Use of Virtual World for Soft/Communication Skills Training: Feasibility Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The current state of the economy has created an increased pressure on companies to establish more efficient training programs, resulting in an upswing in e-learning and distance learning programs. With this increased demand for e-learning/distance learning training, the need for more interactive training that goes beyond the traditional webinar and video conference has also been identified. The literature regarding virtual learning platforms suggests that the use of simulations, both asynchronous and synchronous, holds great potential for enhancing the knowledge and skills of learning in a myriad of fields. Although these platforms are proving to have great benefits, they also are showing some challenges and barriers to overcome. After a review of current research, Cicatelli Associates, Inc. (CAI), conducted an internal feasibility study to determine the feasibility of the use of virtual worlds in training healthcare and health care service provision staff in general counseling skills and communications skills. After examining, both the strengths and the challenges of utilizing this method for training it was determined that several barriers exist that currently prohibit the organization from using this method. These barriers include access to appropriate computer systems, as well as the lack of fine or micro non-verbal gestures in virtual worlds.

Keywords: Communication Skills, Economy Pressure, Training Healthcare, Training Programs, Virtual Learning Platforms, Virtual Worlds

INTRODUCTION

The days of exclusively using a face-to-face training method for teaching have passed and e-learning/distance learning methods are now more readily becoming the norm. Distance learning is not only being used to promote knowledge acquisition but also to develop critical soft skills. Distance learning is being used for classroom instruction as well as training in social services and corporations. Distance training modalities are increasingly being used in an effort to allow employers to have more return on their investment regarding their employees. Strother (2002) stated that some companies who moved from traditional/face-to-face training to e-learning/distance learning training reported savings in the millions for IBM and decreased costs by 35% by Ernst and Young. These companies and others reported that these large savings were due to only a portion (20% to 30%) of their trainings being converted to web-based interactions.

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According to a report by Watson Wyatt Worldwide (2009); of the 201 company executives they surveyed, 41% stated that they were planning to either eliminate or reduce their training programs. In addition, 75% of their subjects reported that they were adding or increasing restriction on their travel policies. The economic situation across the globe has created circumstances in which many learning companies are wanting to “do more with less” (“Economic crisis boosts e-learning”, 2008), and as a result, e-learning/distance learning is being utilized more and has increased the return on investment for employers seeking to continue training.

Beyond the corporate world, many schools and universities are relying on web-based teaching methods such as discussion boards, chat rooms, and other formats that include the use of simulations and virtual world emersion for both synchronous and asynchronous blended learning and e-learning/distance learning, to promote the acquisition of knowledge. In addition, not-for-profit corporations, profit based companies, and hospitals are utilizing the same blended methodologies to training their staff in existing and new practices. Two specific e-learning/distance learning methods that have emerged in the past 20 years which show great promise as modes to teach soft skills/communication skills are synchronous simulations and synchronous virtual worlds. The use of simulations and virtual worlds (games) for training and teaching for non-information technology programs came out of the video game community (Zyda, 2005) and the concept of game playing via the computer individually or with others remotely.

This paper will examine, in brief, the feasibility of using virtual worlds as an effective means for training frontline staff and paraprofessionals in the field of social services focusing specifically on communication and basic counseling skills. The benefits and challenges to using virtual worlds in training will also be discussed. In addition to the literature, information presented will also include information gathered from a feasibility study conducted at Cicatelli Associates, Inc., (CAI) a not-for-profit training agency focused on improving the patient-centered skills of trainees working in healthcare and health care related fields.

CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

In order to promote professional development and training, adult learning methods are used to make learning relevant for the trainee and to promote self-directed learning that directly impacts the learner (De Lorenzo & Abbot, 2004). Patient-centered care is focused on meeting the needs of patients through exploring the reason for their visit. With the shift from face-to-face tailored adult learning to e-learning/distance learning platforms CAI has implemented various methods to train individuals to increase their knowledge and skills in patient-centered. These include the use of webinars, self-paced learning modules, virtual reality simulations and worlds as well as face-to-face interactions.

Virtual reality (VR) methodologies are computer representations that parallel real-life settings and experiences and creates a sense of presence or a feeling as if one is actually present in that setting at a specific time (Gorini, Capidevill, De Leo, Mantoviani, & Riva, 2011). Games developed solely for entertainment have become games and simulations that focus on teaching (Muratet, Torquet, Vaiallet, & Jessel, 2011). These ‘serious’ or training-learning games engage the player and promote knowledge and skill development. Serious games are being used in education, health, and mental health which can result in behavior change or an action on the part of the player. According to Manatovani et al. (2003), virtual reality training provides an experiential and active learning experience that establishes a new learning community; virtual world, where collaborations are promoted. One such virtual world is Second Life.

In contrast to asynchronous simulations, Grenfell and Warren (2010) expressed that virtual worlds, namely Second Life, “provides unique and flexible opportunities for educators and students, particularly those engaged in
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