

(Where)Ever Learn On-line School Overview

Concept: David Bowman, Director, NM REC 1

What is Ever Learn?

A *true* online school that combines the best features of traditional schools with the best features of online multi-player gaming systems

Traditional School

- Synchronous, shared instructional opportunities
- Live, ongoing contact with teachers and classmates
- Student small group study and collaborative learning
- Environment dedicated to learning, a “sense of place” where learning occurs
- Spontaneous learning opportunities, instructional redirection, and re-teaching
- Friends and social interaction

Online Gaming

- Any-place, any-time access without geographic barriers or constraints
- Collaboration with peers through result-driven experiences
- Sense of importance, identity, and involvement
- Powerful systems for group or individual communications
- Whole group, small group, and individualized experiences
- Virtual environments for meeting, working together, and hanging out
- Individualized, self-selected identity

Several Problems to be Solved through a True Virtual School

1. Inability access coursework that meets students needs or interests
2. High drop-out rates and students not re-engaging in schools
3. School schedules that don't align with student availability (e.g., students who work or take care of family at home)
4. Mis-match between learning needs and the traditional classroom environment
5. Students marginalized, passed through without learning
6. Teacher shortages and lack of access to teachers with in-depth subject knowledge (e.g., students “taught” by long-term subs)
7. Lack of cultural diversity among teaching staff
8. Students' sense of non-belonging, non-participation, and low self value

From a Students' Perspective: Frieda's Astronomy Class

Frieda, a seventh grade student in rural New Mexico, logs in to the school from a designated computer in the school library and puts on her headset. Her avatar is waiting outside the school lobby where she left it. She uses a few achievement points to put on an illusion that makes her appear to have zebra legs. It's cool. She enters the lobby and sees some friends there. She chats with a few of them.

She clicks a hot key to check for any messages from teachers, checks her class schedule, and sees a list of homework that is due. She takes a couple of minutes to upload her homework, a short review of major astronomical bodies, and sees that her homework assignment is now marked submitted.

When she pulls up her friends list, Frieda sees which of her classmates are already online. Most of them are there, so she sends a class message to say “hey.” They say “hey” back. One friend, Kris, messages she wants to talk to Frieda. Kris is in bed at home because she has the flu. Frieda pulls up the Voice over IP (voip) program, and they enter an empty room to talk freely. Kris likes Frieda’s new half-zebra look.

A message shows up on her screen that her astronomy class will begin in 5 minutes, so she trots over to the science building. When she enters her teacher’s classroom, her attendance is automatically recorded as present. She looks around the room and sees that most of her classmates are already there, but Kris’s name isn’t marked present on the class roster. Frieda sends her a private message to tell her to run. Kris tells her that she’s nearly 500 miles away from Frieda, and it’s a long way to run. Kris sends an LOL. In less than a minute, Kris enters the room, too.

Everyone is signed in to the voip program and in the room for the class. Frieda’s teacher is roaming around the room and greets them all by voice. The teacher, Ms. Johnson, sends Frieda note to let her know that she received the homework and to comment on her new legs. (Ms. Johnson thinks they look silly, but that’s ok. Ms. Johnson has the same boring look every day. On the other hand, she is easy to spot on campus with her blue instructor’s robe and the planets orbiting her head. Her tusks also help.) By voice, the teacher gives an overview of the day’s lesson, beginning with a small group research study on the definition for a planet.

The teacher puts Frieda in a group with 3 other classmates, and they pull up the research questions that the teacher posted. A flashing icon indicates that they have a unique group question: Why isn’t Pluto a planet? They join a private voip room to review the questions and start figuring out responses using their own knowledge and a little Internet research. The teacher enters the voip room and checks on their progress. It’s going great. Ms. Johnson won’t answer a question about size of the Kuiper Belt, but hints about checking the NASA website. When they are done, they place their group flag along the wall so the teacher will see it and know that they are ready.

Frieda is elected by her group mates to present their responses to the entire class. She walks to the front of the classroom, and the teacher empties all the private voip rooms so everyone can hear. A few students are huddling in the back of the room, but Ms. Johnson snaps them all back into their seats to make sure they are paying attention and can see. Frieda also notices that the teacher turned off the group and private chat windows. As Frieda makes her presentation, the teacher shows them several graphics that demonstrate what Frieda is saying.

When Frieda is done presenting, her teacher asks for questions, but lets Frieda answer them. She doesn’t know the answer to one of the questions—and no one else does either. The teacher gives the class 10 minutes to get back together with their groups to find out which planet might collide with Pluto in the next million years.

Frieda’s group thinks they have the answer, Neptune, and posts it to the class chat. It’s the right answer, and she gets 5 more achievement points. Tomorrow, she will have enough points to get a magic carpet. Kris will be really impressed when Frieda flies by on the way to music class.

Equity and Online Learning

1. Students can access specialized courses, as well as remedial or “make-up” classes even if their schools don’t have the teachers for those subjects or enough students to justify a class.
2. By drawing from a much larger geographic region for teachers, students are more likely to have a teacher that shares their culture and experiences.
3. Non-traditional students, working students, students with children, and students living at home can re-enter schools, participate in learning, earn credits, and advance their education progress.
4. Students develop cooperation and social skills in a safe environment.
5. Students can’t get left out, left alone, or marginalized. Neither can they hide in the classroom, and they don’t feel “invisible.”
6. Everyone has a unique identify that aligns with their interests and personality. They have a name, a face, and a personality.
7. All arbitrary and irrelevant characteristics are removed: no one is too tall, too short, too fat, or too skinny; no one has bad teeth, old clothes, or messy hair.

School System Components

The School System

Online: The environment, student details, management tools, communication tools, file management, student-specific characteristics

Local: Downloadable program to access the system, environment and user template files, plus local and user settings and options; computer and monitor

(By sharing the system between servers and local computers, access time is faster and more stable, with fewer demands on the student’s connectivity network.)

The Voice System

Online: VoIP servers, tools, management, etc.

Local: Downloadable VoIP program, headset with microphone

What Needs to Be Developed

At this time, several online game companies have about 80% of the needed system requirements for a real virtual school. Some features will need to be developed or modified from current systems. Following is a sample list of development needs.

System Needs

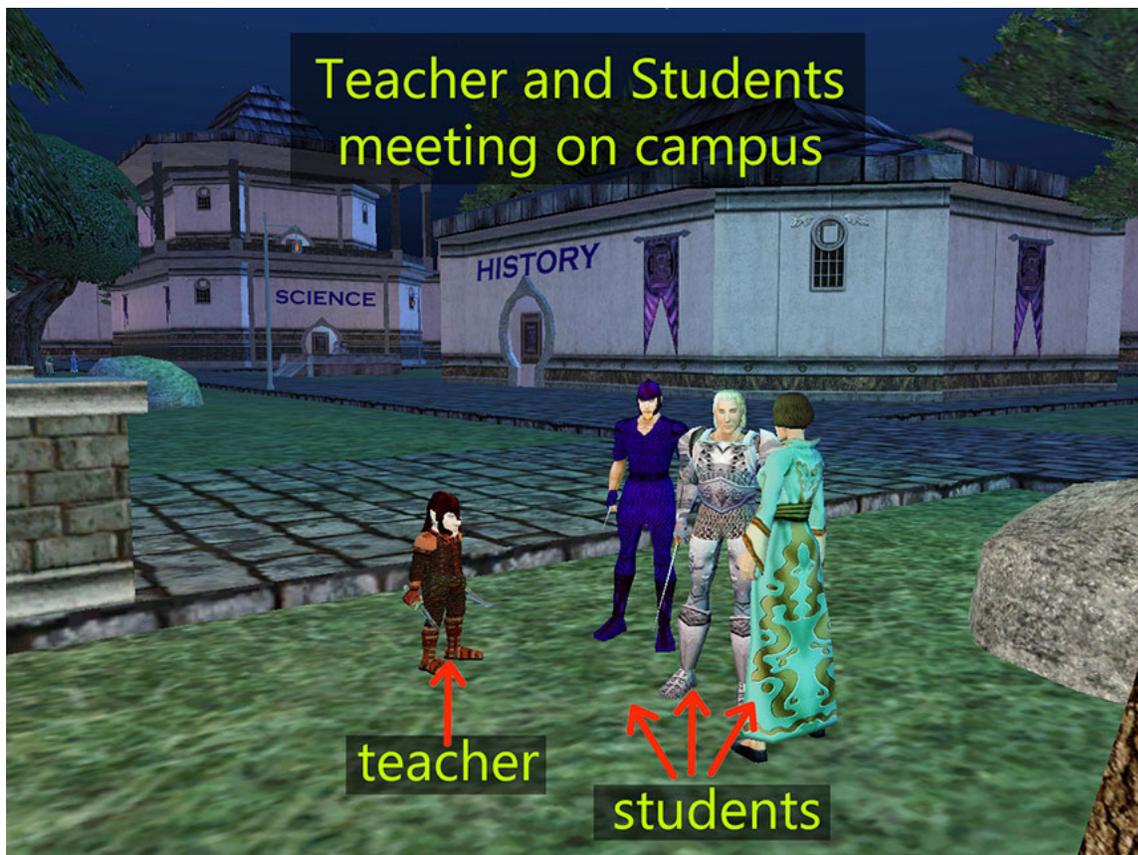
1. Ability to pull outside resources, files, etc., into the school environment
2. Classroom administration tools (e.g., grade book, attendance record)
3. Appropriate achievement system for rewarding progress, other than grades
4. External / home communication tools
5. Class behavior management tools (e.g., snap to desk, chat on/off settings)
6. Overall school management and coordination system
7. Student reporting system and data sharing with students’ school district.

Human Needs

1. Identify potential teachers
2. Teacher training in using the system
3. Teacher training in pedagogy
4. Curriculum appropriate to the environment
5. School administrators willing to pilot the system
6. School policy development for student's school district
7. Online support team for as-needed technical support while using the system
8. On-site support staff (local advisor?) to assist with using the system

Functional Needs

1. Computer systems sufficiently robust to run the applications
2. Microphone headset
3. Local networks, Internet access, and open firewalls



More illustrative images: <http://nmrec1.org/onlineschool>