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Amanda J. Rockinson-Szapkiw
Liberty University, aszapkiw@liberty.edu

Victoria Walker
Regent University, vwalker@regent.edu

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Educational Opportunities for Clinical Counseling Simulations in Second Life

by Victoria L. Walker and Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw

Traditionally, human services counseling (HSC) training programs have relied upon face-to-face interactions, including such methods as simulated counseling sessions and live supervision, to teach interpersonal and clinical skills. Concerns about the ability of online media to facilitate the interpersonal interaction needed to teach discipline-specific skills has delayed adoption of online learning for these programs (Jaffee [1998](#); Patrick 2004). In fact, some HSC programs have resisted online education because of the perceived inability of the medium to provide the same quality of instruction as the face-to-face environment (Granello 2000; Greenidge and Daire [2005](#); Lambert 1988; Walker [2009a](#)).

On-campus counseling students can use campus labs to role play and practice counseling skills, but online students often do not have access to such a location. Multiuser virtual environments ([MUVEs](#)) offer one promising solution for online HSC education. MUVEs like [Second Life](#) can enable "role-playing scenarios, which were once only possible in a face-to-face environment" (Childress and Braswell 2006, 190) and provide hands-on experiential learning in a safe environment (Robbins [2007](#)). Although there are limitations, a MUVE can facilitate the interaction needed to teach discipline-specific skills; a virtual counselor training facility in Second Life can provide a simulated environment in which online students can experience the same kind of skill-development exercises available to students in a face-to-face situation.

In Fall 2007, Victoria L. Walker taught an online counseling skills class using Second Life to provide key role-playing experiences to distance education students; the results of the study conducted with that class have been published elsewhere (Walker [2009a](#)). In this article, we describe the Second Life training facility that was designed and implemented in that class and suggest how such a facility can make online education in HSC possible.

A Counseling Facility in Second Life

Standardized simulations, such as scripted role plays, mock interviews, and mock counseling sessions, are an important part of many HSC programs (Sharf and Lucas 1993, Walker [2009a](#), Walker 2009b). Simulations assist instructors in ensuring the student is prepared for typical counseling situations and allow students to receive feedback on their counseling practice. These activities are often completed in the classroom or in a lab setting with peers, friends, or volunteers. For an online HSC counseling skills course, a virtual environment can offer many of the same features as a traditional HSC course and can even improve the practice role playing for some situations.

Walker ([2009a](#)) experimented with this possibility in a virtual counseling lab tested with master's-level HSC students in Fall 2007 ([Exhibit 1](#)). The multifloor facility, designed and built in Second Life, includes meeting areas, classrooms, and counseling labs ([Exhibit 2](#)); it was designed with the specific needs of HSC instructors and students in mind, using a psychological services clinic at Regent University as an example. The facility's design also addressed ethical considerations specific to the counseling discipline, such as confidentiality, privacy, and accreditation requirements (Casey, Bloom, and Moan 1994; Walker [2009a](#); Watson 2003). The counseling labs provided students with the features they needed to conduct interviews and allowed the instructor to monitor practice sessions without disturbing participants. The facility was made private for confidentiality and privacy; specific user permissions were required to enter the building.

Counseling Practice in Second Life

Although the facility was specifically designed for role-playing activities, the design accommodates many other virtual learning opportunities. Learning kiosks can display interactive quizzes, PowerPoint presentations, and videos. Educators can hold virtual office hours in the facility. In addition to allowing role-play simulations and other functions, the Second Life facility is a useful venue for instructor-led activities, such as short lectures, class discussion, and technique descriptions; instructors can use the virtual counseling labs to conduct entire classes, moving effortlessly from lecture and demonstration to one-on-one practice time just as they would in a face-to-face classroom.

An instructor-led class in Second Life is, in many ways, very similar to a face-to-face class. Once students have logged in to the facility and proceeded to the designated classroom, the instructor begins the class by describing the class objectives and presenting a mini-lecture focused on the target skills for that class period, for instance, paraphrasing, summarizing, and observing nonverbal cues. Students, embodied as Second Life avatars, indicate that they have a question in the same way they would in a face-to-face classroom, by raising a hand. Questions, comments, and discussion are offered via voice or text chat.

Following the lecture, the instructor engages the students in a role play to practice targeted skills. The instructor asks a volunteer to act as the client and models the target skills; together, instructor and volunteer model one role play ([Exhibit 3](#)). In the remaining class time, the instructor provides live supervision as pairs of students take turns role playing the counselor and the client in the facility's lab rooms; other students may also observe the role play occurring in the room via the one-way mirrors. The instructor uses private text chat and voice communication to assist students in formulating responses and to provide corrective feedback while the role-play session is under way. After each session, the instructor provides further feedback and allows students to ask questions. Between class sessions, students are asked to form triads and use the virtual facility's lab rooms to role play and practice skills on their own.

Second Life Features and Counseling Skills Training

As the scenario above demonstrates, a virtual facility in Second Life can provide many of the strengths of traditional face-to-face instruction, allowing students to practice newly acquired skills in the same role-playing exercises typically used in traditional classrooms. In Second Life, "Instructors can provide feedback and assist students in understanding their strengths and weaknesses for future improvement" (Walker 2009b, 22). Practice in Second Life has some advantages. The virtual environment may enable practice in situations that are physically or ethically impossible to simulate in real life. For example, a professional counselor may have to interview a client who becomes physically aggressive or engages in a self-harming behavior during the session. The professional counselor must know exactly how to handle the situation; thus, students in counseling programs must be taught to respond appropriately to such a situations. However, simulating this type of session in a traditional setting may be nearly impossible; practicing with a real client with these problems would be unethical. The Second Life counseling facility offers the opportunity to practice an interview with a simulated client with these traits, allowing the student to learn to counsel clients in a setting that is safe, both for the student and for the clients.

Second Life's voice and chat functions also add substantially to the value of the environment. Voice communication provides a number of benefits in practicing counseling skills. First, some students may not type as fast as their peers or they may not type as well; the voice feature allows these students to participate more easily. Second, and more importantly, the ability to engage in verbal communication allows students to hone verbal counseling responses, voice intonations, and verbal cues, thus supporting the goals of a counseling skills and techniques course to master verbal communication techniques (CACREP 2009). Finally, most students will complete their counseling interviews and sessions with clients in a face-to-face counseling office once they have graduated; voice communication in SL more closely mimics those settings.

The private chat feature enhances the supervision process by allowing the instructor to provide immediate

feedback and correction while the session is still in progress. The instructor can provide correction or guidance via a private text message that is not visible to peers or the "client." In a traditional practice session, the instructor would need to interrupt the session to provide feedback or wait until the session had ended.

Similarly, the use of avatars enhances these affordances by allowing students to interact with one another in a manner approximating face-to-face interaction, even including gestures and nonverbal cues. Avatars build a sense of personal presence that is difficult to achieve in many e-learning environments. Presence goes beyond the environment's features to the interaction between participants in the virtual environment that fosters a sense of reality and engagement in the environment. Presence is a result both of the environment itself and of participants' interaction within it. In a typical virtual learning space, "what is 'real' is only the digital learning environment, with the monitor's screen as the interface" (Peters 2003, 89). If that virtual space is made into a "stage" for pedagogical actions, it becomes real for the learner (89). Such environments facilitate learning that goes beyond the technology (Herz [2002](#)). The particular features of Second Life help to build that feeling of reality:

The use of Second Life adds a visual feedback element that serves to enhance the interaction between the participants. Learners can observe the actions of other learners, watch how others interact with the various elements found in the virtual world, and introduce a visual element of proximity which is not available in a typical online classroom. (Childress and Braswell 2006, 191)

The visual element also fosters social presence. As Annetta, Klesath, and Holmes ([2008](#)) define it, "The concept of social presence suggests that the presence of other people (in the form of avatars) in a VLE provides evidence that the VLE actually exists" ("Avatars and Social Presence," ¶2). A participant's interaction with other participants as well as with the environment fosters the feeling that the environment is real, and "the acknowledgment of a participant's presence in the VLE by other participants offers affirmation that one actually exists in that environment" ("Avatars and Social Presence," ¶2). The nonverbal communication allowed in this environment by the avatar's ability to gesture and express body language also enhances interaction among students (Antonijevic 2007) and thus develops social presence. Some Second Life scripting tools may even allow avatars to produce appropriate facial expressions; we plan to explore these tools more fully in future work in the virtual counseling center.

Implementation of Second Life

Clearly, a counseling environment in Second Life can support interpersonal interactions in a way that mimics many aspects of face-to-face skills practice; however, the adoption of Second Life for an HSC classroom cannot be accomplished without forethought and planning. Before implementation, the instructional designer and educator must accomplish a range of tasks. Any instructor contemplating offering a course or part of a course in Second Life must consider the central pedagogical concern: Can skills and knowledge learned in the Second Life environment transfer to the real world? Once this is established, a number of technical steps remain; the instructor and designer must

- select media and determine what is available and bases skills for students and course goals,
- acquire skills in navigating and building in Second Life,
- plan the Second Life learning environment for the course or exercise,
- build the learning environment and create learning tools and objects,
- determine the technical requirements both for Second Life and to access the particular tools the instructor intends to use in the course or exercise and communicate them to students,
- create training tools to assist students in acquiring the skills needed to navigate Second Life and the particular learning environment.

Some limitations of the Second Life environment must be recognized. Primary implementation limitations, identified through practice and research (Walker [2009a](#), 2009b), are technical. For the neophyte user, the time that it takes to learn to navigate and build in Second Life is not trivial. Educators and instructional designers must acquire a new set of skills to construct meaningful educational experiences in Second Life, and students will need to develop skills to navigate the Second Life environment ([Table 1](#)). Educators and students will experience a learning curve depending on the activities completed in Second Life. Downloading and installing the software, understanding basic navigation, and using a microphone and headset are relatively easy skills to develop. The use of Linden Lab's tutorials and customized instructions developed by the instructor or designer will assist users in learning these skills quickly. Advanced skills such as building or scripting in Second Life do require significantly more time and ability than basic mouse and keyboard navigation of the educator or student user. For Second Life designers, locating tutorials, in-world courses, and published books may assist in this task. Despite Linden Labs' claim that "Building is easy, using built-in tools. And there are lots of daily Resident-run classes and tutorials to help you learn" (Linden Labs [2007](#)), we concur with Hayes's ([2006](#)) assessment that the skills needed for using, modifying, or building in SL can be difficult and time-consuming to master.

Students must also be prepared for the Second Life experience. Prior to scheduled classes, students should be required to download the Second Life software and attend small-group instructional sessions with the instructor to learn to navigate the environment. To avoid technological problems during class time, students should test microphones, headsets, speakers, and voice and audio settings ahead of time. Additionally, in the original study, students were sent downloadable tutorials created by the instructional designer to assist with downloading, installing, and using the Second Life software.

The most common concern will be technical issues, including system requirements to run the client software and problems in accessing and navigating the environment ([Table 2](#)). [Systems requirements](#) for accessing Second Life, including broadband connectivity and advanced graphics and memory capabilities, make the environment inaccessible for some students. In addition, the Second Life grid (the network of computers across the United States that maintain the Second Life virtual environment) does occasionally experience technical troubles. With the increasing popularity of Second Life, thousands of new residents (what Linden Labs calls their users) create accounts daily. This has caused server lag. Other technical concerns that have concerned users include technical bugs, inventory loss, environmental distractions, and abnormal and offensive material and behavior.

Some users may need to purchase additional computer memory, upgrade their graphics cards, download updated graphic card drivers, purchase microphones or microphone headsets, and upgrade their Internet access. Some older computers may be incompatible, and users may need to use an alternative computer for accessing Second Life. During the study in Fall 2007, one student had a computer that was incompatible and chose to use another computer in her home, and one student upgraded a graphics card.

Conclusion

While VoIP and video conferencing serve adequately for some learning applications, there are limitations in their capabilities to simulate authentic counseling scenarios in realistic environments and in a setting where the instructor can supervise without distracting. Successful use of active learning strategies such as role play requires "[a]ccess to an environment that enables students to meet, discuss, role play, practice, and complete activities and that enables instructors to present more authentic didactic examples and supervise students without interference" (Walker [2009a](#), 1). Second Life's ability to mimic many aspects of a face-to-face skills class and engage students in high-quality interactions make it a valuable tool in this regard. In a virtual environment such as Second Life, "students can practice counseling skills in simulated counseling labs as instructors observe without disturbing students . . . groups of students can meet, discuss, practice, and provide each other feedback all while interacting in a simulated immersive setting" (Walker 2009b, 16).

However, questions still remain. Is Second Life truly comparable to face-to-face skills training? Is Second Life an effective environment for training counselors and human service workers? Can skills learned in Second Life transfer to a real-world counseling session? Do the benefits of the environment outweigh its limitations? Further research, especially comparative studies, is needed to answer these questions. We will explore these questions in a series of studies over the next several semesters.

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