

Researchers find virtual computer-based world an effective learning environment

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(Boston)—Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) researchers have demonstrated the potential of using a virtual computer environment for distance healthcare education for an international audience that often has limited access to conventional teaching and training. In this pilot project led by John Wiecha, MD, corresponding author of the study and associate professor of family medicine at BUSM, a virtual world was created in which participants engaged in a learning activity by creating virtual avatars of themselves to navigate through a three-dimensional computer environment and engage in educational activities. This study currently appears online in *BMC Medical Education*.

In many developing nations, access to traditional health care education can be limited as professionals may lack financial resources and live and work in remote areas with poor infrastructure or in a conflict zone. However, with the increase in Internet coverage in the past few years, distance learning has become an important way to offer [health care professionals](#) in these areas the opportunity to increase their clinical and research skills.

However, many current online platforms for training and exchanging ideas like webinars and online discussion boards are two dimensional and limit the way educational information can be designed according to the researchers.

A [virtual world](#) (VW) is an immersive, online environment that functions in real time for shared experiences and the exchange of ideas and

information. Participants in the project navigated the VW as avatars or three-dimensional representations of themselves. They were able to follow the course director through a series of learning stations with questions and discussions occurring in real time.

"We created and delivered, in collaboration with the World Health Organization and the Geneva Foundation for Medical Educational Research Foundation, an interactive lecture on population control, for students from around the world," says Wiecha. "The easy exchange of ideas with people from all over the globe gave the course a uniquely collaborative feeling. The program was successful and highly rated by participants, demonstrating the great potential for this new mode of highly interactive [distance education](#) pedagogy," he added.

More information: *BMC Medical Education*
www.biomedcentral.com/1472-6920/14/36

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