

## Facilitating Group Discussions in Second Life

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### Abstract

This paper reports on a case study of group facilitation in Second Life, a three-dimensional virtual world that simulates places either in the real or imaginary worlds with capabilities of synchronous communications in text, gesture, and audio formats. The participants were four graduate students facilitating group discussions in a virtual world called Second Life. The study took a qualitative approach revealing the essence of group facilitation in a virtual world (e.g., Second Life). The article discusses five important themes that emerged through data analysis and offers implications and suggestions for group facilitators to work in a virtual world like Second Life.

**Keywords:** virtual world, 3D multi-user virtual environment (3D MUVE), Second Life, group discussion, group facilitation, synchronous communication

### Introduction

Virtual worlds are computer-simulated environments either in the real or imaginary worlds. Uses of virtual worlds for educational purposes can be traced back to the early 1990s ([Wickens, 1992](#)). Virtual worlds have been studied for creating online communities ([Riedl, Tashner, & Bronack, 2003](#)), for enhancing the quality and experiences of student learning (Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrath, & Trivedi, 2008; Squire & Jenkins, 2003), and for providing collaborative environments ([Bruckman, 1997](#); [Erlandson, Nelson, & Savenye, 2010](#)). Research studies consistently show that virtual worlds may afford social interaction, access to information, integration of technology, and collaborative learning (Dillenbourg, Schneider, & Synteta, 2002). Scholars acknowledge that virtual worlds may successfully

support synchronous communication and social interaction and therefore motivate participants to learn (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carteaux, & Tuzun, 2005; De Lucia, Francese, Passero, & Tortora, 2009).

Another term used interchangeably with *virtual worlds* is *multi-user virtual environments* (MUVES). The term *MUVE* was originally used to describe massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) such as *World of Warcraft*. Now, the term has expanded to include online platforms beyond those specific to gaming. As learning platforms, MUVES have at least four distinct features, including: (1) a three-dimensional illustration space, (2) an avatar that visually represents the user, (3) interactive tools for communications in text, audio, and symbolic formats (Dickey, 2005a, 2005b, 2011), and (4) the "ability for a user to 'act' on the world" (Hew & Cheung, 2010, p. 34).

Among those MUVES created through various media, *Second Life* is one of the most popular, gaining greater significance for academic, social, and business purposes. Many colleges and universities have established a presence in *Second Life* by offering virtual classes, discussions, presentations, field trips, and guest lectures (Diehl & Prins, 2008). As a learning platform, *Second Life* features compelling visual and immersive components, synchronous interactions in text, symbolic, and audio formats, and an exciting medium for social learning and group interactions. This paper reports a case study aimed at exploring the essence of group facilitation and interaction in *Second Life* and discusses implications for how best to facilitate group work in a virtual world like *Second Life*.

### Literature Review

Group facilitation is the use of self to direct the group as a whole to move forward in an agreed upon purpose and mission. Facilitation includes: (1) inspiring active involvement of all members and shaping of their useful roles, (2) attending to the explicit group process, (3) encouraging group communication, (4) summarizing and clarifying content of discussion, (5) acknowledging and connecting thoughts and feelings expressed, and (6) organizing the structure and format of the group. The emphasis of facilitation largely depends on several factors in the group composition itself. These factors include the design and purpose of the group, the types of problems that are being addressed, the composition of the group members, and the environment in which the group operates. A group facilitator must simultaneously look at the overall group's purpose as well as the individual needs of the member participants. The facilitator ensures alignment of these two elements in order for the participants to recognize the synergistic effects of working together as a whole unit (Corey, 2012, pp. 15-18). Therefore, the facilitator must think and react on several simultaneous levels.

The current study conceptualizes students' facilitation by applying the *interactional/transformational model*, which views facilitation as being derived through group member interactions coordinated by the designated facilitator (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). Using this perspective, the facilitators must take into account the backgrounds of the members, the communication patterns, and the environment in which the group is run. This model closely relates to the ecological systems perspective, a foundation of social work proposed by Germain and Gitterman (1996), which has been explained in detail by Gitterman and Shulman (2005). In the interactional/transformational model, leadership radiates out as a shared function. Thus, group leaders are designated as facilitators whose purpose is to coordinate and empower group members to share their individual expertise with the collective network composing the group (Saleebey, 2009). The group facilitator must consider at least three properties of the group that may influence the interactive/transformational role of the facilitator. These properties include: (1) the size of the group and the steadiness of group membership, (2) the timeline in which the group members and group as a whole are to complete their stated purpose, and (3) the group dynamics.

Within this model, the facilitator must recognize the pertinent individual attributes of each group member and encourage their sharing skills and natural expressive qualities concerning completion of the group task. Another critical role of the facilitator includes designation of individual members who will take on a critical contributory role to the leadership process. For example, one member may be an "expert" on cultural considerations for members of a particular ethnic group. To the extent that these considerations are recognized, all members in the group may feel welcomed and assimilated within the total group process. The openness and inviting nature of an interactive/transformational facilitator is a major factor in whether members feel invested to contribute to the overall group dynamics.

Persons learning how to lead group facilitation, graduate students for example, must consciously incorporate the aforementioned elements into three key applications of self in their role as facilitator: (1) in the facilitation of group processes, (2) data gathering and assessment of group members, including

progress towards group purpose, and (3) coordinating group member actions and deliverables, which can then be combined into the total group product. To successfully integrate these fundamentals, the facilitators must consciously present themselves in a clear manner as both a model and a guide for group members.

Group processes include how to encourage each of the group members to provide their expertise, how to help group members relate and communicate with each other, clarification and summarization of what was heard in the discussion, and encouragement of further conversation. Data gathering and assessment includes the identification of the thoughts and feelings regarding group member behaviors within the group, probing and requesting information from the group members about their individual assignments, and synthesizing what has been heard into a whole framework relating to the group goals. Facilitator action includes directing communication among members, reminding the group of tasks at hand, providing a structure to the group, and resolving potential conflicts (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). All of the above describe skills that have been derived from real life, in-person groups within various face-to-face formats (e.g., small groups vs. large groups, groups with process vs. task focus, etc.) and within different academic fields (e.g., social work, teacher education, counseling, etc.).

Research on group facilitation in MUVES, and research on Second Life in particular, is limited. Little is known about what it is like to facilitate group discussions in Second Life and what particular skills must be tailored and shaped to account for this media. Educational researchers and practitioners ([Dalgarno & Lee, 2010](#); [Lim, 2009](#); [Mikropoulos & Natsis, 2011](#)) have reported many advantages of MUVES over the two-dimensional (2D) alternatives for learning and instruction. Two major advantages of MUVES are to afford a high degree of presence and to provide an authentic learning context in the learning environment. The high degree of presence enables students to "be" and to "act." Hence, students will actively learn with peers through interactions and collaborations inside the learning environment. The authentic learning context enables students to immerse themselves into specific cultural and social environments that "can impact on the affective, empathic and motivational aspects of the experience" ([Warburton, 2009](#), p. 420). These advantages of MUVES over other 2D alternatives formed the rationale for selecting Second Life as a medium for exploring group facilitation.

Additionally, [Zigurs \(2003\)](#) suggests that virtual groups provide an opportunity to redefine group facilitation. While the in-person environment provides the benefit of the facilitators' physical presence through body language, the virtual environment necessitates a revision of communication so that a charismatic ambience may still be maintained to inspire participation. Therefore, keys to virtual communication rely more heavily on avatar body appearance, some emoting of animations, and vocal inflections of the facilitator. As pacesetters and role models, the facilitators set a norm of how group members treat each other. [Ruggieri \(2009\)](#) found interactive/transformational leaders whose presence inspires motivation by individualizing and personalizing comments increase group member level of interest in working towards overall group goals. [Jung and Sosik \(2002\)](#) found such transformational leadership qualities empower group members and provide group cohesion, which increases group effectiveness.

Further review of the literature finds that less than a handful of current studies ([Gutman & Shennar-Golan, 2012](#); [Macgowan, 2012](#); [Macgowan & Vakharia, 2012](#)) have attempted to address methodological issues in group work facilitation, and none of these studies mention teaching methods that specifically incorporate the characteristics and opportunities within a virtual setting. Gutman and Shennar-Golan have developed a model that is used to teach group work within a learning environment that "awakens" the curiosity of the students and encourages the development and the application of the group work method in the students' future.

However, these studies do not define or describe what is meant by Second Life group facilitation skills. Since the environment in which a group operates is a major consideration in studying group facilitation, and MUVES enjoy unique characteristics as social media for learning and collaboration, the authors contend that revealing the essence of group facilitation in MUVES like Second Life would lead to a new and better understanding of group facilitation.

## Method

The ultimate goal of this research effort was to explore the essence of group facilitation in Second Life and draw implications for facilitating group work in MUVES like Second Life.

### *Research Questions*

This investigation sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What does group facilitation in Second Life entail?
- 2) What implications can be drawn for facilitating group work in a virtual world like Second Life?

### *Research Design*

This study took a general qualitative approach and used a case study design (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) to explore group facilitation in Second Life. "The case study method is best applied when research addresses descriptive or explanatory questions and aims to produce a firsthand understanding of people and events" (Yin, 2006, p. 112). It becomes a preferred method "when (a) 'how' and 'why' questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (Yin, 2009, p. 2). The study used a case study design because it allowed the researchers to focus on a single phenomenon in order to produce a firsthand and deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This design was deemed to fit the research purpose of exploring and understanding group facilitations conducted in MUVes like Second Life. It also allowed the researchers to examine not only what the group facilitators did, but how they thought and felt while facilitating group discussions in Second Life.

### *Participants and Tasks*

The study was implemented online in Second Life with four graduate students as group facilitators. The students were enrolled in a Master of Social Work (MSW) program at a state university in the Southeastern United States. All four facilitators were female students in their 20s taking the program-required course *Advanced Clinical Group Practice*. The major course objectives included: (1) advancing the knowledge of evidence-based group treatment models; (2) increasing the students' ability to apply evidence-based group treatment models; and (3) demonstrating proficiency in group formation, group development, and group dynamic facilitation. Facilitating group discussions in Second Life was an option for completion of a required course assignment. The four MSW students were all proficient in Second Life for personal communications, but this was the first time they formally facilitated group discussions in Second Life, though they had discussion facilitation experience in their real lives.

Twenty-one graduate educational technology students participated in the discussions facilitated by the MSW students in Second Life. Of the 21 discussion participants, six were from the same U.S. University, and the other 15 discussion participants were from four universities in China. Prior to the discussions, all 21 discussion participants were given the same tasks, which required them to explore Second Life either individually or in a group. After the participants completed their exploration of Second Life, they were required to participate in group discussions in Second Life, sharing their experiences of exploring Second Life. In this study, there were six group discussions and one group presentation in Second Life facilitated by the MSW students. Each group discussion was facilitated by two MSW students. The group discussions in Second Life lasted between 40 and 65 minutes and the final group presentation was approximately 73 minutes in duration. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the group discussion taking place in Second Life.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The study collected data from multiple sources to establish converging lines of evidence as suggested by Yin (2006). The data collection in this study included: (1) post-study interviews with the MSW student facilitators, (2) researcher and facilitator notes, (3) discussion participants' weekly post-discussion surveys commenting on the facilitators, and (4) the screen recording of the group discussions facilitated by the MSW students in Second Life. The post-study interviews were the major data source for analysis and reporting while other data were analyzed to triangulate the data and confirm findings from the interviews with the MSW student facilitators.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one in the lead researcher's office within one month after the MSW student facilitators completed their group discussion facilitation tasks in Second Life. The interviews were audio recorded in [MP3](#) files that varied from 38 minutes to 52 minutes in length. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions designed to uncover the experiences and perceptions of the MSW student facilitators in Second Life. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to probe beyond pre-determined specific questions and to facilitate the sharing of the MSW student

facilitators' experiences and perceptions in addition to those questions listed in the interview protocol (see the Appendix).



Figure 1. *Group discussion in Second Life*

The data analysis and interpretation involved: (1) organizing and cleaning data, (2) generating data categories and themes, and (3) validating and reporting the findings. First, in organizing and cleaning data, the interviews were transcribed into text, and the personal information in the interview transcripts was concealed to protect the confidentiality of the MSW student facilitators. Prior to data analysis, these revised interview transcripts were reviewed by the MSW student facilitators for accuracy and confidentiality. During the review, the MSW student facilitators made minor revisions to the interview transcripts.

In reading and generating categories and themes, the researchers progressively immersed themselves into the data. First, all four interview transcripts were read individually by each researcher to create a list of descriptors that described the contents of the interview transcripts. The Delphi method ([Linstone & Turoff, 2002](#)) was used to synthesize the descriptors from each research member to generate a group of descriptors and categories that would lead to the answers to the research questions. "Delphi may be characterized as a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals as a whole to deal with a complex problem" ([Linstone & Turoff, 2002](#), p. 3). Initially, the Delphi method allowed individual researchers the opportunity to share their personal understanding of the research data, and then, provided the research group with opportunities to form a group judgment, where disagreement and its underlying reasons were explored. Finally, the Delphi method offered individuals the opportunity to revise their personal understanding of the case under investigation. The Delphi method allowed the research group to communicate effectively and to reach a consensus on data categories and themes. The progressive immersion into the data enabled the researchers to identify clusters of themes from a rigorous analysis of the meaning inherent in the description of the case under investigation. After all the interview data were categorized, the categories of data were repeatedly read and further categorized according to the emerging themes. Using these clustered themes, the researchers revealed the fundamental structure (nature or essence) and offered explanatory descriptions of facilitating group discussion in Second Life.

## Results

This section provides answers to the research questions. The results are primarily the product of synthesized data analyses of the post-study interviews with facilitators. The results have been triangulated with reviews of the researchers and facilitators' weekly notes on group facilitation in Second Life, the discussion participants' weekly post-discussion surveys commenting on the facilitators, and the video screen recording of the group discussions facilitated by the MSW students in Second Life.

The themes that emerged through data analysis describe group facilitation in Second Life as: (1) to go the extra mile in its preparation, (2) to ensure smooth communications, (3) to multitask, (4) to co-facilitate group discussions, and (5) to synthesize and summarize group discussions.

#### *To Go the Extra Mile to Prepare for the Group Facilitation*

Group facilitation in Second Life required the facilitator to go above and beyond typical preparation. The MSW facilitators did a lot of special preparation before the group work began. This special preparation work was in addition to conventional preparation such as getting to know group members and becoming familiar with the group agenda. The MSW facilitators usually arrived at the group location in Second Life 30 minutes earlier than the scheduled time. They spent the time grouping and guiding the members to the meeting locations, assisting group members with technical difficulties, offering technical advice, helping each group member with his or her avatar, understanding their communication capabilities (e.g., text, audio, avatar gestures, and even their English language skills with a strong Chinese accent), and reminding the group of its task objectives for each discussion. In order to familiarize themselves with various Second Life features, the MSW facilitators visited the virtual islands in Second Life assigned to the participants. This allowed the facilitators to better understand their group members' experience. Nancy, a MSW facilitator, described her preparation prior to the group facilitation in Second Life as follows:

*"I went to the same places [virtual islands in Second Life] that they were supposed to go. This way I could have a better understanding of, you know, what they saw and I could maybe formulate a couple of questions. But first what I wanted to know and to ascertain from the group that I was about to facilitate was 'Where did they have any technical difficulties first of all?' 'Were they able to see it?' 'What did they think about it and where do they think that this can go in the future?' Those were what I was really hoping to, umm, get out of them in the group facilitation."*

#### *To Ensure Smooth Communications among Group Members*

Due to the unique characteristics of Second Life environments, information communicated in Second Life takes multiple modalities through different channels and media. These channels included text, audio, video, avatar movements (e.g., walk, run, and fly), and emotional gestures. Additionally, there were differences in cultural expressions and values among group members. The information in Second Life was often overwhelming and could be confusing. Facilitators made a conscious effort to take notes of points brought up by the group members concerning their in-world assignments. In turn, they would devise overarching questions concerning how group members overcame obstacles to complete the assignments. Many of these obstacles were personal in nature and related to what it feels like to be in a foreign environment with new ways of communicating. The feeling of unease within a new environment was a topic shared by many of the group members. Much of the facilitation offered a model of support and assurance, as the facilitators shared ways in which they had improved their own comfort level in Second Life with increased experiences. Ensuring smooth communications among group members in Second Life is a daunting task for MSW facilitators, as described by Shelley:

*"It's much more difficult because there is not that component of body language. Often times there is not even that component of voice communication and in this particular group we didn't have a whole lot of time to get to know our group members ... the amount of sensory information that the facilitators are processing is so much greater than what we're used to processing in real life."*

The MSW facilitators used a number of ways to ensure smooth communication during the group facilitation. Regina, a MSW facilitator, described her experience as follows:

*"We used every possible way to communicate, making them aware of what the group purpose was, things of that nature, setting up the rules of the group. You know, what's appropriate and not appropriate, so just because it's in Second Life, and it's not the physical person in front of you, there's still things that you need to, you know, bring to the group ... announcing yourself, asking questions of the students, getting them to speak to one another, using chat box if you are not sure what they say"*

#### *To Multitask during Group Facilitation*

Group facilitation in Second Life necessarily required a strong ability on the part of the facilitator to balance technical, communication, administrative, and logistical elements proficiently and simultaneously. It was routine that group facilitators had to perform multiple tasks during group facilitation in Second Life. Group facilitation included observing all the group members' behaviors and

moderating the talks to ensure the smooth flow of ideas and fair opportunities for sharing thoughts. In order to deal with issues and problems, the facilitators often found themselves communicating with the co-facilitators through text messaging and private backchannel audio communications. Simultaneously, while leading a group discussion, the group facilitators were often found trying to teleport a lost avatar back to the discussion location (e.g., quickly transport an avatar from one virtual location to another). Additionally, the facilitators had to read and answer text messages from some group members with technical difficulties while commenting on other group members' talking about their experiences in exploring Second Life. Amy described this multitasking experience in facilitating group discussion in Second Life:

*"The collaboration between myself and the other facilitator was one of definite multitasking because you are sending teleports to the students or group members at the same time you are discussing with your co-facilitator as to what is going to take place once they arrive ... so you have to be very attentive to not only the screen but all the sub screens where you're texting other people, where you have side, other conversations going on."*

#### *To Co-Facilitate Group Discussions*

Due to the complicated nature of group discussions through multiple channels (text, audio, avatar gestures, and behaviors) in Second Life, two facilitators collaborated together in group facilitations. The two facilitators usually played different roles. One would focus on leading the discussion to ensure the smooth flow of ideas and fair opportunities to speak, while the other offered assistance to discussion participants including: (1) guiding and sending teleports to the lost avatars, (2) answering questions from individuals through texting, (3) briefing on what had happened in the discussion for those who arrived late, and (4) guarding the group from disruptive stranger avatars or "griefers," who act aggressively and disruptively in Second Life. The process of how the facilitators co-facilitated was shared openly with the group. This allowed the group members to understand some of the workings of a group-coordinated process. As this occurred, comments from the group expressed acceptance, support, and understanding for the co-facilitators' tasks as well as informally assisting in that effort. For example, several of the Chinese students would jump in and translate some of the messages conveyed in English. Co-facilitation also served as a "Plan B" as Amy described her unique experiences in this project:

*"I do remember one moment that stuck out in my mind was, I could not, I was facilitating the group and, I couldn't speak, umm, my microphone stopped working, and I had to collaborate with my co-facilitator, to kind of start where I left off, umm, so that stuck out in my mind because I had some anxiety about it, but she was able to take over with no problem and that sticks out in mind, but that goes back to the collaboration between the two facilitators, but those were the main things that stuck out in my mind in how I felt facilitating."*

Too much information in different formats in Second Life could be overwhelming and very confusing for facilitators. Co-facilitation in this project was *"imperative, imperative that it be co-facilitated"* (Amy). As the group progressed, success of ongoing discussions served as a reinforcement of the need for co-facilitation. All the group facilitators felt very positive about co-facilitation in either the role of leading the discussion or providing assistance. Amy explicitly expressed her appreciation for co-facilitation:

*"I really appreciated the other co-facilitators and their willingness to meet and communicate about the running of the group and everybody's ability to remain open and open to changes that took place, umm, and that's to the group facilitators and the group members, everyone seemed very adaptable to different situations that would come up, umm, I was really appreciative of that personally throughout the whole experience."*

Due to the complicated nature of group work in Second life, co-facilitation ensures successful discussions by meeting the challenges posed to the facilitators and the group. Through co-facilitation, the facilitators as well as the group members saw the value of collaboration and developed a sense of appreciation for each other in facilitating group discussion in Second Life.

#### *To Synthesize and Summarize the Discussions*

The ability to synthesize and summarize the discussion in the moment, both externally towards students and internally, as it relates to self-assessment of instruction, was the core of effective group facilitation. What made this unique in Second Life, according to MSW facilitators, was its repetition in multiple formats. There were two types of synthesizing and summarizing according to the facilitators. The first was synthesizing and summarizing to ensure the flow of ideas and facilitate group progress toward the

goals. This was done through different channels available in Second Life. The summaries initiated group discussion, especially at the beginning and the end of each group session. These discussions helped elicit what experiences stood out as learning opportunities in the class and how these were shared. This provided valuable feedback to the facilitators as to what points needed further elaboration regarding their in-world assignments. Summaries also allowed for a period of warm up at the beginning and a means of winding down at the end of each group. Further, the synthesis allowed facilitators and group members alike to help pull together common elements of the Second Life experience as they applied to the accomplishment of the course assignments. Regina described her co-facilitating experience as follows:

*"We would highlight some important points in discussion at the end, and I remember one Chinese student could not hear what Nancy was saying when she [was] wrapping up the discussion. I quickly typed in what she said, and the Chinese student responded with appreciation and shared with the group additional ideas through the chat box. Other group members jumped in right away either through chat box or audio talk, which really enriched the discussion. It was really cool and very important too!"*

The second type of synthesizing and summarizing referred to the efforts the facilitators took to improve themselves as facilitators as described by Nancy:

*"When we finished each group we debriefed and that I think was really important. I think really setting up beforehand who was going to do what and then afterwards debriefing and talking about what we didn't like and what we did like, what went well what didn't go so well was really important um to having it go well the next time."*

Facilitating group discussion in Second Life was to effectively synthesize and summarize the discussion. The efforts the MSW facilitators took in synthesizing and summarizing discussions not only helped effective group process during the discussion, but also helped them to become more competent group facilitators and coordinated team players. These skills are useful in real life as well and certainly essential in facilitating groups in Second Life.

## Discussion

The discussion section examines the above findings while answering the second research question to draw implications for group facilitation in Second Life. However, before beginning the discussion, it is important to mention some limitations of this study. Due to practical constraints, the study was conducted among a fairly small group of the target students with limited opportunities of group facilitation in Second Life. Although a defined methodology was applied to reveal the results presented (through triangulation and comparison to facilitator and researcher notes, and participant survey results), the essence of group facilitation was nonetheless those of "naïve group facilitators" in Second Life. With this limitation, the authors want to caution the readers of the extent to which the study's results and conclusions can be generalized.

### *Preparation for the Second Life Group*

According to all of the MSW facilitators, the key issues in preparing for the group revolved around technology in its many dimensions. Two key concerns here involved: (1) the students' developed ability to facilitate, and (2) the ability to engage and relate with the group members during group preparation. The overarching concern being the necessity that facilitators be trained on how to use the Second Life platform. This is not a simple task in that the basic training tutorials provided by Linden Labs and others are relatively abbreviated. To help with both the student and co-facilitator learning, the MSW students made an instructional video illustrating the step-by-step basics on how to use the Second Life viewer. This was shown to each group member as part of a training session conducted before the facilitation itself began. This procedure had several advantages. The MSW students learned by conceptualizing and articulating the Second Life skills in creating a self-training video. Next, they served as teachers to the other student participants, and later as consultants to help with particular student needs. All of this makes for interactive engagement on the part of both the facilitators and the group participants and establishes an ease of rapport even before the formal group business began. Such mutual task sharing and coordination in helping to build cooperative group norms has been found effective in other virtual educational contexts ([Black, Welser, & Degroot, 2011](#); [Pedica & Vilhjálmsóna, 2010](#)).

Once Second Life skills were mastered, the facilitators could watch the movements of the group members to get an idea of social proximity interactions and to be able to comment on group processes



to the general group. This is about as close as the current technology comes to monitoring non-verbal communication among group members. In addition, both the observations using the camera and the etiquette connected with the use of voice and microphone adjustments needed to be cultivated with the group and practiced as agreed upon group normative conduct. Facilitators knew they would serve as role models for the other group participants. While this also happens in real life groups, Second Life groups require students to see the facilitators coordinate multiple channels of communication among participants. This heightens their awareness of how to maneuver through the use of such channels and gives full consideration to the input of each member.

Before the group meetings, members were supplied a notecard that gave them the landmark to the group. This allowed the participants to teleport directly to the group location and minimized the chances of them getting lost in transit. This method served a dual role in that it brought the group together quickly and efficiently, and it reduced questions posed by avatars that may have gotten lost at the beginning of the group. This reduced both user anxieties and logistical inefficiencies. The group could then begin on time with members feeling a sense of readiness and calm.

To assist in understanding the assignments in the educational technology course, the MSW students went to the virtual locations (called *sims* in the Second Life parlance) and went through the assignment protocols. This allowed the facilitators to understand at both a verbal and experiential level what was to be learned from these assignments. Further, it allowed the facilitators to ask knowledgeable questions of the educational technology students. Since both time and bandwidth were often at a premium, familiarity with the assignments allowed the facilitators to keep the communication efficient and on topic to allow for as much group interaction as possible.

Certain standard measures were established in each group session to encourage full group participation. Since only some of the group had voice capability, the facilitators took extra pains to poll each of the group members before the group so they could develop a strategy for group communication, which included both voice and texting. This required coordination between the two co-facilitators. The topics regarding the class assignment discussion also had to be mapped out in advance to keep the messages simple and accessible for text and voice. Coordination also included facilitator role assignment as to which co-facilitator would contact a group member who was not responding when asked a question. The one who took that role had to make sure the backchannel chat was working and the group members were aware of it. At the very beginning of each group session, the communication channels were fully explained and group members were asked for acknowledgement. Each member was asked whether they were reliably connected to the Internet, and if they could hear the voice of the facilitators. In going over the course assignment of the educational technology students, the facilitators highlighted specific key terms that might be used in group discussion during the session for that day. This showed regard for the language bridging needed, as English was a second language for about half of the group participants. This process has been reported in other studies in terms of the development of specialized norms of behavior to fully exploit the communication potential of a virtual reality environment. Such coordination necessitates the use of an efficient plan of co-facilitation to cover verbal and audio components of interaction ([Cutcliffe & Bajkay, 2009](#); [Dodds, Mohler, & Bülthoff, 2011](#)).

#### *Extra Steps to Ensure Clear Communication*

To get a reading on the status of the channels of communication and the efficiency of communication, each group member was asked to introduce themselves at the beginning of each group. This allowed the current communication abilities and preferences for that day to be broached. Proximity to fellow avatars was also noted in terms of how well each member could hear each other. For those who used voice communication, the sound levels were checked to make sure all could hear, but that volumes were not too loud as to be offensive. For the Chinese students, the ability to understand verbal and technical concepts along with the current clarity of the voice often required anticipating whether text would be a better medium of communication for these students in a particular group session. Each group member evaluated their circumstances and was encouraged to decide what medium to use. Also, because of the distance factor, lag often delayed communication. In these cases, the facilitators needed to be patient up to a point and then inquire if the previous communication was clear or needed to be repeated.

To make the focus of the group as clear as possible, the course assignments for the educational technology students served as a focal point for the group discussion. This allowed for members to discuss a topic familiar to them, and also to fill in blanks when communication may have become momentarily sporadic. At the same time, a form of communal constructivism ([Girvan & Savage, 2010](#))

was applied in which specific norms of group interaction were defined by facilitators for the purpose of encouraging member interaction. This procedure helped other members to be sensitive to the particular technical needs of fellow members. An example includes identification of potential and previously experienced communication gaps. Where possible, facilitators would repeat or paraphrase for individuals who reported a gap or did not participate for a period of time. When a Chinese student may have been misunderstood in voice, often the co-facilitators would ask the student to type the words they were voicing so as to allow other members to begin to understand the unique characteristics of that person's dialect. This was reported to be respectful of the student and helped build cross-cultural group cohesion.

Unlike in real life, members do have the opportunity to privately chat with others in the group or even outside of the group. This distracts from the group communication process. Therefore, rules were set up requesting that participants refrain from private conversations with anyone during the group discussion, with the exception of mentions of technical difficulties directed to one of the co-facilitators. Such structured rule setting has been found to be effective in developing efficient group interaction as opposed to allowing the interactive norms to develop without facilitator guidance ([Barnett & Coulson, 2010](#)). It was understood that co-facilitators would have to communicate with each other in the backchannel in order to strategize how to best keep the group discussion going through both voice and text. Since there is very little non-verbal communication in Second Life, a clear indication of a member's participation came from the timing and frequency of responses to questions posed by the facilitators. Typically, if a group member had not spoken for a period of time, a strategic decision was made between the co-facilitators to call upon that avatar. In real life groups, this is most often not necessary, since the attention to the group discussion is clear through non-verbal cues, such as body posture, facial expression, and eye contact.

Using a round robin ([Black et al., 2011](#)) approach, the facilitators effectively posed a question to the group as a whole and then announced they would ask each member to take a turn at giving their answer. This type of clear procedure also seemed to have the effect of maintaining active participation of the members. Co-facilitators also referenced other members' comments when asking for additional answers to questions. This helped to connect the members. This method of leader-oriented discussions seemed to suit all the students, but the Chinese students expressed special appreciation for this process of being called upon before speaking. This process seemed to coincide with their cultural expectations and would apply to real life as well. Likewise, it was important to provide very clear announcements for each part of the group session, including initial introductions of the group members, focus of discussion, working and sharing together, and ending of the session. It can be concluded, as did [González-Navarro, Orengo, Zornoza, Ripoll, and Peiró \(2010\)](#), that a more structured group format as opposed to a flexible group process is not only desirable, but necessary to keep communication flowing and participants fully engaged.

## Conclusion

Several areas of consideration in facilitating educational groups in Second Life have been revealed by the MSW students who facilitated the groups in a synchronous virtual group environment. The descriptive themes have revealed the essence of group facilitation in Second Life. Collectively, they believe group facilitation, of which the mission is to enhance the educational experience of other students from around the world, must include the following responsibilities:

- *Preparation.* Group facilitators must recognize the criticality of their advanced preparation with respect to effectiveness and success of the group discussion. Facilitators are in effect leaders who must demonstrate a command of the session to participants. This includes anticipating and preparing for optimal communication given the technology and tools available.
- *Strategy.* Group facilitators must proactively strategize how they will enhance and promote effective and efficient communication, both among themselves and other participants, as well as within the co-facilitation dyad. This may include the use of several channels of communication simultaneously.
- *Dexterity.* Group facilitators should possess a skillset composed of agility in managing simultaneous tasks and deftness in assessing participant needs "in the moment." The facilitator must concurrently manage presenting and fielding questions around the discussion focus, as well as interjecting when participants may need some technical assistance.

- *Collaboration.* Co-facilitators must be strategic in planning for both anticipated and unexpected challenges, which arise during a group facilitation session. They must ensure that participants do not get lost in gaps of misunderstood information, lost messages, or technical issues. Furthermore, effective co-facilitation draws participants out and connects ideas in a succinct manner.

With rapid development of synchronous technology and increasing connectivity of our world, group work in MUVes like Second Life will likely become more practical and prevalent in the very near future. Preparing our students to become effective and competent group facilitators in such an environment is a critical undertaking, which we must begin to appreciate and approach with great urgency.

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### Appendix: Interview Questions

#### Overarching Question

What is it like to facilitate a group discussion in Second Life?

#### Specific Questions

- 1) When did you start using Second Life?
- 2) What was your first impression of Second Life at that time?
- 3) Can you please describe what you did when you were facilitating a group discussion in Second Life?
- 4) Can you please describe with an example the general procedure of facilitating a group discussion in Second Life?
- 5) Among your experiences of group facilitation in Second Life, which do you want to share with me first? Please tell me what you did, from the beginning of that group-facilitation event.
- 6) What interesting events or incidents occurred when you were facilitating a group discussion in Second Life?
- 7) What were some memorable moments you had when you were facilitating a group discussion in Second Life?
- 8) What strategies did you use when you were facilitating a group discussion in Second Life? Please describe them with an example.
- 9) What were proud accomplishments you had as a group facilitator in Second Life? Please describe them.
- 10) What challenges did you have when you were facilitating a group discussion in Second Life?
- 11) What did you do to meet those challenges?
- 12) If you were going to describe your experience of facilitating a group discussion in Second Life to your colleagues, what would it be like? Please give me an example.
- 13) If you were going to describe your experience of facilitating a group discussion in Second Life to your grandparents (i.e., people over 60 years old), what would it be like? Please give me an example.
- 14) What would you do differently as a group facilitator if you got another opportunity in Second Life?

**Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank Shannon Bradley, MSW, Ashley Burnette, MSW, Natalie Moppert, MSW, and Rachel Boyko, MSW, four graduate students in social work, for completing the Advanced Groups course assignment in such a diligent manner and helping the authors to see the experience of Second Life group facilitation through their eyes. The authors also wish to express their sincere appreciation to Dr. Jackie Greene and Dr. Michele Stork for providing feedback on the paper.

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