a very engaging learning experience."

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