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Featured Article

# Using Virtual Simulation to Teach Inclusivity: A Case Study

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## KEYWORDS

simulation;  
virtual reality  
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Second Life®;  
avatar;  
inclusivity;  
diversity;  
cultural awareness;  
nursing education;  
innovative teaching/  
learning strategies;  
role-play

## Abstract

**Background:** The topics of inclusivity, diversity, and cultural awareness are difficult to adequately explore in a traditional classroom setting. The use of the virtual platform of Second Life® afforded a unique opportunity to use virtual role-play simulation to experience what it is like to walk in another's shoes.

**Method:** Fifteen graduate nurse educator students enrolled in a course titled "Inclusivity in Nursing Education" were randomly assigned a customized avatar, representing a marginalized person for use in a role-play simulation in the virtual world of Second Life®. Two written assignments regarding the learning experience were evaluated using a simple qualitative analysis.

**Results:** Students indicated that they increased their own capacity to understand, appreciate, and relate to people different from themselves.

**Conclusion:** Although future research is needed to determine the full extent to which virtual platforms can be used effectively in nursing education, this case study demonstrated that valuable learning regarding complex topics can take place in the virtual world.

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To facilitate safe and effective nursing practice, nurse educators strive to develop curriculum that facilitates an appreciation and understanding of diversity and helps nursing students learn to understand patient cultural frames of reference as filtered by their own lens (Pyburn & Bauman, 2013). Because inclusivity and cultural competency are difficult topics to address in the classroom and nursing students have varied clinical experiences that expose them to these concepts, an innovative approach to address these concerns was needed. This article describes the use of Second Life®

(SL) as an interactive learning environment and how SL facilitated graduate nursing student exploration of concepts related to cultural awareness, inclusivity, diversity, personal bias, and—isms as related to the practice of nursing. The results of simple, qualitative thematic analysis of two written student assignments are presented.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

Nursing education is moving from traditional pedagogies to the use of constructivist pedagogy, which shifts the role of

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the educator from “lecturer” to “facilitator.” Constructivism relies on the educator serving as a partner in the learning process. The educator who utilizes constructivism understands that the focus of the educator role is to identify and implement teaching/learning strategies that enhance

and facilitate student learning rather than simply deliver information (Lickteig, 2004). Learning experiences within virtual environments such as SL are consistent with constructivism because students learn through interaction and exploration of the assigned virtual setting (e.g., Dutile, Wright, & Beauchesne, 2011; Givran & Savage, 2010). Research shows that nursing students who engage in active learning exhibit higher order thinking skills and are better able to construct new meaning out of what is taught (e.g., Forneris & Peden-McAlpine, 2009; Thomas, Menon, Boruff, Rodriguez, & Ahmed, 2014). Traditionally, schools of nursing teach inclusivity the same way that pathophysiology is taught, via lecture in large or small rooms. This type of teaching strategy does not take into account individual differences, experiences, or preferences. Although the

overall goal of lecturing is content comprehension, this strategy is no longer emphasized as a primary teaching strategy because of the variability in learning that occurs. Complex topics such as inclusivity require innovative and active teaching strategies that shift beyond lecture to incorporate listening, engaging, and honoring where students are in their personal, professional, and educational journeys.

## Second Life<sup>®</sup> as an Educational Platform

In academia, the virtual world of SL affords unique pedagogical opportunities through real-time interactions between participants who are role-playing as avatars. SL provides numerous opportunities for educators to develop

customized, innovative, and unique simulation activities that facilitate learning using a constructivist approach (Tiffany & Hoglund, 2014). According to Foronda, Godsall, and Trybulski (2013), virtual reality environments such as SL have been effective in teaching concepts and skills across all learning domains. Furthermore, virtual learning activities are becoming more acceptable and widely used throughout nursing education, including simulated role-playing to practice teamwork and communication skills (Foronda & Bauman, 2014; Kalisch, Aebersold, McLaughlin, Tschannen, & Lane, 2015).

SL avatars are able to move throughout virtual spaces that replicate real-world spaces such as museums, theaters, resorts, and night clubs. Access to SL software is free to users unless a dedicated area is desired; this type of an area would require purchase, development, and maintenance by a site owner who pays a monthly fee. In addition, health systems such as Kaiser Permanente and Mayo Clinic maintain virtual spaces for health-related professional education and research activities (Kapp & O’Driscoll, 2010). Nightingale Isle, a dedicated space in SL used in this study, was created to support and enrich the educational experiences of nursing students through virtual simulation and role play. Learning activities that take place within SL can be designed consistent with Devane and Bauman (2013) who explored context-rich learning experiences that enhance and transform learning in ways that allow the learner to “try out acquired skills and discover new ones in a controlled environment” (p. 50).

## Method

This Institutional Review Board-approved study included simple qualitative thematic analysis of two written student assignments in a graduate course titled *Inclusivity in Nursing Education* (n = 15). In preparation for the learning module, graduate nurse educator students were assigned readings that introduced the idea of teaching and learning about inclusivity and cultural awareness. A private area in SL called Nightingale Isle served as the orientation and gathering space designed to familiarize the students with the use of SL as a virtual learning space. Customized avatar biographies and pictures designed for this role-play were randomly distributed to each student (Figure 1). The avatars represented a cross-section of marginalized persons commonly encountered in real life. As part of the learning module, students wrote an initial reflection paper on their reaction to the avatar they were assigned that included a discussion of any biases or isms they perceived toward this avatar. In addition, the students were given a list of SL sites such as health-related spaces, coffee shops, dance venues, and beaches where other SL avatars gather (Figure 2). In the experiential role-play part of the coursework, students assumed the persona of their assigned avatar

### Key Points

- Exploration of concepts related to cultural awareness, inclusivity, diversity, personal bias, and—isms is important, but difficult topics for nurse educators to address in traditional learning environments.
- Nursing students who engage in active learning exhibit higher order thinking skills and are better able to construct new meaning out of what is taught.
- Through participation in virtual simulation activities, graduate nurse educator students indicated that they increased their own capacity to understand, appreciate, and relate to people different from themselves.

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