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Avatars Teach Teens About Self-Image

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Credit: David Julian

Eighth graders type furiously on the keyboards in a middle school computer lab. Their spirited online chat is all about appearances: Who looks gross? Who wants a makeover? Most teachers would ban this kind of digital discussion, but not health teacher Diane Whiting. She encourages it, because what students say online often reveals concerns that would otherwise go unspoken.

One day in her class, five health students chatted about how they have manipulated their personal avatars -- online images that represent them -- to appear "more attractive."

Girl 1: I made myself taller and thinner.

Girl 2: Me too.

Boy 1: I made myself taller and muscular. Boy 2: I didn't keep my regular appearance because by media definition, I'm pretty gross looking.

Boy 3: Me too.

Whiting uses all the digital tools at her disposal -- from movies to instant messaging to virtual environments -- to get students thinking more critically about body image. "I'm always looking for ways to get them to see things differently and to support one another as they confront unrealistic media pressures," she explains.

Instead of blaming the messenger for the daily onslaught of impossibly beautiful images, Whiting uses digital media as her ally for combating stereotypes. She has discovered that the virtual, Web-based world of [Teen Second Life](#) [1] offers a safe place for young adolescents to discuss sensitive topics such as body image. Her students at Suffern Middle School, in Rockland County, New York, conduct candid text discussions while using avatars to put a face -- and body -- on themselves. They design avatars that are like digital alter egos or online stunt doubles -- close to reality but a safe step removed.

A New Conversation

Whiting first introduced her students to Teen Second Life two years ago. "The whole tone of the class changed dramatically," she recalls. "Students had conversations that just don't normally happen in the classroom." [Peggy Sheehy](#) [2], the school's tech-savvy library media specialist, coached Whiting through her first Teen Second Life project. "These online chats were nothing short of profound," she says. "I remember the hairs on my arms going up when I saw kids commenting about the need to rethink what beauty is," Sheehy adds.

A growing obsession with beauty challenges the physical, emotional, and economic health of American women of all ages, according to "[Beauty at Any Cost](#) [3]," a 2008 report from the YWCA. The conclusion: Every female in the country participates in "a daily beauty pageant, whether she likes it or not."

And guys aren't immune from the beauty obsession, either. "Our nation's teens are in great jeopardy," says film director Darryl Roberts, who conducted extensive interviews with teens, some involved in the fashion world, for his documentary *America the Beautiful*. "Boys are absolutely victimized." His assertion echoes recent findings about the Adonis complex, the male obsession with body image. A 2007 Harvard University study suggests that boys and men are increasingly at risk for eating disorders, yet they are reluctant to talk about body-image concerns.

Enter Teen Second Life

Even as the national beauty obsession grows, a new virtual world has emerged to give kids another perspective about image.

In 2006, Sheehy persuaded the Ramapo Central School District, of which Suffern Middle School is part, to join the Second Life grid. She was convinced of the educational value of this virtual world by her own adult daughter, a computer science major and early proponent of Second Life. [Ramapo Islands](#) [4] is the name of the district's secure three-dimensional world in Teen Second Life. This private online space is accessible only to students from the district who are at least 13 years old, along with their teachers and a handful of carefully screened adult visitors.

Because Teen Second Life is new territory for most teachers, Sheehy offered technical support and curriculum development for any teacher in her school willing to give it a try. Whiting had never taught in a virtual-world environment before, but right away, she saw how she could use the space to give a more traditional health unit a makeover. Sheehy was thrilled to help.

"I immediately understood the potential," Sheehy says. "In creating an avatar, students would have so many opportunities to reflect on the choices they make." The site allows teens to modify every aspect of their avatar's appearance, including body type, hair color, skin tone, and wardrobe. Talking about the choices the students were making was the logical next step for learning.

A Brave New Health Class

To set the stage for the health unit, Whiting first had students watch and discuss a short video clip produced by Dove as part of its [Campaign for Real Beauty](#) [5]. With music pumping at a fast pace, the video shows an ordinary-looking woman transformed by makeup, hairstyling, Photoshop, and other special effects into a glamorous billboard model.

Whiting then escorted her students to the library computer lab, where Sheehy was standing by to provide support. Over the course of four class periods, students created a series of avatars to represent themselves in Teen Second Life. This hands-on design task gave kids an opportunity to explore their self-image individually. Then, when they moved on to small-group chats with peers, they were poised for conversations that went well beyond the superficial.

The open-ended assignments began with students manipulating their avatars' appearance however they chose. Next, Whiting had them modify their avatars to resemble their real-life appearance as much as possible. After that, they created an avatar that looked like the media's generic image of beauty. Then some kids switched genders: Girls created a "beautiful" male avatar, while boys created a "media-perfect" female. Finally, they chose which of the avatars they felt most comfortable about representing them in the virtual world. After some playful experimenting, a majority of the kids were happy to return to the avatar that most closely resembled their real appearance.

The same group of health students discussed the exercise in Teen Second Life:

Girl 1: I'd rather stay with my own image. I feel I'm beautiful in my own way. The media is stupid for the way they show women and the way they look.

Boy 1: Yeah, men don't have to look like Captain America either.

Boy 2: Yeah, it's very stupid. They change appearances to make women look deathly skinny.

Girl 2: It's so stupid.

What Avatars Teach Students

Designing personalized three-dimensional avatars gives the kids a risk-free chance to explore their identity. Avatars don't look quite as real as photographs, but they aren't totally abstract, either. They're just different enough from real life to make them an ideal device for toying with appearances. For a teen wondering what it would be like to dress a little edgier, have a more muscular physique, apply some body art, or otherwise stand out from the crowd, Teen Second Life offers a space free from the judgment of cliques or parents.

Each time the students created a new avatar, Whiting would assign them to a different pod, or small group, within Teen Second Life. Pods of four or five students would virtually fly to a private space where they used chat tools to discuss a set of questions posed by Whiting. From the educator's

perspective, this was where things got exciting.

"The whole room was silent except for the clicking of keyboards," Whiting recalls. As she switched from pod to pod to track the online chats in real time, she found lively online conversations under way. "If the same kids had been sitting in a classroom talking out loud to their peers, they wouldn't have had such personal discussions," she says. Her theory: The avatars and text chat created just enough anonymity so that kids felt comfortable about opening up.

Whiting says chatting came naturally to her eighth graders, who are adept at using text messaging. Transcripts allowed her to see at a glance whether students were on task. She left plenty of leeway for the kids to take conversations in directions that mattered to them, as long as they related to the general topic. At the end of the project, and after gaining the students' trust, she could review the transcripts to see how their attitudes evolved.

After students completed their avatar-building activities and discussions in Teen Second Life, Whiting had them continue their exploration of body image with more traditional classroom activities. They analyzed song lyrics for subtle messages about body types, investigated health statistics, and extrapolated the dimensions of Barbie dolls and GI Joe action figures to see what they would look like if they were life sized. "They realized that Barbie wouldn't have room for intestines," Whiting says, "and Joe would have 36-inch biceps."

Those follow-up classroom conversations went beyond the superficial level because students "had built a level of comfort in the virtual world activities," Whiting notes. "Student support was pretty amazing. And students who wouldn't normally even talk in class shared some personal stories and feelings in Teen Second Life." Adds Sheehy, "With the help of their avatars, these kids found their voice."

Suzie Boss is coauthor of *Reinventing Project-Based Learning: Your Field Guide to Real-World Projects in the Digital Age*. She also [blogs for Edutopia.org](#) [6].

Go to "[Technology Provides a New Look at Body Image](#) [7]."

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