

Chapter 11

Virtual Reality in Social Work Education: Models, Meaning, and Purpose for Enhanced Learning

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ABSTRACT

The use of virtual reality (VR) as a learning tool occupies a whole new and exciting domain for social work education. Engaging in virtual worlds expands the potential for students to connect with the learning experience on multiple levels, pedagogically aligns with stimulating affective processes to enhance cognitive engagement, and aligns with the domains of knowledge acquisition in competency-based social work education. In this chapter the author outlines the affordances necessary for student engagement in a virtual learning experience (VLE). The author explores applications for virtual reality in social work education and outlines several distinct opportunities for virtually-enhanced classroom learning. Practical guidelines to assist instructors in facilitating a VR learning experience are proposed, and the chapter concludes with commentary on the future of VR in social work education.

INTRODUCTION

Social work education reflects the essence of what it means to instruct students in an applied profession. Social work curriculum is constructed on and rotates around *nine behaviorally-based competencies*: (1) *Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior*; (2) *Engage diversity and difference in practice*; (3) *Advance human rights in social, economic and environmental justice*; (4) *Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice*; (5) *Engage in Policy Practice*; (6) *Engage in practice with individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations*; (7) *Assess individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations*; (8) *Intervene with individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations*; and (9) *Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, communities and organizations*

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(CSWE, 2015). Competence in social work means the student demonstrates the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being. Students are expected to use critical thought and judgement to determine best action and interventions in multiple settings, on multiple levels, with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. Assessment of social work competencies encompasses the five domains of knowledge, skills, values, and cognitive and affective processes. In sum, social work programming aims to teach students how to behave as professional social workers through demonstrating competencies on multiple levels across multiple domains.

As a human services profession, social work programs are charged with providing students opportunities to develop specific social work competencies through classroom learning and field education. Field education bears equal importance to classroom learning. Students transfer skills learned in the classroom to real world settings in a structured environment that promotes professional socialization (Miller, 2010). In their field placement, students are charged with developing the professional behaviors that demonstrate acquisition of the competencies and use critical thought and judgement to determine best action and intervention.

The charge to educate students in the field presents challenges. First, not all students are exposed to situations where they work with all levels of practice inclusive of individual, family, group, organization and community practice. Secondly, some students feel unprepared for field work because classroom practice activities simply do not provide adequate real-world experience. Lastly, although students are expected to develop empathy skills as they relate to interpersonal relationships, many experiences in the classroom fall short in eliciting the necessary conditions to learn about and process empathy as a therapeutic tool.

The use of simulation in social work education has proven successful in helping students bridge the gap between classroom learning and demonstration of learned skills in the field (Bogo et al., 2014). Simulation provides students with a safe way to practice skills prior to using them in high stakes, real-world situations. Simulation also gives students the opportunity to process behaviors post-simulation and can be an effective arena for reflecting on knowledge, values, and cognitive and affective processes that precipitated and accompanied the skills demonstrated in the simulated experience. However, facilitating simulation activities can be labor intensive, time-consuming and costly. Further, simulations, while mimicking real world practice scenarios, may lack authenticity and are limited by the quality and quantity of resources available to the instructor.

With the advent of fully online social work education, the field is no stranger to integration of virtual technology to enhance learning. According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, virtual reality is defined as an artificial environment which is experienced through sensory stimuli (such as sights and sounds) provided by a computer and in which one's actions partially determine what happens in the environment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Virtual reality may simply be thought of as computer-generated experiences that can simulate physical presence in real or imagined environments (Curcio et al., 2016; Kerrebrock et al., 2017). The virtual platform called Second Life® (SL) has been used to simulate learning around interpersonal engagement, and direct practice skills development (Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2020; Martin, 2017; Wilson et al., 2013). Yet, SL programming has failed to gain traction in the field due to cost and difficulty of use, and reviews on the benefits of integrating SL into curriculum remain mixed (Anstadt et al., 2013; Martin, 2017). Social work programs are slowly beginning to explore other augmented reality and virtual reality learning experiences to engage students in education content despite its strong presence in other allied health professions (Alakar et al., 2016; Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc,

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