Robin Breault, an adjunct instructor in the business communication program, uses Second Life to stay connected with her students outside of regular class hours.

UA classes go virtual

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Imagine holding a one-on-one student-teacher conference while sitting in your underwear. That could soon become a reality - a virtual reality.

Second Life is a free 3-D virtual world created by its residents, the people who are involved with it. It serves as a social network where users can interact with avatars, or virtual people, that can communicate "face to face" with people from around the globe.

Within the system, users create a character and go to different places in the virtual world. The classroom, however, is probably the last place many users thought they would visit.

Hallie Leaventon, a speech, language and hearing sciences junior, said her African American studies teacher holds office hours and different classroom events in virtual reality on Second Life.

Leaventon said she has a hard time communicating with her teacher when she cannot physically interact with her.

"I'd rather meet one-on-one in person," Leaventon said. "It's kind of hard when there's no eye contact."

Robin Breault, a business communication professor, said the idea of using Second Life as an educational tool has just recently become popular.

There has been a big push to incorporate Second Life into the classroom. She said she knows of other classes where students are required to use Second Life to build things and learn interactively through the virtual world.

"Research has shown that there is a co-presence that your metronomes, a part of your brain that responds to people's emotions, respond to the 3-D environment the same way as in real life," Breault said.

She said she attended a Second Life training program hosted by a UA astronomy professor. There she learned some shortcuts that she passed on to her class in an attempt to make their virtual transition easier.
Breault said she received a $100,000 grant this year to create an online Eller College of Management Communication Certificate using 2-D and 3-D virtual technologies.

Her plan is to implement the first modules this fall in select graduate management communications courses.

By next summer the UA plans to offer distance-learning courses using Second Life and other virtual technologies for students and professionals across the state of Arizona.