Transformational learning in the ‘helping professions’ as best practice

Final Report 2013

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List of acronyms used

SL – Second Life
TL – Transformative Learning
VW – virtual world
Executive summary

Higher education has embraced various digital technologies with great vigour. These new technologies can, if used thoughtfully, represent unique learning experiences given their often relational, multifaceted and/or immersive qualities. Such technology may greatly assist students training for the ‘helping professions’ especially through experiences which develop them cognitively and personally so as to be able to make nuanced, if not wise, decisions. Tabor Victoria undertook the current project in the context of counsellor education, ultimately seeking to match the use of virtual world (VW) technology with the pedagogy of Transformative Learning (TL). TL seeks to create new, richer and more adaptive meanings around old problems. Given that narratives represent the units of meaning-making, specific narrative therapy tools were embedded to see if they assisted the transformative process.

The unit of study titled Professional Ethics is chosen for the project. The unit is divided into two halves; Counselling and the Law and Counsellor Self-Care. Across the two years of the project Counselling and the Law represented a comparison condition while in Counsellor Self-Care there was first a face-to-face TL pedagogy which was then adapted to a VW learning environment, specifically Second Life (SL). As the project existed across two years, two cohorts of volunteer students were investigated. Within each cohort all students undertook both halves of the Professional Ethics unit. Between cohorts, students had all completed about two thirds of their Bachelor of Arts degree and had similar personal demographics. Qualitative data was collected at the conclusion of Counselling and the Law and then again at the conclusion of Counsellor Self-Care.

Outcomes were as follows. From year 1: It is possible to develop a set of face-to-face class activities consistent with TL and note a degree of transformation in students. It is also possible to induce negative transformation through increased arousal levels. This led to the proto-typing of custom bio-feedback technology appropriate for use in SL.

From year 2: It is possible to create a VW environment consistent with the aims of TL. It is also possible to adapt TL class activities to a VW environment. Indeed, ‘disorientating dilemmas’ may be more potent in a VW environment. However, group critical reflection was diminished in the VW of SL. Students discussed the benefits of mixed-mode learning and the value of Skype for group critical reflection. Nevertheless, some evidence for transformation following a VW experience existed.

Three cautions were also noted:

1) providing equity of access is a complex issue when using VW technology;

2) student ‘buy-in’ may be compromised by the time taken to gain proficiency with the technology and the cognitive load induced; and

3) a VW promotes student autonomy such that duty-of-care takes on increased relevance.

Beyond the strict aims of the project, students noted the ‘meta-carnate’ benefits of being represented as avatars and the importance of discovery to their learning. Students also commented on their increased autonomy in SL. These elements suggest the development of a VW-specific pedagogy which should be explored in future projects.

Lessons and insights are discussed further in Chapter 4.
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1. Background

Online learning now sits comfortably alongside traditional face-to-face methods of instruction across the Higher Education spectrum. At the simplest, learning management systems can be used to provide educational material and assessment to students in distributed locations. Limited peer-to-peer and peer-to-teacher communication also often accompanies such technology through the provision of forums and the like. However, the current generation of school leavers, and thus the bulk of undergraduate students, have grown up in a world dominated by both communications technologies (e.g., mobile phones, SMS, email, Facebook, Twitter etc) and technologies devoted to interactivity (e.g., websites, virtual worlds, gaming etc). To this extent typical learning management systems do not provide the sophistication expected by students nor do they provide a unique learning experience in, and because of, themselves. Arguably the most complex and poorly utilised amongst these new technologies are the virtual worlds (VWs). This is attested to in so much as by 2009 only about 100 universities owned or rented land in the VW of Second Life (SL). In addition, many institutions under-cut the unique nature of VWs by replicating class environments and activities as opposed to exploring the potential for VWs to provide unique learning experiences.*

VWs represent an important and distinct subset of online learning environments. Broadly they are identified as being a three dimensional spatial environment into which the student is inserted in the guise of an avatar. Due to these structural characteristics and the potential for detailed graphics and in-world atmospheric sound a degree of immersion often accompanies a VW experience.

Such virtual learning environments have also been shown to be distinct from typical learning management systems by providing:* (1) a space dedicated to education globally and not just distance education specifically; (2) a functional relationships between objects so that information is organised to maximise learning; (3) a degree of interactivity between students who now actively participate in the learning process; (4) a degree of malleability such that teachers can utilise various educational resources and/or pedagogies within the one VW environment; and (5) a degree of overlap between the virtual and real worlds to facilitate greater student engagement.

More specifically, by providing an in-world experience VW platforms provide teaching experiences not otherwise easily had in the real world. For example students can ‘get a feeling for’ an unfamiliar, or hazardous, work environment. In doing so they can practice skills safely before a work placement. Perhaps even more exciting VWs allow students to engage in experiences not typical - or not possible - in the real world for a variety of reasons around time, money and/or geography. These may include virtual field trips to key historical buildings, such as the Sistine Chapel (see Figure 1), in which the students experience a new perspective (see Figure 2). Alternatively, VW also provide students from a diverse set of fields, including architecture and archaeology, the ability to experience buildings which either, lie in ruin (see Figure 3 & 4), currently stand, or are to be built. Table 1 gives a number of other examples of VW experiences used in Higher Education.*
Figure 1: A VW rendition of the interior of the Sistine Chapel (Vassar College).

Figure 2: From the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Vassar College).
Figure 3: The ruins of the Roman fort at Binchester, UK (Wikipedia).

Figure 4: A VW reconstruction of the Roman fort at Binchester UK (Vinovium.org, Stanford University, Durham University, & Durham County).
Table 1: Educational activities currently performed in Second Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development of personal skills</th>
<th>Development of professional skills</th>
<th>Development of professional reasoning</th>
<th>Development of research ability</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fostering task completion and competition through educational games and activities.</td>
<td>Provide language and cultural immersion.</td>
<td>Explore business case studies in an interactive manner.</td>
<td>Allow modelling in economics and sociology.</td>
<td>Develop interactive libraries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice conflict resolution skills. These can be expanded to gaming-out conflict scenarios.</td>
<td>Conduct role-plays.</td>
<td>Within the creative arts to improve ability and develop criticism through exhibitions and field trips.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Undertake treasure hunts and quests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the anonymity of an avatar to provoke honesty in interaction, risk taking and assertiveness by students.</td>
<td>Provide virtual field trips for archaeology or nursing students.</td>
<td>Provide simulations of workplace scenarios, eg ambulance, which in the real world would carry a degree of risk.</td>
<td></td>
<td>To record in-world educational experiences for later reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop “...less tangible skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, team building and collaboration”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide simulated field trips to ancient ruins or distant galleries.</td>
<td></td>
<td>The provision of self-paced tutorials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Provide opportunities for social engagement which may defy convention.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Create a hub for social contact which provides a broader context in which the educational experience is occurring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before discussing pedagogical approaches which are consistent with the benefits inherent in VWs it is useful to engage with the notion of an authentic VW learning experience. Authentic activities derive their validity from a collaborative stance taken by both teacher...
and student. Herrington identified several characteristics of authentic activities which include: (1) the need for applicability and relevance beyond the immediate concerns of the exercise; (2) valuing collaboration; (4) students taking control for defining the problem and testing competing solutions over an extended period of time; (5) the need to build in times for reflection during the exercise; and (6) the provision of assessments which are well integrated with the conduct and outcome of the exercise. Authentic activities therefore promote the teacher as a facilitator who guides student learning and opens the possibility for rich discovery. As such, students take control of their learning and become autonomous thinkers.

To the extent that academics who use VWs discuss relevant pedagogical approaches experiential learning, action learning or problem-based learning have all featured strongly. However, some have argued for an entirely new approach. Support for this comes from both the revolutionary nature of the technology and that SL, for example, has been demonstrated to have a strong influence on affect, empathy and motivation. With perhaps the greatest impact being on the affective. Further, psychosocial aspects of learning are brought into the fore in a VW environment so much so that “…the Second Life experience impacted on the relational aspects of the learning experience to a greater extent than the cognitive ones.” As such, students may be learning different things in a VW environment when compared to a face-to-face class environment. However, nobody has yet clearly articulated this new pedagogical approach.

In addition to the pedagogies mentioned above VWs also lend themselves particularly well to the pedagogy of Transformative Learning (TL), first put forward by Mezirow in the 1970s. In brief, TL seeks to promote new meaning making. Transformation is thus seen as the development of more adaptive attitudes, values and/or beliefs. Moreover, TL is something that cannot be taught by traditional methods so much as by experience. As such TL holds a unique place within education as it seeks to assist people to function better in a complex world, to make more nuanced decisions and to act more wisely. The value of TL to the ‘helping professions’ is significant given the variety of technical and ethical challenges presented to workers on an almost daily basis. Examples may reasonably include treatment decisions made by medicos, issues of confidentiality (especially with minors) as pertaining to therapists and the best way to intervene with a family in crisis as may be relevant to social workers and police. Therefore, to train students only in theory and the practice of skills belies what the community expects of them. As such TL is a most important, if not somewhat under-utilised, pedagogy relevant across professions.

At its core, TL sits on a tripod of: a humanist approach; constructivist epistemology; and the value of critical social theory. Central to this is the constructivist approach which values people as both agentic and dynamic and highlights the learner as a meaning maker. In a 2007 review, Taylor demonstrated considerable support for TL as a valid theory of personal change noting that interest in TL had grown substantially in recent years with 35% of the research into TL now occurring outside the USA. Research studies had also become more “sophisticated through the use of longitudinal designs, action research, scales, surveys and content analysis…”

In its simplest form TL theory suggests that students come to identify narrow ways of understanding the world (ie frames-of-reference) gained through uncritical acceptance of family, social and cultural norms. As such, students often fail to explore all possible solutions to problems, may apply a correct solution in a blunt manner or simply fail to engage complex social and life problems. A broadening of these narrow frames-of-reference therefore opens the student to a world of greater richness. As such TL is designed to foster the autonomy of each learner by providing them with the ability to productively engage novel or ambiguous situations.

Key to the process of TL is to recognise narrow frames-of-reference through experiencing a ‘disorientating dilemma’ and so trigger the ‘problematisation’ of current attitudes, values and/or beliefs. Through subsequent critical reflection one begins to be aware of
transformation whereby new, broader and more adaptive, frames-of-references begin to form.\textsuperscript{51,52} Such adaptive frames-of-reference have the quality of being “more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective…”\textsuperscript{53} As such, TL does not seek the accumulation of facts so much as the making of new meanings.\textsuperscript{54}

Dividing the TL process into parts, a ‘disorientating dilemma’ represents the trigger by which learning occurs. Two types of disorientating dilemma have been recognised: (1) an interaction with value-laden material provoking a reaction which makes use of one’s relational and social context; or (2) an intense personal experience.\textsuperscript{55,56} Following a disorientating dilemma TL theory would have it that if critical reflection occurs, and often naturally does, transformation is inevitable.

However critical reflection must embrace “…a holistic orientation, awareness of context and an authentic practice.”\textsuperscript{57,58} This being so, no matter if the material to be reflected upon is external or personal\textsuperscript{59} two aspects interact to bring about transformation. The first is a rational, cognitive process which articulates the experience. The second is a subtle process involving the inter-play of unconscious forces and conscious emotions. Together a deep appreciation of self is had\textsuperscript{60} so much so that the learner now has the words to articulate their situation and an ability to plumb the depths of their being to identify novel solutions and thus create new narratives of meaning.\textsuperscript{61,62} Finally, as the theory has evolved the role of learners critically reflecting together in groups has also become important. In this way the group provides a place for experimentation and consolidation of new meanings. 

However, the TL literature remains conspicuously under-developed with respect to the specifics of meaning making. This is an especially important question in education where a teacher may wish to develop new meanings in a specific direction to meet the needs of a curriculum. Within the psychological literature the notion of ‘meaning making’ is closely aligned with that of ‘narrative’ and those most adept at working with narratives are ‘narrative therapists’. As such, the problem of how to shape meaning making may be met by the introduction of narrative therapy tools within a curriculum. For example, clients are invited to examine their problem as external to themselves. This ‘externalising’ permits clients to see their problem as separate from themselves and thus to take control of it. In turn this breeds a clarity and flexibility of thought opening the possibility for new narratives to form. Through techniques such as ‘outsider witness’ and identifying the ‘absent but implicit’ within a story clients begin to shape alternative, and more adaptive, narratives. From the perspective of a teacher, there is no reason to think such tools would not be efficacious in bringing about transformation in the classroom.
2. The Project

Objectives

The current project had four aims which mapped to six outcomes. Outcome 1 and 4 on the original proposal mirrored Aims 1 and 3 closely (see below). Outcomes 2 and 5 related to publication of the work so as to inform the Higher Education community about TL and to inform specialists in TL about the value of narrative therapy. Outcome 6 also related to the communication of findings but suggested both ongoing communication to stakeholders during the project and is aligned to the grant’s communication strategy which includes a symposium at the conclusion of the grant. In year 1 of the project the relevant aims were:

**Aim 1** – Having engaged the literature and consulted with relevant stakeholders (teachers, employers and the CCAA as a key professional body) devise a TL curriculum. This curriculum was to be problem-based, engage students’ cognitive and personal qualities, demonstrate job relevance and utilise group-based learning.

**Aim 2** – To embed narrative therapy tools within the TL curriculum and evaluate the ability of such tools to enhance TL.

Having performed an evaluation of the narrative therapy infused TL curriculum from Year 1 the following aims were identified for Year 2 of the project:

**Aim 3** - Adapt the narrative therapy infused TL curriculum to a VW environment, specifically within SL. As part of this to merge the College’s learning management system Moodle with SL to create a SLoodle environment.

**Aim 4** – To evaluate whether SL further enhanced the transformative potential of the curriculum.

Method

Participants were healthy adult male and female volunteers who self-selected for this project. They were mature entry students who had completed approximately two thirds of their Bachelor of Arts (Counselling). They were selected based on their well developed reflective ability as demonstrated using the Groningen Reflection Ability Scale (GRAS).23

Recruitment and data collection were conducted by an independent research assistant.

On advice from the project’s advisory group one unit of study was chosen for this project as opposed to two. Given that Professional Ethics is a key unit within the degree, is applicable to other disciplines in the ‘helping professions’ and requires engagement with various social, legal and personal dilemmas it was seen as ideal for this study having the most synergy of any unit with the intention of TL. Moreover, it is divided into two equal components: (1) Counselling and the Law; followed by (2) Counsellor Self-Care. Counselling and the Law represented a comparison condition in which no attempt to develop a TL curriculum, nor use narrative therapy tools, was made. By contrast it was in the Counsellor Self-Care component of the unit that a TL, narrative therapy infused, curriculum was implemented. In this way the same cohort of participants could be tracked through both curricula and better comparisons made as to the effectiveness of TL. Nevertheless, participants in Year 2 were from a different student cohort than in Year 1, except for a limited number of students who were repeating the unit. The demographics between the two cohorts were broadly equivalent. The same academics took the same classes across both years of the project.

Data collection was done using focus groups in Year 1 with a limited number of participants requesting a semi-structured interview due to being unavailable at the time of the focus
groups. Year 2 of the project used only semi-structured interviews. Both teachers were interviewed in Year 1 and the teacher who implemented the TL curriculum in SL was also interviewed in Year 2. Although quantitative data collection and analysis was put forward in the original application the advisory group recommended against it given that transformation may be a relatively slow process and areas of transformation not always predictable. Moreover, as transformation has the appearance of being “more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective…” this was thought difficult to capture quantitatively which may lead to confounded findings.

This project was completed in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) and approved by the Australian Catholic University’s Human Research Ethics Committee (# V 2011 62).
3. Outcomes

Aim 1 – To devise a Transformative Learning curriculum

Dr Tom Edwards (project leader) was responsible for consulting the literature and forming a group of relevant stakeholders to advise on the formation of a TL curriculum which would be infused with narrative therapy tools. To this end each activity taught was to have both a disorientating dilemma and time for critical reflection. Ms Lyn Nethercotte is a qualified narrative therapist and the teacher of Counsellor Self-Care. She and Ms Maureen Ireland (counsellor and Victorian President – CCAA) advised Dr Edwards according to educational and employer needs. Others assisted as needed.

Six topics areas were covered in Counsellor Self-Care and TL activities designed for each. The topic areas were: (1) managing conflict; (2) burn-out; (3) failure; (4) self-renewal; (5) the counsellor in-body; and (6) identification of relational strengths and vulnerabilities. Table 2 discusses the structure of each activity in both Year 1 and 2 of the project.

Table 2: Counsellor Self-Care activities undertaken in both Year 1 and 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Year 1 (face-to-face) disorientating dilemma</th>
<th>Year 2 (SL) disorientating dilemma</th>
<th>Narrative therapy tools used during critical reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing conflict</td>
<td>Using triads students take turns at being conflictual, managing conflict and observing conflictual relationships.</td>
<td>In turn, students met an avatar controlled by a project team member. The role of this avatar was to contravene the norms of productive social behaviour.</td>
<td>Students learnt to externalise their stress and anxiety. These were then deconstructed. Management of future stress and anxiety were discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burn-out</td>
<td>Students participated in a content heavy, quick paced lecture. The teacher was very process-driven.</td>
<td>Students were asked to undertake tasks on Tabor Island and follow instructions in a time-dependent manner.</td>
<td>Externalisation built toward understanding the absent but implicit within student narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>For a highly regarded teacher to talk to students of a time of professional failure and its cost.</td>
<td>For students in a virtual classroom to access a video of a highly regarded teacher discussing a time of professional failure and its cost. For students to use their webcams to video themselves watching this video. For students to then play both videos in parallel.</td>
<td>Externalisation was followed by understanding the absent but implicit within student narratives. Outsider witness was also used in a unique way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self renewal</td>
<td>To undertake a novel and pleasant activity in the week before class.</td>
<td>To explore SL and participate in it in a novel and pleasant way in the week before class.</td>
<td>Outsider witness was used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The counsellor in-body</td>
<td>To have students imagine their deaths at their current age and after living a full life and dying at 101 years of age. To write their epitaphs in both situations. This was designed to identify students’ core values and to provoke somatic cues. Using student triads to provoke somatic cues. To use management techniques to effectively deal with them.</td>
<td>To have students engage a virtual graveyard to provoke somatic cues. To have students imagine their deaths at their current age and after living a full life and dying at 101 years of age. To write their epitaphs in both situations. To have epitaphs placed on headstones. This was designed to identify students’ core values</td>
<td>Externalisation and noting the absent but implicit within student narratives were used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification of relational strengths and vulnerabilities</td>
<td>To engage with the parts of the therapeutic relationship. To externalise these using balloons where the proximity of a balloon to self suggests the relative importance of a component part of the therapeutic relationship.</td>
<td>Using diads, students reflected on the component parts of the therapeutic relationship.</td>
<td>Externalisation and the absent but implicit were the two tools used.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: Critical reflection both singularly and in small groups followed each activity. In Year 2 all exercises were mediated through avatars. Across both years of the project two assessments were used to further critical reflection and potentiate transformation: (1) for each student to journal their experiences and insights across the weeks of Counsellor Self-Care; and (2) for groups of students to interview an experienced counsellor on issues of professional practice and self-care and write-up their insights.
Aim 2 – Evaluation of the Transformative Learning curriculum in a face-to-face class environment

As reported at the 2nd Global Conference on Experiential Learning in Virtual Worlds, Ethics and the Law was intended to represent a comparison condition such that transformation of attitudes, values and/or beliefs was not intentionally sought. Nor were any aspects of narrative therapy used in this class. The non-TL intention of this portion of the unit was confirmed by the teacher whose intention was to “...[make] them think...”, for students to be able to make “...a decision...” and the wish to form “...cautious...” practitioners. These intentions run counter to the experiential and holistic nature of teaching within a TL context which, as an overarching principle, promotes student autonomy. In addition, two students also commented on the importance of now taking a legalistic stance when encountering ethical problems. Another also commented that “The consequences of not being ethical are huge...”. Multiple students also noted that the curriculum prompted a degree of “Fear”. One student discussed their experience as a “...baptism of fire...”. Together, such responses indicate that frames of reference were not broadened and were possibly contracted in so far as students retreated from the development of adaptive frames-of-reference to accept, safer, more concrete methods of engaging ethical dilemmas.

Nevertheless, a limited number of students made statements to the contrary such as “...I considered ethics to be probably something external and I would now consider ethics to be something that is very much integrated into your life and thinking, your personal life as well as your professional life...”. For these students one may suggest that a degree of adaptive transformation had occurred.

By contrast Counsellor Self-Care demonstrated a growth in student autonomy consistent with TL. Other students made statements which also insinuate positive transformation. Indeed one student commented “...it began to give me the courage to be willing to tune into others’ reality and not [be] afraid to risk and change in the experience...”. Although one student referred to both components of the unit as “...equally transformational...” two other students plainly stated that self-care was, for them, more transformative. As such the intention to develop an effective TL curriculum for Counsellor Self-Care was met.

Students also commented on the benefits of the teacher encouraging respect, empathy and curiosity as aspects which, in a contextual way, appeared to contribute to positive transformation. In line with this a student commented about the importance of a “...non-judgmental attitude towards self, and...positive regard...”. With specific reference to the disorientating dilemmas, they appeared most effective when they were “...personally challenging...” and as a corollary of this “...transformation was most apparent...” when students discovered aspects about themselves. These points are useful for teachers to take into account when designing a TL curriculum.

All participants noted the value of critical reflection in small groups typically via discussions following a disorientating experience. One student commented, with another agreeing, on the value of their reflection group being “...intimate...” and “...[a] very encouraging supportive environment...”. Again this speaks of important aspects which must be considered when designing future TL curricula.
Typically used within the context of small group reflections, the narrative therapy tools considered to hold the greatest transformative potential were externalisation and identifying the absent but implicit within student narratives.

Aim 3 – Adaptation of the Transformative Learning curriculum to the virtual world environment of Second Life

Year 2 of this project sought to adapt the teaching of Counsellor Self-Care to a VW environment, using SL as the platform. ‘Tabor Island’ (Figure 5) was constructed to have a diversity of learning environments (Figures 6, 7, 8 & 9) and these were consistent with the requirements of TL to present to students disorientating dilemmas (eg Figure 8) and provide opportunities for critical reflection, either individually or in small groups (eg Figure 6). Merging the College’s learning management system (ie Moodle) with SL to create an integrated SLoodle environment was also a component of Aim 3 but due to the cognitive load placed on students in using SL alone we did not progress this aspect of the project further than integrating the College’s website with SL so that it could be accessed from screens in the virtual classrooms (Figure 9).

Figure 5: An aerial shot of that part of Tabor Island demonstrating formal learning environments such as buildings and some, but by no means all, informal learning environments

Figure 6: The amphitheatre on Tabor Island.
Figure 7: Floating islands above Tabor Island used also as teaching spaces.

Figure 8: A view of the graveyard used by students in one TL activity.

Figure 9: A demonstration of the integration between Tabor Island and the Tabor Victoria website. In this
The adaptation of Counsellor-Self Care to a VW environment represents, in its own right, an important contribution to understanding what is possible in VW teaching. This comes about as Counsellor Self-Care is often a lived-out experience where theory is used to seed growth in self-awareness and autonomy, with skills-work playing a lesser role than in most Higher Education units. For the designers this required the creation of spaces and experiences which were unique. Such challenges were met through the creation of both formal and informal learning spaces. Some of which were highly creative. For example, while students sometimes used the virtual classrooms they were more often than not taught in atypical environments including levitating islands, a mountaintop or graveyard. Students were also encouraged to explore other islands within SL and thus be exposed to more environments and people than were present on Tabor Island. As such the designers had to plan for a set of rich experiences. In addition the designers also had to be aware that provoking sensations and emotions, in and of themselves, is nearly worthless without adequate processing to follow. To this end a range of quiet places were also developed for both individual and group reflection. Such places typically had an element of realism about them to avoid further provocations and were typically nature-based. For example, a forest, beach, mountain lake etc.

Similarly the use of TL within a VW environment would also, in its own right, be considered an important contribution to understanding the limits of VW teaching. Not so much in content as in method. Moreover, the introduction of narrative therapy tools with a SL environment further added to the uniqueness of the project.

Taken together, to be able to blend a Counsellor Self-Care curriculum with a TL pedagogy and also include narrative therapy tools represented a unique contribution to the field of VW education.

Aim 4 – To evaluate whether SL further enhanced the transformative potential of the curriculum.

General considerations

By way of context it is first helpful to identify those broad negatives and positives which, in some respects, anchored students’ experience. Negatives were around cognitive load. Be it using the technology at a proficient level, dealing with IT failures, or one’s emotional response to either of these issues. For example, “…with Second Life there was a lot more of me having to make myself be able to function in that classroom...” while another student commented “...you would have to be really quite invested...” to use SL proficiently. The often negative personal effects of increased cognitive load were seen in remarks such as “It was the tiredness and frustration of just working with the technology...”. To this extent developers must be acutely aware of cognitive load and the potential ramifications of this on the quality of student experience and the level of engagement with the curriculum.

Nevertheless students were equally able to discuss positive aspects of their SL experience. These included activities which could not be mimicked easily in a real-world classroom (eg
visiting a graveyard, “I couldn’t have possibly envisaged that in a class face-to-face….”) and the freedom of what became known as a meta-carnate existence. Although perhaps slightly abstract, this term is useful in describing the freedom students felt in using their avatars in ways not possible for people in the real world. For example, “I really loved walking under the water…”, “I really enjoyed flying…” and “The thing about Second Life avatar, I am not limited…”. Of central importance to educators across disciplines was that a number of students also commented that their experience in SL gave them a “…a sense of discovery….”.

Beyond these initial observations it is useful to discuss key structural and functional elements of the students’ SL experience. All aspects of the island had an educational purpose typically aligned with the needs of a TL pedagogy. For example, disorientating dilemmas included locations such as the graveyard as evidenced by “I really like the cemetery…it had not just visual atmosphere…it had the sounds….I think that really provoked different things…”. In accordance with TL another student commented that “…there were [also] places for reflection…”. As such, the island was perhaps more austere than other islands designed for fantasy, entertainment or commerce. This was picked-up by students, one of whom commented that the Tabor Island “…needed more beach and more flowers…it needed more colour…. I would definitely put more things in the sea….” while another stated it needed “…more interactive things….”. Such comments perhaps reflected students’ familiarity with the detailed graphics of video games and the use of CGI in movies. If so, it suggests that designers of educational spaces nevertheless need to be aware of students’ expectations from other media, and to some extent, meet them. This growth in graphic sophistication will be undertaken as future groups of students use the island.

Within SL students represented themselves as avatars. It was through the avatars that activities were conducted, discussion held and new learnings mediated. With respect to what may be termed the structural elements of the avatars only a couple of students queried being limited to humanoid figures. The most numerous statements being about how the avatars were rendered in SL. “We’re got people coming in without their hair, really strange things, or they are just a grey figure and clothes come later….”. Such delays in appropriate rendering of avatars appear to be the result of internet speed and computer processing power. This may suggest that one has to either exceed the published system requirements or have sufficient broadband before embarking on a SL experience. This was remarked upon by one student who stated “…maybe we need to wait for the NBN….”. At an institutional level it suggests the need for policy development around equity of access to VW platforms. In doing so institutions must determine how to manage the cost of using VW platforms. For example, what direct costs are to be borne by the institution, eg the provision of additional IT assistance to students? What costs may reasonably be borne by the student, eg computers and contracts with internet service providers?

Avatar control was common issue amongst students. Movement and navigation were particular issues which increased the time taken to complete activities. Although one student commented “I was happy I could get around the island…and became familiar with it.” and followed this with “I didn’t have any problems going to other places.” it was more common for students to make statements such as “…[I experienced] problems with navigation and trying to keep up with your partner if you were flying, even running or
walking...”. While such problems may, in part, be related to the design of the controls in SL, given one student recommended the development of hotkeys such as “…F1, F2…” to increase usability, it is perhaps more generally accepted by students that the institution needed to provide “…much more in-depth training…” – in spite of the multiple hours provided. This issue of training is an important one for institutions and students alike. Adequate training will decrease cognitive load and assist students to focus on the curriculum and so has obvious educational benefits. However, the provision of adequate training is not a simple issue. Given a range of competencies amongst the students some may become proficient quickly while others may take much longer. Moreover, some students also commented “…I don’t have the time.” to master the technology. Therefore even if substantial training is offered will it be utilised? In addition, an institution wishing to embark on a VW curriculum must also factor in the costs of training within its budget. Finally, given the time taken to train students in using a VW platform teachers must be sure that the benefits gained from the learning experience exceed the time and effort required to reach proficiency with the technology.

Another general theme which emerged was that of communication within SL. Students communicated with each other, with the teacher and with other users through their avatars. Communication was mentioned by all participants within several definable contexts. Most notable were: (1) the difficulties in using voice communication; and (2) the difficulty in communicating with very limited physical cues.

The value of voice communication in teaching is obvious but may be more so in a VW environment given that students are at distance from the College. Indeed it was noted by one student that voice communication provided them with a “… a sense of being closer…” to the other class members. However, within the context of this project there existed a number of significant problems with the use of voice communication in SL. For example, “Sometimes I could speak and sometimes I could hear but it seemed to just come and go randomly.”, or “…every conversation you had everyone heard it…”, similarly “…when more than one person spoke it was a blur.” In addition, comments were made with respect to ambient noise at each user’s location, “…you can hear their conversation with a person in the room or hear the dog barking…”. In light of the difficulties in using voice communication text communication became the norm. Although text communication may appear, at first glance, unable to communicate the richness inherent in voice communication it is commonly used on Facebook, in SMS and with Twitter. It therefore represents a style of communication many students are already familiar with. Interestingly, one student made the following astute remarks about the use of text communication, “You do one line answers…” but in doing so “…probably gave a lot more thought to what you said.” This was both unexpected and potentially important in so much as although text does not provide the “…closeness…” of voice communication it may permit a thoughtfulness in communication not otherwise conveyed. To this extent we may not need to be fearful in using text-based communication, but simply be aware of the nuances surrounding its use.

As mentioned group communication was not easy using voice communication and was perhaps made more difficult by the fact that the avatars demonstrated only limited physical
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...cues. This lead to situations whereby “...there was often times when we were all silent, waiting for someone else to speak and then suddenly there would be four voices over the top [of each other]...”. However a wide variety of gestures are possible for avatars in SL which could have been used by students to determine who was to speak and in what order. This was suggested in one instance when a student commented of another that they had “…mastered [SL] very well. Each time she smile she can make facial expression and whenever she talk she will come-up with a hand gesture.” What is interesting to note were opposing statements such as “The gestures...never used them...”. Such a difference in proficiency and/or engagement with the technology presents important considerations for teachers who seek to maximise the learning experience for all students.

Unexpectedly, a number of students also commented on the way in which they could view the world of SL either through the eyes of their avatar, referred to as first person viewing, or from outside their avatar, known as third person viewing. Both viewing modes were found useful as evidenced by “I think the first person view did really help a lot...” and “Actually I really liked the one where you could see yourself [ie 3rd person view], that was really great.” Taken together, the popularity of both viewing modes suggests that this feature is an important part of the student experience in SL. Further, incorporation of the correct viewing mode into specific learning activities may also enhance student learning.

Taken together, VWs represents a complex learning environment for students. Several challenges therefore exist to the adoption of VW technology by students. For example, students must be IT literate so as to obtain the appropriate hardware and identify their internet needs. In addition teachers must make adequate provision for training, both in content and in the provision of time to gain proficiency. IT support may also have to be provided to students on an on-going basis. Having entered into a VW environment, such as SL, students are now faced with unusual possibilities such as to fly or walk under water. This will, of itself, likely increase cognitive load. In addition their ability to communicate must be reconfigured in so far as they may need to shift from voice to text and not be able to use the range of gestures we take for granted when communicating in the real world. As one student said, “Second Life was disorientating in the experience of itself...”.

This being said, it becomes apparent that the benefit of VW environments in education are in those activities which are: (1) important; and (2) not able to be replicated by other means. In this way the effort to gain proficiency is sufficiently off-set. Such experiences are presently seen with the use of flight simulators to train pilots safely but in the case of VWs could reasonably extend to other hazardous tasks or complex work environments. Another set of activities which cannot be easily replicated in the real world are those whose key element is ‘discovery’. This may take the form of meeting new sorts of people but also encompasses the discovery of places. For example, in SL students can move through the Sistine Chapel and even fly to its ceiling to gain a unique appreciation of both ‘perspective’ and of the artist’s labours (Figures 1 & 2). Alternatively students can go on a virtual field trip to an archaeological site such as the Roman fort at Binchester, UK. Here they can see buildings reconstructed and walk through them. In doing so they gain a sense of space, form, ornamentation and functionality not possible in viewing ruins, especially from a book (Figures 3 & 4). Taken together, the use of SL to teach Counsellor Self-Care provided a set of
unique challenges as described above. Nevertheless, the unique nature of the environment also provided a series of unexpected, and important learnings, as will be described below.

**Evaluating the learning experience**

Key to the current project was to evaluate the implementation of a TL pedagogy in SL for teaching Counsellor Self-Care. By necessity this evaluation must be in two parts. Without reference to TL, can Counsellor Self-Care be adequately taught in a VW environment? And second, is it possible to demonstrate TL in a VW environment?

Counsellor Self-Care represents a specific type of unit where although there is some learning of theory and some practice of skills much of what one hopes to impart to students is learning to be ‘in-body’. To this extent students are taught to be aware of physical sensations and emotions. Further, one hopes for students to develop a degree of insight so that they become aware of the source of their incarnate experiences and understand their meaning. In doing so students learn to self-regulate when they are with a client, or when faced by many clients with complex needs. They thus avoid professional traps such as inappropriate counter-transference and burn-out.

To begin with, some activities did translate well from face-to-face modes of delivery to SL and were perhaps even optimised in SL given the immersive nature of the experience and other aspects of the technology. For example, nearly all students commented on the ‘graveyard exercise’ (see Figure 8) exemplified by comments such as “But I couldn’t have gone there easily in my own imagination. When we wrote our [epitaphs]...I don’t think I could’ve had that [experience] out of Second Life. That was interesting.”, or from another student “I couldn’t have possibly envisaged that in a class face-to-face...”. Another exercise which was optimised was that of being one’s own ‘outsider witness’. Not that this exercise was immersive in the same way as the ‘graveyard’ activity but that it used the available technology in a unique way. That is, in a virtual classroom watching a video of the teacher describe a time of professional failure while videoing one’s self with a webcam and then replaying both videos in parallel. Students typically remarked, “Actually I really liked the one where you could see yourself, that was really great. I think that was something you could do more of...”. Finally, other unique experiences commented on by students included exploring other islands within SL. Together, these exercises would be difficult to replicate in the real world given the need for technology, props or even the necessity of field trips.

In addition to set activities, other experiences in SL also provided rich learnings for students. One of the most common was their engagement with water. Be it under the sea, at the beach, in a pool or lake many students described their interaction with water and often in terms of relaxation. For example, “I just walked around under the water. It just seemed really quiet and peaceful...”. In addition, walking under the water was for a number of students an exploratory activity and one which could bare unexpected discoveries such as “...when I was walking under the sea...I quite enjoyed that experience...and I found a spaceship under there.”.

However two concerns were raised with respect to how the Counsellor Self-Care curriculum translated from face-to-face to a VW environment. The first related to the difficulty in forming a strong group dynamic where students felt safe to disclose and process personal
information during times of critical reflection. In talking about their positive experiences of doing group work in face-to-face classes students made comments such as “...I think you actually feel it more...it is much more or a felt thing...”. Conversely it was said “...trust, I don’t know that you have that online.”. Nevertheless, this isolation was not a universal experience with other students commenting, “There were times when we all shared our difficulties...” or “...we sort of all got close...”. To this extent it becomes an interesting question to explore the depth of relationship which can be had in a VW environment given that students are at distributed locations and their interactions are mediated through avatars. To further the teaching of Counsellor Self-Care within a VW environment, or any other unit requiring group disclosure, the issue of how to manifest strong online relationships is key and must be given substantive thought by developers.

The second concern related to the use of narrative therapy tools. These were found effective in Year 1 of the project in boosting the transformative potential of the class. They were also embedded in each of the SL activities. However, one student stated of their SL experience “Look, I love narrative therapy and it was so much not there.”. The context of this statement is difficult to interpret but may relate to the invitational, collaborative and curious nature of the narrative process as opposed to the tools used. This process was perhaps better exemplified in Year 1 of the project where teacher and students were face-to-face. This is suggested as the student had previously taken Counsellor Self-Care in the face-to-face mode stating of it “...loved the class.” Nevertheless, many students noted the use of various tools and could associate them with the activities done. ‘Externalisation’ and identifying ‘the absent but implicit within the story’ being the most commonly identified tools. As to their impact on the degree of transformation observed, this is difficult to deduce given the confounds of increased cognitive load as well as other un-planned experiences.

In addition to the translation of specific activities to a VW environment it is important to note that students did gain in self-insight and learnt to live ‘in-body’ in both formats. In this way key learnings were preserved between the two teaching formats. However, SL also allowed for unexpected – yet valuable – learning experiences not had face-to-face.

It is correct to say that most students grew in self-insight. This was an important learning outcome and demonstrates that a VW environment can match, and potentially exceed, a face-to-face environment in this regard. While the particular form of insights differed between students it is reasonable to say that the activities in SL often provoked personal insights which may have professional resonance. For example, “...I had to accept that this was part of me...I don’t have to push it down”. Then again one of the most impressive insights came from a student who stated “I have got to know myself... of what my capabilities are and my boundaries...”. To this extent the student appears well on their way to becoming a competent practitioner. Interestingly, one student also commented “...online allows you to explore more deeply.”. As to how this may be the case “...everything was more heightened [in SL] and there were more challenges...”, or put within a slightly different framework another student stated, “...because my stress levels were higher, I became aware of more things because they sort of stood out...a bit more”.

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Another key learning for self-care students is to learn to be ‘in-body’, both recognising physical sensations and different emotions. This assists diagnosis, the process of counselling and may also be a warning to the counsellor as to how they are travelling with the client. Being ‘in-body’ was a theme brought-out by most students. While some students simply experienced stress, “…there were lots of times when I had a lot of physical feelings of stress that I don’t normally encounter.”, others experienced more specific negative emotions. For example, “When we ventured off into another world I felt very tense...like I was at risk...”. Interestingly one student noted a feeling of helplessness which was unexpected given the context but a really useful emotion for a novice counsellor to work with. Specifically, they stated “…I couldn’t quite get my avatar to do that [ie climb stairs], and I felt kind of helpless...”. However, the most common strong emotions felt were frustration and isolation as exemplified by comments such as “Frustration, it block my thinking, it gives me a bad attitude...” and from another student “The emotional component is the isolation.” Useful being in-body was, at times, paired with self-insight. An exemplar of this was a comment by one student who said, “I felt it physically. ...I knew that self-care you need to be aware of what’s going on physically in your body, and I noticed how tense I was feeling, how clenched jaw I was and how sad I felt. And I had to go, ‘What are all these things I’m feeling, what does this mean?’”. The same student then remarked about the usefulness of this learning experience “I am sure these feelings will come-up again and I might be able to identify them a bit quicker.”. To the extent that the student demonstrated self-awareness, was questioning the source of their feelings and could project into the future, possibly within a professional context, demonstrates that significant learning was achieved in SL.

The obvious corollary to experiencing strong sensations and emotion is to learn to manage them and this represents another key learning in Counsellor Self-Care. At its simplest good self-management allows for longevity in the profession by minimising issues of workplace stress and inappropriate stress management styles. Self-management was demonstrated by nearly all students in various ways. For example, “…I had to go somewhere quiet with no stimulation...”. Another student commented about one exercise “…I thought maybe I should step back a little bit from this, because I just didn’t want to go there.”. Or in a slightly different context “…I had a headache [from being online]... [I used] different strategies that made it physically better...”. In this way it can be demonstrated that although many students felt a degree of discomfort at times they were able to use the skills taught to them to manage this.

Interestingly, a number of students also demonstrated two other learnings which were not explicitly designed for, nor expected by the teacher, and may be additional to the learnings had in the face-to-face format. Both represent important elements in the formation of competent counsellors and relate well to self-care. The first was learning acceptance (e.g. “So it was like I can’t do anything about [it so] just go with the flow.”). The second was interesting in so far is it countered, to some extent, the widespread feelings of isolation reported above. That is the development of inter-personal relationships best described as an inter-personal bond which contained aspects of empathy (e.g. “...you felt for people...”) and an esprit de corps (e.g. “...in the Second Life class there was a bit of a sense that we were all in this together. ...[There was a] huge spirit of cooperation...”). What appears to have brought these additional learnings about were the difficulties encountered by the group in using the technology of SL proficiently.
Moving from an evaluation of Counsellor Self-Care to an evaluation of whether TL is possible in a VW environment it is first necessary to understand the process of TL. A TL experience has two component parts, a disorientating dilemma and subsequent critical reflection. Together these permit new meaning to be made as seen by altered attitudes, values and/or beliefs. Historically, the intent of TL has been to create more adaptive ways of engaging the world and so the new meaning making typically has the qualities of being “more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective...”. By way of curriculum structure, each week of Counsellor Self-Care had one key activity. Indeed all activities were designed to be in accordance with TL theory, having both a disorientating dilemma and time for individual and/or group critical reflection. In recognition that transformation of attitudes, values and/or beliefs often takes some time there was an expectation that critical reflection would also continue between weeks using journals to assist this.

As to disorientating dilemmas students agreed that in SL “...there were quite a few of them...”, more than those planned for in each of the activities. One aspect of the project was to see if adapting the current curriculum from face-to-face (Year 1) to SL (Year 2) would enhance TL. To understand this question better students were asked whether face-to-face learning, or learning within SL, provided better disorientating dilemmas. Given the unexpected nature of many of the learning experiences in SL this was not an easy question to answer, being exemplified by one student who remarked “Well, it depends. Intentionally, probably face-to-face. Unintentionally, Second Life.”. Yet other students recognised the power of SL to provide immersive experiences not possible in face-to-face learning which were, at times, the basis of powerful disorientating dilemmas. For example, when asked about which learning format had the most potent disorientating dilemmas one student exemplified the thoughts of others by commenting “Oh definitely Second Life.” and followed this with “…everything was more heightened and there were more challenges...”. To this end SL does appear able to manifest strong disorientating dilemmas either by design, or by accident, as students explore within the VW. As such, this aspect of TL may be done better in a VW than in a face-to-face class.

Those disorientating dilemmas which may be considered unintentional by the designers began to represent an important consideration in the style of learning being engaged with by students, namely that of ‘discovery’, and need not be shied away from. For example, “One time I found myself in a strange land early on and I didn’t know how I got there and didn’t know how to come back and I sort of landed on some foreign person and they were talking another language and I didn’t quite know my controls yet.”. This experience, although unexpected, was managed by the student and likely represents a useful learning experience. Nevertheless, some unexpected disorientating dilemmas may confound the anticipated learnings. For example, developers should be aware of one student’s statement that “Second Life was disorientating in the experience of itself...”. Such global disorientation cannot be, of itself, considered useful.

Critical reflection is central to the creation of new and more adaptive meanings. It can be done singularly or in small collegiate groups, but is perhaps richest when both are used. Singular critical reflection was possible in SL and was often accompanied by an experience...
with water. For example “...I went under the water. It just seemed really quiet and peaceful... I find water really calming.”. Interestingly another student commented on the value of coming out of SL to singularly reflect, “In the breaks you would stop and think and journal...”. However, while students adequately performed singular reflection in SL they generally preferred group reflection done face-to-face. To overcome this deficit a couple of students used their ingenuity to communicate by Skype in place of SL. This use of multiple formats, and technologies, to provide a more complete learning experience was discussed by a number of students with one commenting “It means it cannot be Second Life alone. Second Life could be part of it... [but] it must be a combination...”. This represents a possibly important point often overlooked by designers who tend to be early adopters of a single technology. When wanting to teach something as complex as Counsellor Self-Care, or do so in a manner as rich as TL, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect one class format, or one technology, to fulfil all requirements. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that while SL can potentiate potent disorientating dilemmas and provide suitable times for personal critical reflection, other means should be found to evoke the “...presence...” required in group reflection.

Having given examples of disorientating dilemmas and of critical reflection it is also necessary to observe direct evidence of transforming attitudes, values and/or beliefs as a consequence of SL use. This is difficult as transformation may take some time. Potentially weeks, months or even years. And while provoked by a disorientating dilemma transformation may be fed by a large number of smaller experiences along the way. Nevertheless there exists some evidence for prototypic transformation for both the ‘outsider witness’ activity and the ‘graveyard’ activity. For example, “...where you could see yourself, that was really great. I think that was something you could do more of...looking at yourself...[seeing] things you don’t agree with. I saw myself when I liked things. I couldn’t believe my face [I] said things without talking.” and “I really like the cemetery...it had not just visual atmosphere...it had the sounds....I think that really provoked different things...”. However clearer evidence of transformation was evident in unintended ways following the use of SL (eg. “I became more creative...”) or in those students who, having had significant self-insights, used their SL experience as a springboard for further work. For example, “...I don’t need to put things under the carpet anymore, but let them be explored and see where they take you.”. Such statements are classic statements of adaptive transformation. Finally, as to whether such transformation was potentiated by the inclusion of narrative therapy tools is difficult to say. Nevertheless most students could identify their inclusion and believed that ‘externalisation’ and identifying ‘the absent but implicit’ with in the story were of most use.

Towards a pedagogical approach for teaching counsellor self-care in a virtual world environment

VWs have been used in-conjunction with a number of pedagogical approaches centred around problem-based and activity learning. Indeed in the current project a TL pedagogy was used. However, there have also been calls for a new pedagogy, recognising the unique elements of VW learning. Although it is not the intention of the current project to build a new and general pedagogy for VW learning, especially given the specific nature of Counsellor Self-Care, it is nevertheless possible to suggest elements which may have bearing
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on such a pedagogy. These elements include: (1) student expectations around learning per se; (2) the types of learnings had in SL; and (3) the processing of these learnings.

‘Expectations’ is most easily described in terms of student expectations as to what will be learnt and the workloads to be encountered. But expectations can be described more broadly to include expectations around class culture.

Remarks around student expectations of the learning experience should be prefaced with the fact that there was a reluctance by some students to engage alternative learning formats such as SL. For example one student reported “I was comfortable with... face-to-face, because that was something that I knew...”. While other students had more entrenched attitudes such as “Everything is done better face-to-face. ...I am not a big believer in online learning.” or “Second Life is ‘second life’.... That’s just my personal prejudice”. Such attitudes speak to the need for the teacher to prepare students prior to a VW learning experience.

Of more concern were the consumerist attitudes of a number of students to their learning. For example, “Overall definitely the face-to-face is better...because the lecturer can plan the content. ...delivery of the theory, is a lot easier [too].”. Or from one student who had previously attempted Counsellor Self-Care in a face-to-face format “...I learnt more information on more topics...in the face-to-face [class]...”. This suggests that students, even in Higher Education, show a reliance on the teacher to provide content in an orderly - if not linear - manner. This foundationalism is not without merit and a number of students discussed how best to integrate content with the variety of SL experiences had. In this context mixed-mode learning was seen as beneficial whereby theory was provided face-to-face and then utilised through the rich experiences had in SL.

Student expectations also extended to what may be considered a reasonable time commitment required for engagement with new technology, be it in training or in using the technology to facilitate learning. For example, “…I was mindful about how much time I was going to put in...I didn’t want to spend too much time...”. This is an important consideration for teachers given the competing demands upon students. It is suggested that a VW environment should only be used when the demands of training and use are outweighed by the novelty and importance of the learning provided.

Although not typically discussed by students as an ‘expectation’, class culture has been placed within this theme as it is a contextual issue that impacts student learning. Interestingly, within SL class culture significantly shifted when compared to previous face-to-face Counsellor Self-Care classes. For example, “Second Life was a lot more relaxed and less formal...”. Although adult-learning pedagogies typically frown on having the teacher as expert, preferring the role of a facilitator, it may be that VW environments destabilise this broad equality in new ways with unintended negative consequences. In particular, the power balance in the Counsellor Self-Care shifted in favour of the students. For example, “The control of the class is not up to the lecturer.” said one student. So much so that a student commented of another student that they just opted-out of an activity and said of it “You would never do that in class.”. In addition, issues of Occupational Health, Safety and Emergency (OHS&E) plays into this new power imbalance whereby one student chose not
alert the teacher to a time of strong emotion, “No, I didn’t let anyone know, I know I could have...”. Taken together, SL promoted a new style of class relationships. Although improved student autonomy was evident, and generally should be encouraged, these new power relations suggest the need for additional vigilance by the teacher to manage issues of class participation and OHS&E.

So what does learning look like in a VW environment? Although this may differ depending upon the demands of the unit, for Counsellor Self-Care it was of a style perhaps best described as ‘meta-carnate discovery learning’. One student typified this by stating, “...face-to-face is limited [by being] in the body...” by utilising an avatar there now becomes "...an element of fun, and new discovery...".

The meta-carnate nature of VW learning is focused on the avatar. While still having shape and mass (eg “…people were bumping into me...”) it also possesses novel elements which allows its user to escape many of the restrictions of an incarnate existence. For example, “I really loved walking under the water...”, or “I really enjoyed flying... ”, or potentially more intriguingly “…when you drown you get resurrected...”. In addition, the viewing controls allowed one to switch between looking through the avatar’s eyes (ie first person) and viewing from an out-of-body perspective (ie third person). Both styles of viewing were actively engaged with by most students as discussed above. Such experiences are simply not possible in the real world suggesting the meta-carnate nature of engaging virtual reality.

As to the discovery aspect of learning in SL, students variously commented on the ability to explore and discover with one stating “You don’t really get an opportunity in real life as you do in Second Life to explore so freely.” Of surprise to the project team was the importance of unexpected or incidental discoveries to the overall learnings of students. For example, “I had a really amazing experience...[but] I don’t think it was an experience that was planned for...” and similarly “…there is this unexpectability about [SL]...”. The unexpected nature of the SL experience is exemplified by one student who stated “…I found myself in a strange land early on and I didn’t know how I got there and didn’t know how to come back and I sort of landed on some foreign person and they were talking another language...”. As to what learnings such experiences may impart appears difficult to answer if one concentrates only on unit content and cognitive outcomes. However, if one thinks more broadly and invests such experiences with an emotional, if not personal, quality a variety of significant learnings become evident. Broadly, students must problem-solve their way through novel experiences. In doing so they must manage their own emotions and perhaps deal effectively with others. As such both IQ and EQ are engaged. However, to both Counsellor Self-Care and to TL alike, the most significant benefits of incidental discoveries are the challenges they make to one’s view of the world. How things should be are not how they are. In this sense a student invokes a deeper style of problem solving to make themselves congruent with the complex world in which they have found themselves. This requires engagement not just with the intellectual but also with the affective aspects of self. As such incidental discoveries, as disorientating dilemmas, represent the beginnings of rich insights into self and self-in-the-world.

Given the ad hoc nature of discovery learning there exists increased demands on students and teachers alike to capture such experiences and processes them in both a deep and
timely manner. In discussing how one adequately processes such discoveries it is important to note that a number of students commented on the benefits of face-to-face discussion with some justification. For example, students variously commented about face-to-face discussion promoting deep processes with comments such as “…I think you actually feel it more [in face-to-face classes]...it is much more or a felt thing…” and in a “Face-to-face [class] you are able to read people’s emotions as they express their story. You can see how they react and the body language is a powerful tool in counselling.... That’s not possible online.” Nevertheless, students did hint at ways in which processing occurred. For example, “…on Skype...we actually discussed the activity on Skype...”.

Taken together, the current findings suggest that TL is a pedagogy well suited to the teaching of Counsellor Self-Care in that it uses disorientating dilemmas to provoke in students both cognitive and affective responses which can then be critically reflected upon. Not only does this process cause students to develop more adaptive frames of reference but more strictly within the context of Counsellor Self-Care provides an opportunity to identify unresolved personal issues and practice self-management. As for SL, this is a unique learning platform often able to provoke more potent disorientating dilemmas through exposure to novel environments and to unanticipated experiences. However, SL is a technically demanding learning environment which challenges students’ assumptions about how learning occurs. In the context of Counsellor Self-care SL also places increased demands upon the teacher to identify the variety of learnings being had, many of which were incidental, and to assist students to process these adequately. In sum, this project pushed the boundaries of what can be taught in a VW environment through both the unit chosen and the pedagogy used. While SL was shown to have deficits in group communication, and by corollary group critical reflection, it was demonstrated to be an environment which provided novel experiences as well as a freedom to explore and discover. As such it is a valuable educational tool.

4. Future directions, lessons and insights

Future directions

Students could see the future potential for VWs in counsellor education. One remarked, “If you ask me, the avatar could enhance the pedagogy, could enhance the learning experience...”. Another student even discussed specific counselling exercises only possible with an avatar. For example, “…talking about vicarious trauma... make our avatars with some sort of shield so that we could externalise that...” or “…change their avatar to reflect how they felt...” and also “…create another avatar that was your inner critic and have a conversation with your inner critic. You could do a lot of externalising.”.

Within the context of both TL and Counsellor Self-Care a future direction currently being pursued and prototyped is to integrate students’ experience in SL with biofeedback. This adaptation replicates more complex VW therapeutic environments at substantially reduced cost. In particular galvanic skin response is a time-sensitive measure of sympathetic nervous
system activation and thus stress. From Year 1 of the project it was evident that for
adaptive transformation to occur students required disorientating dilemmas which were, to
some extent stressful, but not so stressful as to induce fear. Biofeedback is therefore both a
way for the teacher to measure the intensity of the disorientating dilemmas provided and
for the student to recognise when they are moving outside adaptive levels of stress. This
advancement will enable students to learn to regulate their own internal state and thus
manage stress, which are also key self-care skills. Taken together, the incorporation of
biofeedback within a TL and/or VW context represents a fertile area for future research.

As to future directions related to the adaptation of VW technology to other disciplines of
study the author has presented both locally and internationally with further presentations
planned for 2013. These have included presentations at the 2nd and 3rd Global Conferences
on Experiential Learning in Virtual Worlds incorporating aspects of the above findings and
presentations to the College leadership, to the College staff as a whole and to an allied
college. From these presentations interest in using SL to teach creative arts has emerged.
In addition, the ability to use SL to teach Church History in new and exciting ways has also
been explored. This may include the recreation of archaeological sites mentioned in the
New Testament so that students can experience, not just what was said there, but also the
location in three dimensions. For example, it would not be unreasonable to recreate the
main street of Ephesus. More substantially, SL has been used in semester 1 2013 to train
counsellors in a unit other than Counsellor Self-Care. This unit has very different demands
requiring students to diagnostically evaluate a series of teacher-controlled avatars who
represent common sorts of clients. Of even greater potential is the use of SL in semester 2
to teach modern history. It is the intention of the teacher to provide students with an
experience of the American South in the first half of the 20th century. SL will be used to
both recreate a physical environment of economic disparity and an environment where
discrimination can be experienced through the interaction of avatars. This project
represents a unique use of SL worthy of future discussion.

Pedagogically, the future directions suggested by this project are two-fold. First, to explore
TL more deeply. In Year 1 of the project it was found that transformation could either be
adaptive or maladaptive. That is, either broader or narrower frames-of-reference could be
created and the degree of stress imposed on students appeared to be a critical factor.
Understanding TL within the context of the stress literature, and cognitive appraisal more
specifically, will likely provide important insights. Moreover that style of transformation
previously referred to as maladaptive may not be so in all circumstances. Although such
transformation has not been clearly articulated within the literature it likely represents an
important style of learning. Especially in tasks and occupations where there may be a set
process to avoid some hazard. To this end negative transformation represents significant
research opportunities.

Moving to the new style of learning observed in SL called ‘meta-carnate discovery learning’,
it is necessary to explore this further and in particular its structure, outcomes and potential.
Most critically, what does this style of learning tap within a student? Why did students get
excited over the use of avatars which walked underwater, flew and did not die? Similarly,
why is discovery an important aspect of the student experience? Neither of these aspects
speak to skill acquisition, nor to a purely cognitive response by students. So in what lies
their importance? It is the author’s contention that a form of deep learning is occurring at such times but one in which students utilise both cognitive and affective elements to assist the creation of new meanings. One may even speculate that in this form of learning the raw template on which other learnings depend is being exposed and re-worked.

Lessons and insights

Several lessons and insights have emerged from this project and can be categorised around several broad themes. They are:

**Transformative Learning**

1 – TL is a viable classroom pedagogy well suited to those units which require students to engage personal, professional or social problems and think in new ways about them. In face-to-face teaching adequate disorientating dilemmas can be created in class with excellent critical reflection to follow. In SL it is possible to create more pronounced disorientating dilemmas but group critical reflection may be impaired.

2 – TL may not always be of an adaptive variety if the disorientating dilemma is too stressful. Nevertheless, in some situations this is advantageous as it makes for cautious, if not safe, practitioners.

**Narrative Therapy tools as a way to enhance transformation**

3 – Narrative Therapy tools can be inserted within a TL pedagogy.

4 – Students could, by-and-large, identify which tools were used and when.

5 – Narrative Therapy tools may have a greater transformative potential in a face-to-face class where the teacher can also exemplify a ‘narrative approach’. As such, when using narrative therapy tools with online learning it may be of benefit to have the initial learning experience in a VW but then critically reflect using Skype and here apply such tools.

**Counsellor Self-Care**

6 – Training across the ‘helping professions’ would benefit from a unit of study similar to Counsellor Self-Care where student insight is developed and their ability to engage complex problems enhanced.

7 – Teaching within Counsellor Self-Care requires vigilance by the instructor to assist students to manage strong emotions and make the most from the various learnings had. This is perhaps done best where mixed-mode learning is possible and class sizes are capped.

**Virtual Worlds**

8 – VWs, such as SL, represent a useful addition to the variety of technologies available to teachers and students. Within the context of the current project their advantage comes from both the meta-carnate nature of the avatar and the discovery experiences had by students. In these ways SL provided a set of novel experiences not otherwise possible in a traditional classroom environment.

9 – When introducing students to a VW environment care must be taken to manage cognitive load and student expectations around what learning should look like.
10 – Within the context of the current project SL was limited in its ability to mediate group communication. As such, SL should be used alongside either face-to-face communication or other technologies, such as Skype, which perform this function better. As such mixed-mode learning appears to be optimal.

Institutional issues
11 – Teachers must recognise that both TL and working within a VW have a number of duty-of-care issues associated with them. In the current context, these typically related to the expression of strong emotion and the ability of the teacher to assist students in managing this.
12 – Institutions must develop policies around equity of access if they wish to engage learning in a VW. This will also necessitate an understanding of the financial and time burden imposed on students.

Pedagogical advancements within VWs
13 – Although VWs can be used for skill acquisition and other traditional learning activities the current project noted the value of what came to be known as meta-carnate discovery learning. Although this style of learning is yet to be fully appreciated it has parallels with TL in that new meanings are likely being made and to do so students engage both cognitive and affective elements within self.
14 – As a consequence of observing how students learnt within SL it became evident that they had many more learning events than planned for. To make full use of the richness of such experiences it is incumbent upon the teacher to track closely with students and so identify these incidental learnings and assist students to feed these back into the learning process as a whole. As such the demands upon the teacher become greater.

Taken together, Counsellor Self-Care has represented a useful template to investigate a number of the complexities inherent in the education of people for the helping professions. To do this in the context of a novel pedagogy, TL, and then also in the context of a VW learning environment was a challenge but one that has borne fruit and will continue to do so in the years to come.
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