Chapter 15
Second Life® Project
Development as a Venue for Interdisciplinary Collaboration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The increasing complexity of health service delivery, along with rapid growth of the older population, increased survival of premature births and serious accidents, and retirement of baby boomer healthcare workers have created a critical need for health care professionals who can function as team members and leaders who collaborate to deliver effective, individualized care. Yet, while collaboration between disciplines is considered an ideal, many barriers impede its implementation, including geographic isolation and limited information exchange opportunities (Kilgo & Bruder, 1997). As a result, students in health disciplines frequently are educated without exposure to the professionals with whom they will work when entering the workforce. The need for interprofessional education was highlighted by concerns noted by the Committee on the Health Professional Education Summit for the Board of Health Care Services of the Institute of Medicine in 2003, that reported a major disconnect between the isolated professional education approach in health care and increasing expectations for interdisciplinary team-based care. The Center for the Advancement of Interprofessional Education indicates that benefits of such an educational approach can cultivate closer collaboration between professions, organizations and service users, which can improve quality of care (Center for the Advancement of Interprofessional Education, 2002). The ability of health-related programs to implement interprofessional project-based learning is often hampered by distance, time and programmatic constraints. Virtual worlds such as Second Life can help address these constraints. Virtual worlds like Second Life® (SL) provide unique venues for fostering collaboration by closing the gaps created by distance and lack of information exchange. In this chapter,
the authors describe the process of collaboration by occupational therapy (OT) and speech-language pathology (SLP) students and faculty in developing an educational event in the virtual environment of SL. The event planning and implementation provide an example of project-based learning (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2005) and interdisciplinary community-building that provides insights and “lessons learned” with application to future project development in virtual worlds. The authors discuss the applications of project-based learning for interdisciplinary team building, describe student and faculty roles and specific steps in planning, management, and production of an event for current and prospective OT and SLP students, and analyze challenges and supports in project implementation.

BACKGROUND

The present chapter details the interdisciplinary collaboration of two faculty members from university programs in the health professions: one from a SLP department in a Midwestern university and the other from an OT program at a university on the East Coast. These two professions commonly interact closely on interdisciplinary teams in the workplace and may engage in co-treatment, in which an OT and SLP work simultaneously with a patient.

Occupational therapists help patients improve their ability to perform tasks in living and working environments. They work with individuals who suffer from a mentally, physically, developmentally, or emotionally disabling condition. Occupational therapists use treatments to develop, recover, or maintain the daily living and work skills of their patients. The therapist helps clients not only to improve their basic motor functions and reasoning abilities, but also to compensate for permanent loss of function. The goal is to help clients have independent, productive, and satisfying lives. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008)

Speech-language pathologists, sometimes called speech therapists, assess, diagnose, treat, and help to prevent disorders related to speech, language, cognitive-communication, voice, swallowing, and fluency. Speech-language pathologists work with people who cannot produce speech sounds or cannot produce them clearly; those with speech rhythm and fluency problems, such as inappropriate pitch or harsh voice; those with problems understanding and producing language; those who wish to improve their communication skills by modifying an accent; and those with cognitive communication impairments, such as attention, memory, and problem solving disorders. They also work with people who have swallowing difficulties. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008)

The OT and SLP faculty members had both been engaged in virtual learning initiatives in Second Life® starting in early 2007 with funding from their respective universities. However, while supported by their universities, these faculty conducted the initiatives largely as individual efforts. Their status as innovators in this effort (Rogers, 2003) was notable in that none of their colleagues had yet begun to explore or utilize the potential for virtual environments as venues for learning by students in health professions. Thus, each faculty had begun developing initial programs for their respective students at the time they met at an event at the OT faculty’s Center on SL; this formed the basis for discussion and common interest that initiated their collaboration. The first group effort by SLP and OT faculty and students was to expand an exhibit on adapting environments for daily life; this was followed by a joint exhibit for the SL Fifth Birthday Celebration, which highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration through informational displays and virtual objects. These initial efforts then expanded to the focus of the present case study, an event for current and prospective SLP and OT students collaboratively