Teaching Health Care in Virtual Space

Codier, Estelle

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Codier, Estelle.

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This chapter introduces and describes three general types of MUVE learning: individual learning activities, one-on-one learning activities, and those in small groups.

This chapter is for you if:

1. You have never experienced a MUVE learning activity.
2. You have experienced MUVE learning but are interested in a broader vision for what MUVE learning can offer.
3. You are interested in learning about general types of MUVE learning.

MUVE learning activities can be divided into four types, depending on the number of student participants: (1) solo learning in content- or context-rich environments, (2) one-on-one MUVE learning activities, (3) small group MUVE learning activities, and (4) large group MUVE learning activities. This chapter will describe general characteristics for each of these types of MUVE learning. In the chapters that follow, they will be presented in detail and illustrated by sample learning activities.

Solo Learning in Content- or Context-Rich Environments

There are many examples in Second Life® of content-rich, topically specific MUVE regions. In these environments, students can encounter topical content in lots of ways, engaging and interacting with the region as a means of learning topical content. In the most basic form of this type of MUVE learning activity, a student can simply walk through an exhibit dedicated to a specific topic. In a MUVE garden dedicated to breast cancer education, for example, students can walk through the beautiful space, reading posters, listening to lectures, activating audio material, and seeing content illustrated in other graphic ways. They gaze at a statue, examine parts of a model, or listen to the stories of women
who survived breast cancer or did not. This type of learning activity can be a highly effective alternative to reading a text chapter or listening passively to a classroom lecture.

Genome Island is a content-rich Second Life® environment created by geneticists to teach genetics. Students who visit this island are offered many interesting ways to engage with a huge range of genetics topical content. They can walk through a gene forest to learn about individual gene characteristics. To explore inherited physical characteristics, students can mingle with a herd of llamas, changing the color of the mama llama and observing the effect of that change on her progeny. In an exhibit on the history of genetics, a student can walk through Mendel’s garden to observe as Mendel did the changed characteristics of pea plants across generations. Visitors to this region can watch generations of rabbits reproduce, watch DNA replicate in a microscope, or interact with a large-scale model of human DNA. In a beautiful outdoor lounge, family genetic charts fly overhead. Students can direct one to hover over their head, available to interact with as a way of exploring genetically inherited diseases. This is a dynamic and active environment for learning.

One-on-One MUVE Learning Activities

MUVE learning environments make it possible for simultaneous interaction between multiple users. This makes it possible to design learning activities that engage students with each other. This type of learning activity is both easy to design and easy for students to engage.

Many different types of one-on-one learning activities are possible. The focus can be anything from content application or demonstration of communication skills to practice and evaluation of new behaviors. The specific environment for the activity can be selected to contextualize the learning. Novice students can practice interviewing skills in a simulated environment similar to that in which they will interview clients in the future. Students of all levels can practice job interviews one-on-one in a prospective supervisor’s office or even with a team of interviewers in a clinical or business setting. Students can meet with course instructors in an environment that may be experienced as less intimidating than meeting face to face in the instructor’s First Life office. These are but a few examples of the possibilities for one-on-one MUVE learning activities.

Small Group MUVE Learning Activities

Small group MUVE learning activities offer students the opportunity to develop team membership skills. Because group interaction is recorded in the
learning activity transcript, students have an objective tool to evaluate their contributions toward team task achievement and team learning. The simplest small group MUVE learning activity is an inworld discussion group. Others can be more complex, involving multiple students, disciplines, and levels of performance. Team simulation of specialized teams such as institutional review boards or management teams can help students develop specialized team skills. Although professional disciplines such as health care function in interdisciplinary teams, health care education provides little opportunity for students to actually practice interdisciplinary teamwork. In a MUVE simulation, students can practice their own discipline-specific contributions to the team, as well as those that require interaction with professionals from other disciplines. The clinical rounds activity mentioned in Chapter 3 can be designed to include nurses, physicians, social workers, and other interdisciplinary team members. Small group MUVE learning gives students an opportunity to practice, evaluate, and improve their skills over time. The activity transcript provides data that are the basis of self-evaluation and peer and instructor feedback, making the evaluation process objective, data driven, and easy to track over time. Goals for improvement can be made and improvement demonstrated in future small group activity.

Small group MUVE learning can be used at all levels of health care education, from undergraduate clinical practitioners practicing patient interviews to graduate students in MUVE learning activities that focus on professional roles. Doctoral students can discuss and implement policy change, explore research methodologies, or develop new methods of education. Evaluation in
these activities can easily include 360-degree evaluations that encompass self-evaluation, peer evaluation, instructor evaluation, and evaluation of group performance.

Large Group MUVE Learning Activities

Second Life® offers rich possibilities for large group activities. An example of this was a conference on teaching in Second Life®, which took place in Second Life®! This virtual conference had all the elements of a typical First Life conference. There were keynote speakers doing podium presentations in large amphitheaters. There were small breakout sessions on a huge range of topics in smaller, more informal settings. There were poster sessions galore! There were also postconference party venues where small groups shared experiences and networks of support and information exchange developed.

Reader’s Roadmap: Where Are We?

In this chapter, general types of MUVE learning activities were described. In Chapter 5, the detailed descriptions of these general types begin with a description of content- and context-rich solo learning in Second Life®.