USING 3D VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION FOR MENTAL HEALTH INTERVIEWING AND DIAGNOSIS: STUDENT PERCEIVED LEARNING BENEFITS

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ABSTRACT

Role-playing is a useful technique educators have assigned with the hope of preparing their students for situations they encounter in their careers. Role-playing serves as important activity for student counselors developing interviewing and diagnosis skills. The use of role-playing in counselor education provides instructors and students with a useful method in practicing various scenarios and the development of a strong interviewing and diagnosis skill set. Instructors and students need an environment that enables them to “meet, discuss, role-play, practice, and complete activities and that enables instructors to present more authentic didactic examples and supervise students without interference” (Walker, 2009, p. 1). Finding an authentic environment with “patients” who emulate clients that counselors may encounter in their careers can be difficult as educators are limited by the available technologies and mediums to produce settings where such active learning can take place.

Research on the challenges facing counselor educators to provide effective learning opportunities and the development and use of 3D virtual environments in education was used as the conceptual framework for this study. The purpose of this study was to evaluate student perceived learning benefits of a 3D virtual environment for counselor skill development. Students completed three activities during each unit in their course. While practicing their skills in the 3D virtual environment Second Life during two units in their course, students completed role-playing activities in a virtual counselor training facility interviewing customized avatars emulating a mental illness. Research questions for this study include: Is there a difference in perceived learning based on learning activity? Do students perceive the use of a 3D virtual environment for role-
playing as an effective method to develop their counseling interviewing and diagnosis skills? Study results were obtained by the administration of a student perceived learning instrument after each activity completed in two different units during the course and the administration of an attitudinal survey after both units and all activities in those units were completed.

An analysis of the results of this study determined students perceived using a 3D virtual environment for role-playing activities as beneficial. The quantitative perceived learning survey results found a statistically significant difference when comparing student perceived learning between the three learning activities; with the 3D virtual environment obtaining the highest student perceived learning scores. Specifically, students perceived they learned more during their activities in the 3D virtual environment than other activities used during the same course units.

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from the attitudinal survey determined students perceived the use of a 3D virtual environment for role-playing as an effective method to develop their mental health interviewing and diagnosis counseling skills. Students felt the 3D virtual environment was realistic, interactive, fun, and engaging. In addition, students felt the environment improved collaboration, communication, and cooperation among students. The findings of this study have implications for future educational practice as counselor instructors in both traditional and distance education courses seek to find better methods to assist their students in developing their skills.