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Promoting occupational therapy in virtual environments: Project-based learning in Second Life®

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Description of project

Occupational therapy students from Jefferson School of Health Professions in Philadelphia planned and implemented interactive exhibits within the virtual world of Second Life®. The educational exhibits were provided through an ongoing project designed to *promote occupational therapy, provide immersive experiences on health and wellness for persons in Second Life® and promote collaboration between project personnel and others with an interest in health and wellness.* Exhibits focused on home and playground adaptations, mental health and productive aging and were based on current research evidence and best practices. Students also participated in events in which they promoted occupational therapy and discussed their projects.



Fig. 1. The Occupational Therapy Center at Jefferson in Second Life® at βEduisland 2

Rationale

Fulfilling the Centennial Vision requires that we harness new ways of promoting occupational therapy to people, organizations, and communities, including the use of innovative technology (Moyers, 2007). While our profession is beginning to take advantage of the power of blogs, podcasts, and virtual worlds to promote OT, these venues have not been fully utilized (Babiss, 2007). We can take advantage of technological innovation to demonstrate the value of OT to society and its basis in science—bringing a high-definition focus to the profession. The OT Center at Jefferson in Second Life® demonstrates specific ways in which virtual worlds can be used to promote the profession of OT through interactive exhibits about health, wellness, and participation in life

Acknowledgments

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What is Second Life? What can OT do there?

Second Life® is a virtual world that allows you to create an avatar to represent yourself and use that avatar to meet other people and explore different events and communities. In Second Life® you have the option to change your appearance, attend classes, participate in meetings and groups, and build virtual objects.

For some people Second Life® provides opportunities for social interaction and is a way to meet people who have similar interests. Second Life® also provides a creative outlet for many people.

Second Life® provides Jefferson OT students the opportunity to create a community in which we can educate other users about what occupational therapy is as well as some of the different populations we serve. It also allows us to use pictures, videos, and other interactive materials to help us present information to our visitors.

Second Life® provides a unique way of reaching out to people we otherwise may not have the opportunity to meet. We can provide people information and resources about different OT topics such as mental health, caring for older adults, and how to incorporate universal design into their home environments. As students we learn how to present information to reach a wide range of people and interact with people from all over the world. This unique opportunity allows us to advocate for OT and become comfortable educating people and answering questions about OT topics.



Fig. 2. OT students discuss accessible playgrounds with visitors from the US, the UK, Australia, and Israel who attended the event in December 2009.

Insights and lessons learned

Exploration was key to understanding what an exhibit should "feel" like on a basic level as well as to know what already existed in SL so that we could create something new and unique.

Through exploration and discussion with current users, we learned that SL users enjoy interactive exhibits as well as freebies, so we made sure to include these two elements into the equipment that we built.

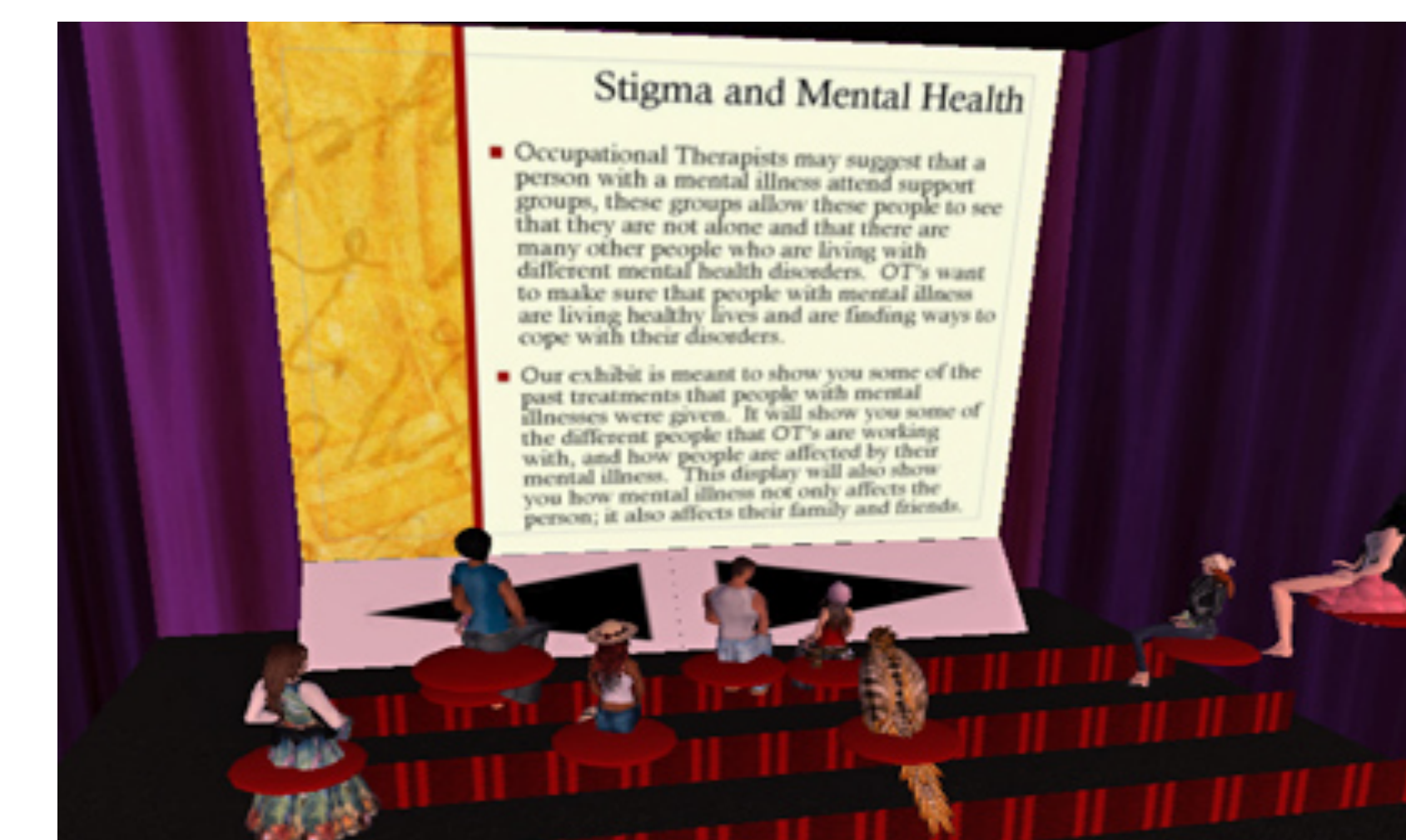


Fig. 3. OT students discuss occupational therapy's role in addressing stigma in mental health by facilitating participation in life roles and valued occupations (February 2011).

Bringing the curriculum into Second Life®

We were able to further explore some of the mental health conditions we learned about in class.

We also were able to combine the history of OT that we learned in classes and compare it to the past treatment of mental health populations

Fig. 4. OT students present concepts and examples of universal design (April 2011).

We chose the topic of Universal Design because it is unfamiliar to many people. Many people know what "accessible design" is but Universal Design goes beyond that. UD is meant for all people, so this topic is relevant to everyone in the Second Life community.

Project-based learning

Project based learning is an educational approach that focuses on *group work performed in teams, that extends over time, incorporates key milestones, and includes formative evaluation* (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2005). Students work together in teams to create educational materials that are based on research, present information in a user-friendly way—skills that they will use in their future careers as occupational therapists. They also participate in giving and receiving feedback from peers and the faculty advisor.



Fig. 5 The Garden of Healthy Aging is based on ideas from Rowe and Kahn's (1998) work. The exhibit highlights ways that keeping engaged with life, avoiding disability, and staying mentally and physically fit can substantially influence *how we age.* A team of 4 BS/MSOT students developed the exhibits.

Steps in Project Based Learning at the Occupational Therapy Center at Jefferson in Second Life®:

1. Faculty advisor and students jointly determine topic for expanded or new exhibit
2. Students and faculty discuss sources of information about the topic(s) from published literature
3. Students identify key findings from literature that have practical application for consumers and are feasible to implement in a 3D environment.
4. Students present their ideas for creating an educational exhibit and brainstorm with their peers and faculty to refine these ideas.
5. Students further explore ways to implement the exhibit ideas, with the faculty director and other faculty members as resources.
6. Students and faculty plan and implement a special event within the virtual world to present the new topic and exhibit, inviting guests from various groups and creating a powerpoint or video presentation.

Literature cited

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For further information see our blog at: <http://otsecondlife.wordpress.com/>