Teaching Health Care in Virtual Space

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CHAPTER 14
Assessment of Students and Other Factors Related to MUVE Teaching Success

This chapter continues the MUVE readiness assessment with a discussion of student, organization, and technology readiness. It concludes with a checklist for assessing readiness for teaching your first MUVE learning activity.

This chapter is for you if:

1. You have assessed yourself to be ready for MUVE learning and would like to continue laying the groundwork for designing your first MUVE learning activity.

2. You are interested in assessing indicators for MUVE readiness that include student readiness, organizational and computer readiness, and assessment of risk.

Key 3: The Best Students for a First MUVE Learning Activity

If the instructor is clearly the right instructor for teaching a first MUVE learning activity and the course is ideal as well, there are other keys to consider. Picking the right students for a MUVE learning activity contributes to a successful first MUVE learning activity. The following elements should be included in this assessment.

Student Technology Skills

Doing a MUVE learning activity is far easier with a group of students who have already demonstrated technological dexterity or previous success with learning a new technology. For example, a group of students who made YouTube videos for a previous class assignment have demonstrated the ability to learn and apply new technology. It is a good idea to survey students to explore attitudes and experiences with new technology before asking them to take the leap into MUVE learning. Student difficulty with learning new technology can be a significant obstacle to a successful MUVE learning activity.
Key 4: The Best Time to Implement a MUVE Learning Activity

Timing is everything! A MUVE learning activity has the greatest chance of success if it is introduced on a firm course foundation. Introducing a MUVE learning activity very early in a course may not be as successful as introducing it later in the semester. If the class feels secure with the course and comfortable with the instructor and they feel good about how the course is progressing, they will be more likely to be open to and successful with a new type of learning. Mid-semester is a perfect time to say, “Let’s mix it up and try something a little different.” The energy and interest a MUVE learning activity generates is often welcome in the mid-semester slump! Late in the second half of a semester is not ideal for a MUVE learning activity. At that point in the semester, student fatigue and stress are often high, and students have less energy for and patience with a new learning challenge. Workload is also typically heavier during the end of the semester, and additional work is neither appreciated nor appropriate. Additional work at an already busy time in the semester can produce negative attitudes toward MUVE learning that can undermine its success. Ideally, introduction of a MUVE learning activity occurs when both the students and the instructors have sufficient time and energy to adapt to MUVE learning.

Key 5: Are Computer, Internet Access, and Tech Support Adequate?

A MUVE learning activity should only be planned if there is adequate technology support for both students and the instructor. This is one of the deal breakers for your decision to implement a MUVE learning activity. There will always be technology problems. If a system is not in place for dealing with them, the credibility of the work is at risk. Realistically, sometimes the instructor is the only tech support available. In that case, the instructor is acting in two roles, instructor and tech support. In this case, the instructor must have sufficient time and expertise to perform both roles. This is not ideal. It is vastly better to work closely in partnership with an information technology (IT) team member. To evaluate the adequacy of tech support for MUVE learning activities, several factors should be considered.

Assessment of Tech Support for Instructor and Students

Before implementing a MUVE learning activity, a number of questions must be addressed. Who is available for the instructor if problems arise related to access to Second Life® or downloading it onto school computers? Who is available to the instructor to identify school computers that can be used for MUVE learning?
activities if a student's computer cannot accommodate Second Life®? If the instructor is planning to serve as tech support, who is available if there are questions or problems the instructor cannot manage? Whom will students call if they have problems downloading Second Life® or evaluating their computer's capability to support the Second Life® program? If students have tech difficulty during a learning activity, who will support them with problem resolution?

**Adequate IT Support**

It is best practice for an instructor planning MUVE learning activities to find an IT partner who is excited about learning in Second Life®. Such a partner can help navigate technology difficulties that arise and may also be willing to assist students directly as well. This can be challenging. If the IT department is not willing or able to support such a partnership, the instructor will need to make an assessment about the advisability of going it alone. Particularly for a first MUVE learning activity, the role of instructor will be challenging enough without adding the second role of tech support.

An IT team member may be available who is knowledgeable and interested in supporting MUVE learning but may not have time do so. A candid conversation with the IT team leader is important to assess this. If tech team members are available to help but do not know much about MUVE learning, additional training time might be necessary for them. Again, there is nothing like a good partnership between an IT team and an instructor doing MUVE learning activities. With flexibility, good communication, and a shared passion for MUVE learning, a great deal can be accomplished.

**Computer and Internet Access**

Unless the course requires students to have Internet access and/or a computer of their own, MUVE learning activities cannot be mandatory unless all students have access to a school computer. One way to deal with this is to ensure that the Second Life® program is available on computers in the student lounge, computer center, or library. It is crucial to identify this before planning a MUVE learning activity. Old computers in the library or lounge areas may not have sufficient RAM to accommodate the Second Life® software. Most relatively new computers do, but old computers are still around, particularly in lounges and libraries. If students are going to use those alternative computers, the instructor must check to make sure Second Life® is downloaded onto them and that the computers will be available during the hours in which MUVE learning activities will take place. For example, are the library, computer lab, or student lounges open in the evening or on weekends, when MUVE learning activities are most often scheduled?
Computer Requirements

Most computers less than five years of age can easily accommodate the Second Life® viewer and software support requirements. Occasionally, gaming software on computers or other RAM-intensive programs interfere with system capabilities. Students should be directed to other computers or encouraged to prioritize their RAM. As of the printing of this book, 1 GB of RAM was the minimum required to run the Second Life® viewer, and 3 GB is recommended. Smartphones cannot be used for MUVE learning activities. Some tablets can accommodate Second Life®, depending on their RAM capabilities. Tablets should be checked for individual RAM capabilities.

Learning activities in Second Life® should only be done on a secure web connection. Students should never use a wireless Internet connection for MUVE learning. This is important because even a very brief interruption in wireless connection causes the user to be logged out of Second Life®. The student’s avatar disappears and the student must reopen Second Life® and log back in. The student not only misses part of the learning activity but the activity itself is disrupted.

Occasionally, institutional firewalls make it impossible to download Second Life® onto computers owned by the institution. Instructors should attempt to download the Second Life® viewer before beginning to plan a Second Life® learning activity. The IT department can often resolve firewall issues.

Key 6: Is It the Right Time for Innovation within the Organization?

One of the characteristics of professional maturity is an understanding that innovation, even on a small scale, affects the whole organization. The yeast of a small innovative project can expand to produce positive energy, excitement, and affirmation of both the innovator and the project. It can spread to other people, projects, and departments. At the same time, change, even on a small scale, can be perceived as threatening, a disruption of the status quo. It can, even on a small scale, generate negative responses from other faculty who disparage or discourage the innovator. If MUVE learning is new for your organization, there are a few additional issues to consider.

Risk Assessment

Not every MUVE learning activity works perfectly the first time. As well as the instructor’s assessment of his or her own ability to fail constructively, planning the first MUVE learning activity should also include an assessment
of the broader organization’s relationship with innovation and failure risk. An organization, such as my own, that values innovation and has a high tolerance for steep learning curves is a safe place to try new things. An organization that penalizes failure poses a difficult challenge for any innovation, including MUVE learning.

Talking Story: Risk Assessment and MUVE Implementation

Before attempting my first MUVE learning activity, I did an extensive risk assessment. None of the faculty in my department had ever done a MUVE learning activity. Most did not know what a MUVE was. The IT support staff assigned to our department was interested and supportive but focused on other priorities. They simply did not have the time to help. My assessment of organizational readiness for MUVE learning included two big risk factors: the absolute novelty of the innovation and IT support limitations. However, there were also two positive organizational factors. Several other departments at the university were successfully doing MUVE learning. The university IT department had already addressed and managed potential problems for them. I had mentors and a support cadre of MUVE teachers available to me. They were passionate about MUVE learning and not only provided practical help but always left me encouraged and excited about the work.

Another deciding factor for my risk assessment was that my own department had a history of support for innovation. The dean was both interested in innovation and actively supported it. She knew that the road to innovation was a bumpy one. I felt sure that if my first MUVE learning activity was a disaster, she would support making the next one better. Best of all, when I described what my students could do in a MUVE learning activity, she was always enthusiastic and affirming. My organizational risk assessment contained both positive and negative factors. I decided to proceed with the design and implementation of my first MUVE learning activity.

Readiness Checklist

One way to assess the keys to success discussed so far is to review the following MUVE Innovation Success Checklist. There is no minimum score that indicates that it is a good time to begin MUVE. The process of completing the checklist and reviewing it with an organizational supervisor or mentor can help identify both supporting factors and obstacles. This process will help instructors come to conclusions about overall readiness for MUVE learning activity implementation that will give it the best chance for success.
### MUVE Innovation Success Checklist

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<tr>
<th>Assessment Criterion</th>
<th>Your Assessment</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Is this the right time for you as an instructor to begin your first MUVE learning activity?</td>
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<td>2. Are the students the right students for a successful first MUVE learning activity?</td>
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<td>3. Is this the right course for beginning MUVE learning?</td>
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<td>4. Is the timing right for implementing MUVE learning?</td>
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<td>5. Is there adequate tech support for instructor and students?</td>
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<td>6. Is this the right time for the organization to embrace MUVE learning?</td>
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<td>7. Is an adequate orientation possible for students new to MUVE learning?</td>
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### Key 7: Is the Right Orientation Possible?

The last question that must be addressed before moving forward with design and implementation of a MUVE learning activity is, “Can students be provided with an adequate orientation to MUVE learning?” If students are unfamiliar with MUVE learning, before they can be asked to participate in a MUVE activity, they first must “learn how to learn” in a MUVE. This is a crucial issue, another potential deal breaker for your first MUVE learning activity and one that involves many topics worthy of discussion (see Chapter 15).

Reader’s Roadmap: Where Are We?

Part III began with a discussion of risk and readiness assessment, the first important phase of designing and implementing a MUVE learning activity. Chapter 15 continues with the issues raised in Key 7: orientation to MUVE learning.