CHAPTER 16
Designing a MUVE Learning Activity, Part I
Readiness for MUVE Learning

Building on the readiness assessments covered in Chapters 13 and 14, the next two chapters review the design and implementation of a MUVE learning activity.

This chapter focuses on specifics of learning activity design and implementation. The next chapter discusses integration of a MUVE learning activity into a course. Progressive levels for integrating MUVE learning into a class are outlined.

This chapter is for you if:

1. You are planning your first MUVE learning activity and would like to explore both how to design the activity and the issues related to activity design.

2. You want to improve a MUVE already in use.

3. You want to develop systematic skills for designing a MUVE learning activity.

Planning the Design of a MUVE Learning Activity

One way to design a MUVE learning activity is to answer a series of questions related to the structure and design of the learning activity itself.

Question 1: Should the Learning Activity Be Simple or Complex?

Considering the student and instructor characteristics for this course, where should the MUVE learning activity fall on the continuum of simple to complex? MUVE learning activities can be very simple or very complex. They can also be highly unstructured or highly structured. It is advisable to begin with a simple, relatively unstructured MUVE learning activity. With a relatively
simple activity, the instructor can practice basic MUVE instructional skills (student orientation to MUVE learning, implementing MUVE learning within a course, problem solving technology issues) and at the same time practice working out any unexpected problems related to teaching as a novice instructor.

**TWO ENDS OF THE SIMPLE-TO-COMPLEX CONTINUUM**

The importance of assessing instructor and student characteristics to determine the appropriate complexity for MUVE learning activities is well illustrated by MUVE learning activities used with two very different groups. The first was a group of health care technicians. They had a primarily passive learning approach and did not have much experience with reflective thinking or critical analysis. They were not accustomed to thinking with the group brain. Many expressed resistance to online learning in general and described themselves as low tech.

With this group, I had planned optional MUVE discussion groups for the later half of the course, but I was unsure of both the group’s baseline computer skills and their readiness for new ones. I was aware of considerable group resistance to online learning. For this situation, early in the course, I selected a mandatory MUVE learning activity that was simple and unstructured, with very few points allotted to its grade. I made it mandatory so I could assess the students’ skill level in a relatively low-risk assignment. The learning activity I chose was a one-on-one “getting to know you” MUVE session. Pairs of students met for thirty minutes in a MUVE and interviewed each other with a series of questions designed to help the students to learn about each other. Beyond answering the questions, there were no structured requirements for the assignment.

To my surprise, the group made a game of overcoming their technology phobia. Students who were nervous paired with students who weren’t. This playfulness reduced overall resistance to MUVE learning. The students helped each other, and after that first assignment, most of the class chose to continue with the optional MUVE learning activities that were offered later in the course. For this group, the selection of a low-risk, simple, unstructured assignment that had a very small role in the overall class made it possible for students to be successful with later, more complex and important MUVE learning activities. It also engaged students who were resistant to this type of learning because it was low risk, fun, social, and easily accessible.

On the other end of the simple-to-complex continuum was a small class of graduate-level nurse clinical specialists in the second semester of a two-semester online class whose focus was application of pathophysiology to clinical practice. All but one student had been in the first semester class in which
I had successfully used many MUVE learning activities. Student performance outcomes had been excellent. By this time, I had taught hundreds of MUVE learning activities and considered myself an expert. I wanted to take the next step in my MUVE teaching by offering highly complex, very structured, and mandatory MUVE learning in a course taught almost entirely in a MUVE. The student group was small, MUVE experienced, highly motivated, and tech savvy.

I chose to design the course to take place almost entirely in a MUVE. The graduate students in the class participated in MUVE discussion groups, one-on-one client interviews, group clinical rounds in the MUVE hospital, and all course exams there as well. In these activities, students were able to apply pathophysiology content, practice professional roles, and apply both interpersonal and teamwork skills in a simulated environment. The activities had very specific performance objectives and specific criteria for each objective. All of the course credit was dependent on MUVE learning activities, so the stakes were high. As it turned out, the course was highly successful. At the end of the course, students reported that although the course had been very hard, the learning was outstanding. The choice of complex learning activities was appropriate to the students, the instructor, and the content focus for the course.

These two examples represent the continuum of options for planning mandatory MUVE learning activities, from a course using a simple unstructured one-to-one learning activity to one that involved many learners in complex multilevel learning.

**Question 2: Which Specific Course Objectives Will Be Addressed in the MUVE Learning Activity?**

The specific course objectives that will be addressed by the MUVE learning activity are selected to maximize the impact of the activity. The instructor makes use of pedagogical synchrony to match the learning activity with the objective it best addresses. Since the advantages of MUVE learning include contextualizing learning, developing colleague and team skills, and using the group brain, the course objectives selected for the MUVE learning activity should emphasize these. For example, even if the learning activity is content focused, the learning activity should still include interpersonal and team function objectives.

**Question 3: Which MUVE Learning Activities Are Most Appropriate for Meeting Course Objectives?**

Selection of the type of MUVE learning activity (solo, one-on-one, or small group) that is best suited to the course learning objectives includes several
issues. First, the level of MUVE experience for teachers and students must be considered. If either are fairly limited, a solo or one-on-one learning activity is most appropriate. If team skills are to be addressed, obviously a small group activity is indicated.

As well as course content and methodology, the interpersonal, team, and professional skills related to the course objective must be considered. An example was a MUVE learning activity for novice clinical nurse specialist (CNS) and nurse practitioner students who had not done much interviewing at an advanced level. The MUVE learning activity had two objectives. The first was that the students practice interviewing, and the second was that they would learn how to do a focused interview for a patient with a particular disease. This is a good example of a dense learning activity. The students applied course content (what should be included in a focused assessment for a patient with CHF?), skills development (interviewing), and also role development (how is interviewing different in student, clinical nurse, nurse practitioner, and CNS roles?).

*Instructional Note:* MUVE learning performance outcomes should be specific and measurable. One way to ensure this is to link every objective for a MUVE learning activity with an item on the grading matrix. Make sure it is easy to read the activity transcript and check off the performance outcomes on the grading matrix you have designed.

One of the strengths of MUVE learning is that in the simulation of virtual space, there is a vast opportunity for students to apply not only content but also interpersonal and team skills, continuous learning, and emotional intelligence skills. The learning activities can be very dense, incorporating many dimensions of learning at once. Make sure that the MUVE learning activity performance outcomes reflect this!

**Question 4: Where in the MUVE Will the Learning Activity Take Place?**

**LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION!**

For some MUVE learning activities, location does not exert a major influence on the learning activity. For example, one-on-one “getting to know you” activities can take place pretty much anywhere. Students often enjoy picking their own locations for these activities. Indeed, locating a good place to talk develops MUVE skills like walking, searching, and teleporting. Even in these cases, it is a good idea for the instructor to provide examples of places students might try out. This is a particularly important for students who are new to the MUVE you are using.
For most MUVE assignments, however, the MUVE environment will greatly contribute to learning effectiveness. For example, a small group that will be meeting together all semester for an ethics discussion may have a first getting to know you session. If this takes place around a campfire or at the beach, the intimate environment may help support students be more open with each other. Other environments simulate the context in which learning will be applied in the future. If the assignment involves a nurse practitioner interviewing a client, the learning is contextualized when the activity takes place in a hospital or clinic. Situating the learning activity within an appropriate context enhances learning and subsequent translation of learning into clinical practice. This contextualization of learning is one of the greatest strengths of MUVE learning. Care should be taken to situate MUVE learning activities appropriately.

The instructor will need to spend time exploring the MUVE find locations that are appropriate for the goals of the learning activity planned. Hospitals, clinics, offices, and other environments would be suitable for health care learning activities. Other MUVE learning activities are strictly dependent on a specific environment for which the learning activity was specifically designed, for example, the content-rich environments discussed previously.

BUILDING YOUR OWN LOCATIONS

Often instructors beginning to use a MUVE make the assumption that they will need to build their own learning environments. Building learning environments is awesome work that requires a high level of MUVE technical mastery. It also is expensive in time, money, and other resources. Designing and building an environment is a full-time job. Remember, lots of places in MUVEs have already been constructed and are available to use. Particularly in the beginning of MUVE teaching, it is important to focus designing and implementing MUVE learning activities that can take place in regions that already exist. If a new region must be constructed for a particular learning focus, partnership with a construction specialist is recommended.

PRIVACY

Unless a region is privately owned and closed to public users, there is no guarantee of privacy in MUVEs. Nevertheless, there are several ways to make a learning activity private enough to support effective learning.

For all MUVE learning activities, consider locations where there is not a lot of public activity. For example, meditation islands and gardens foster group intimacy and sharing. They are wonderful places to conduct discussions and team simulations. These locations do not usually have many people in them, so there is relative privacy. In public MUVEs, highly populated, popular regions,
there are more people simply wandering around. Learning activities in these locations have a higher chance of people listening in out of curiosity. At best, privacy in these regions is more difficult to maintain. At worst, individuals may disturb the group and interfere with the learning process. Even the interruption of individuals who are genuinely interested in being included in the activity takes a few minutes to deal with. Popular sites are also more apt to have lag because of the number of people on site. Lag, privacy, and griefing will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 19.

**Question 5: What Are the Specific Steps for the Learning Activity?**

After identifying goals for the learning activity, the number of participants, and the location, the instructor should map out specific procedural steps for the learning activity, from the earliest step to the last piece of documentation. This constitutes a to-do list for every MUVE learning activity. Although instructors may devise their own personal checklist, a basic one follows:

**CHECKLIST FOR PLANNING A MUVE LEARNING ACTIVITY**

1. Assess instructor strengths/weaknesses for teaching this learning activity.

2. Assess the target student population strengths/weaknesses for engaging in this learning activity.

3. Evaluate how much technology support may be needed for the learning activity as well as technology support availability.

4. Where will this learning activity be on the continuum of simple to complex?

5. Where will this learning activity be on the optional to mandatory continuum?

6. What are the learning objectives for the learning activity? (Include specific content, communication, interpersonal, and group skills.) What specific performance outcomes are involved?

7. Devise an evaluation matrix for the learning activity based on the learning objectives and specific performance outcomes.

8. On the basis of steps 1 to 7, write a brief description of the learning activity for distribution to students. Make sure that the steps for involvement in the learning activity are very clear and that each participant
is clear on what is expected of him or her. The grading matrix should be attached and responsibilities for self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and/or group evaluation included.

9. Write the syllabus description of MUVE learning for the course, including a brief description of each MUVE learning activity. If the activity is mandatory, computer requirements should be included and alternate computer access described.

10. Identify, if appropriate, the MUVE region that will be used for the learning activity. (Note: it is essential for the instructor to visit the region before the learning activity takes place. Changes in the region that occur without the instructor’s knowledge could negatively affect the learning activity.)

11. Prepare and distribute MUVE orientation materials. Repeated orientation in class is preferable. The more students hear about the MUVE, the better (see Chapter 15).

12. Review students’ avatar names to ensure that there are no duplicate avatar names in the class. If students have not used their actual first name, they should be asked to rename their avatar. It is not acceptable to expect that the learning activity participants know that “Baby Bunny” is actually Susie under an assumed name. Mismatched names can cause great confusion in a learning activity and should not be permitted.

13. If the assignment involves student sign ups (discussion groups, volunteer leaders), this should take place at least a week prior to the due date. This will give time to fix problems that arise in the sign-up process.

14. For all group leaders, voluntary or assigned, provide specific direction as to what is expected of them.

15. Make sure it is clear to the participants who is responsible for sending the transcript of the learning activity to the instructor (a lost transcript is a catastrophe—it is not retrievable in Second Life®, for example, once the group has logged off).

16. Set up a system for logging participants and logging grades and extra credit from evaluation matrix forms.

17. Devise a system for combining the learning activity evaluation matrices into a summative evaluation for the activity and for course MUVE activities.
18. When the learning activity has been completed, review transcripts, complete grading, provide feedback, post grades, add extra credit points, and complete other documentation as needed.

19. Complete your own review of the student performance overall and share with the class. If not all class members participated, invite MUVE learning activity participants to share what the activity was like in class.

20. Complete a self-evaluation of your MUVE teaching. What did you learn from doing this learning activity? What would you do differently next time? Include this evaluation in the file with the learning activity materials so your own suggestions can be incorporated into the activity the next time you do it. Include: What is the logical next step to continue developing your MUVE teaching skills?

Just as instructors use a set of procedural steps for building and implementing a MUVE, students can also be given procedural steps for doing a MUVE learning activity. This can help students new to this kind of learning organize their first MUVE assignment. The following is an example of steps for student participation in a MUVE learning activity.

**PREPARING FOR A MUVE LEARNING ACTIVITY**

The week before the MUVE learning activity is planned, all students should:

1. Download the MUVE software, if needed

2. Open an account if this is required for the MUVE platform you are using.

3. Make an avatar, using as the first name the school abbreviation (UMCDavid) and using your first name as the avatar second name. Note: students must *not* use their full names, but it is essential that they use their first name. This ensures they can be identified by peers and the instructor. If more than one person in class has the same name, the instructor should discuss this with students involved. Sometimes a nickname or abbreviated name is preferred by the student and would work as a good substitute name. Avatar appearance should be professional, including human form and dress similar to what would be appropriate in the classroom or in the clinical setting.

4. Send the avatar name to the instructor.
5. Practice the following (and ask for help if you need it):

- Teleporting from one area to another
- Walking and moving around objects
- Communicating using the chat function
- If transcript capability is available on the MUVE platform, copying the chat transcript and pasting it into a Word document

6. Review what to do if the learning activity is disturbed. (Remember, begin with “This is a university learning activity, would you please allow us some privacy.”)

7. Review the learning activity and be clear ahead of time what is required. Get in touch with the instructor if there are any questions.

8. Teleport to the MUVE location where the learning activity will take place. It is a good idea to go there well ahead of time and log off of the MUVE while at the meeting area for the learning activity. When logging back on the next time, the avatar will be located where it was when logged off, ready for the learning activity to begin.

9. Log on to the MUVE ten minutes ahead of time, ensuring readiness to begin the learning activity on time.

Reader’s Roadmap: Where Are We?

In this chapter, the first stage of implementing a MUVE learning activity was described. In Chapter 17, a strategy for integrating a MUVE learning activity into a course will be explored.