

Virtual Academy Next: Addressing Transition Challenges Through a Gamified Virtual Transition Program for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract : Students with disabilities (SWD) engaged in a distance summer program delivered over multiple virtual mediums that used gaming principles to teach and practice self-regulated learning (SRL) through the process of exploring possible jobs. Gaming quests were developed to explore jobs and teach transition skills. Students completed specially designed quests that taught and reinforced SRL and problem-solving through individual, group, and teacher-led experiences. SRL skills learned were reinforced through guided job explorations over the context of MinecraftEDU, zoom with experts in the career, collaborations with a team over Marco Polo, and Zoom. The quests were developed and laid out on an accessible web page, with active learning opportunities and feedback conducted within multiple virtual mediums including MinecraftEDU. Gaming mediums actively engage players in role-playing, problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration. Gaming has been used as a medium for education since the inception of formal education. Games, and specifically board games, are pre-historic, meaning we had board games before we had written language. Today, games are widely used in education, often as a reinforcer for behavior or for rewards for work completion. Games are not often used as a direct method of instruction and assessment; however, the inclusion of games as an assessment tool and as a form of instruction increases student engagement and participation. Games naturally include collaboration, problem-solving, and communication. Therefore, our summer program was developed using gaming principles and MinecraftEDU. This manuscript describes a virtual learning summer program called Virtual Academy New and Exciting Transitions (VAN) that was redesigned from a face-to-face setting to a completely online setting with a focus on SWD aged 14-21. The focus of VAN was to address transition planning needs such as problem-solving skills, self-regulation, interviewing, job exploration, and communication for transition-aged youth diagnosed with various disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, intellectual disability, down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder).

Keywords : autism, disabilities, transition, summer program, gaming, simulations

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