

Ed Media 2009
Proposal for Best Practices Session

Virtually There: Using Constructivist Strategies and Cross-Cultural Dialogue for an Online Course in the Pacific

By using constructivist methods in distance learning courses, instructors can create authentic contexts and promote student engagement. In this presentation, we describe an online course, designed around constructivist principles. Using narrative strategies, multimedia resources and a synchronous weekly “virtual class” meeting, instructors of this course sought to address the needs of indigenous distance learners in the unique and isolated islands of Micronesia. Though teachers and students were on islands separated by 2300 miles of ocean, students experienced a high context, interactive and group-based learning environment similar to what they would have had in a traditional face-to-face class.

The objectives of this Introduction to Exceptionalities course were to introduce general education teachers to special education concepts, such as inclusion and advocacy for children with disabilities. Instructors used visually-rich presentations, narrative storytelling and hands-on learning activities that engaged students in their local communities. Rather than relying on textual materials and written communication as many online courses do, instructors delivered course content during the virtual class sessions. Students learned by participating in discussions with instructors and through small group activities with each other. Activities were designed to foster a cross-cultural dialogue that honored the unique perspectives and circumstances of these indigenous learners. Students taught the instructors about their cultural contexts and applied lessons learned in class in their schools and communities.

We will share results from this course, including student feedback on the unique, constructivist methods utilized for teaching and learning.