

Supporting Abundant Life in a Virtual Environment

Phase 1: Pilot Investigation

Report of Findings

Submitted to

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Catholic Community Connection (CCC) contracted The Research Center for Educational Technology (RCET) of Kent State University to develop a virtual environment that might provide an additional support venue for Abundant Life participants as an individual or group experience. The proposed virtual community can support participants who cannot attend support sessions regularly in world or who would like to practice Abundant Life exercises using educational technology with other participants from long distance locations. Working toward this goal, RCET provided faculty and technology to develop Abundant Life support sessions in Second Life. Project Phase 1 (May 7, 2010-August 15, 2010) encompassed the following services and deliverables:

- Recruitment and supervision of KSU students for a summer internship that included participation in a face-to-face Abundant Life education seminar (June 9-10, 2010) and pilot testing of the virtual environment for Abundant Life activities
- Development of a virtual environment in Second Life and scenarios for Abundant Life support sessions
- Training in Second Life navigation provided to the KSU students and partners from Catholic Community Connection.
- Data collection and analysis of the pilot implementation of the Abundant Life virtual environment
- Report and presentation of the findings and outcomes from Phase 1 and recommendations for Phase 2

Phase 1: Project Overview, Outcomes, and Findings

Beginning in May 2010, RCET convened a trans-disciplinary team of Kent State University faculty to work with members of the Abundant Life Team on the conceptual design and development of the virtual environment. Using the Second Life platform, KSU faculty member Dr. Steve Zapytowski, Professor of Design and Technology in the School of Theater and Dance, built two environments conducive to Abundant Life activities in-world, one resembling a park grove setting and another a room for relaxation exercises. RCET recruited Kent State University students to participate in the pilot test of the virtual environment. Two of the students were enrolled in the graduate program for Counseling and Human Developmental Services. A third student graduated from KSU with a nursing degree in May 2010. The three students attended a two-day face-to-face Abundant Life workshop and then received training from Dr. Zapytowski in using the Second Life platform to navigate the Abundant Life grove. Dr. Zapytowski also provided training to representatives from Catholic Community Connection in using Second Life and then conducted a group training session on navigating the Abundant Life environment in Second Life for both the KSU and Catholic Community Connection participants in Kent State's AT&T Classroom. Following the

group test run of the site, the KSU students were asked to continue to pilot the environment through continued simulations of group meetings. Specifically, students were asked to explore the Abundant Life grove and then to meet at a designated time in the grove two times per week for two weeks. At those meetings, students piloted two activities that had been created for the virtual environment: the Abundant Life Activity and the Listening Activity. After their meetings, students wrote written reflections of their experiences addressing the following prompt:

- Please provide content recommendations and technical recommendations to improve the Abundant Life Activity and the Listening Activity in Second Life.

Analysis of students' responses to the questions revealed the following common themes regarding their impressions of the Abundant Life environment:

- Value of the environment for fostering community
- Considerations for Second Life novices
- Factors in developing content/activities

Fostering community. In their comments, students noted the importance of community and of how the Abundant Life virtual environment offers an extended community from the face-to-face experience. One student noted how having designated meeting times and a designated activity leader facilitated both participation in the SL aspect of the activity as well as opportunities for community and for focusing on Abundant Life principles.

Supporting Second Life novices. One student had limited experience in SL and another student had not used SL prior to this project. Both students commented on how being new to SL impacted their initial experiences in the grove and also offered suggestions for easing the transition for new users. For example, one student suggested new users would benefit from an introduction to SL during the face-to-face training as well as access to an instruction sheet to guide them through initial use. (Refer to Attachment A, "How to Get Started in Second Life" for a draft of an instruction sheet). Also to increase usability, it was suggested that activity handouts would be made accessible in SL, perhaps using note cards. Similarly, another student suggested other ways to integrate Second Life in the face-to-face workshop.

Developing content/activities. Based upon their experiences in the environment, students concluded that some exercises from the face-to-face training are better suited for a virtual environment and it is important to consider ways to modify such activities. Another student offered suggestions for determining content for the Abundant Life virtual environment. Further, while students had commented on the value of having designated meeting times, they also pointed to the importance of having resources and experiences accessible for individual exploration. A summary of data obtained from the students' responses to each research question is in Attachment B.

Phase 2: Recommendations

Based upon the project outcomes of Phase 1, the following recommendations are offered for Phase 2:

- 1. Continue development and expansion of the exercises and scenarios available in the Abundant Life virtual environment.** The work of Catholic Community Connection to date has shown that education followed by a structured support system and communication network leads to improved wellness and quality of life. Successful sustainability of the Abundant Life concepts requires that participants have frequent opportunities to practice the Abundant Life exercises and to interact with the growing Abundant Life community of individuals who have also participated in face-to-face education seminars. For many individuals, the logistics of practicing the exercises on their own and/or continuing to attend face-to-face support sessions may not be feasible. In such cases, a virtual environment provides an accessible and useful way of providing the support system and community that is critical to an individual's journey to well-being and a fuller, more meaningful life. The outcomes obtained from Phase 1 of this project clearly document the potential of a virtual environment for offering Abundant Life support sessions and point to the need for continued work in Phase 2 to expand the virtual environment to offer additional exercises and resources. (Note: refer to Attachment C for considerations for continued site development based upon the pilot data).
- 2. Conduct formative assessments of the Abundant Life virtual environment.** In order to best serve participants' needs, continued ongoing assessments are necessary to inform future efforts. Such assessments include monitoring the site to gather data regarding visits, participation, and continued testing of various activities in-world. It would also be useful to poll attendees during the face-to-face sessions with regard to their experience with Second Life and their interest in learning to use a virtual environment as a support resource.
- 3. Seek additional funding sources for project expansion.** As a society, there is an explosion in the interest and use of virtual environments for education, research, training, and recreation. The effectiveness of such environments has become well documented across fields in both industry and education. The outcomes of Phase 1 clearly point to the potential of a virtual environment for supporting the Abundant Life mission and providing individuals with continued access and support that would not be possible otherwise. The initial development and pilot testing of the Abundant Life virtual environment conducted in Phase 1 of this project represents a cutting-edge innovation to approaching education for whole person care. The approach of using a virtual environment in this context has tremendous potential for scalability, extending the Abundant Life philosophy to new audiences and certainly merits continued funding.

The outcomes from this pilot investigation conducted in Phase 1 provide important next steps for informing the vision for Abundant Life and extending the Abundant Life community beyond traditional settings and mediums. The Research Center for Educational Technology is grateful for the opportunity to partner with the Catholic Community Connection on this project and looks forward to continued collaboration.

Attachment A

Instructions for Getting Started in Second Life

Attachment A

Instructions for Getting Started in Second Life

1. Go to the Second Life website at: <http://secondlife.com/>
2. Click “Join Now” which is at the top right of the Second Life (SL) home page. These accounts are free. There is no need to opt for the premium Second Life membership unless you wish to.
3. Choose a first name and then click on Find Last Names. There may be no last names available for the first name you selected, in that case pick another first name until you get a list of last names to choose from. Enter your password and then select a starting avatar from the portraits below the password box. There is no need to opt for the premium Second Life membership unless you wish to.
4. Provide an email address, your date of birth, select a security question and then complete the security check box.
5. An email will be sent to the address you provided and you must open that email and verify your account. In the meanwhile you will be directed to download and install the SL viewer. If you miss that step you can find the viewer at: <http://secondlife.com/support/downloads/>.
6. Open the viewer and log into SL. You will find yourself at a place called Orientation Island, which will explain how to use Second Life. Note that you will be deposited directly onto Orientation Island the first time that you log into Second life.
7. When you are ready to navigate SL on your own send an IM to StevieZ Zapedzki explaining who you are and you will receive a membership in the KSU Guest Group and a landmark that will get you to the Kent State islands. Also, don't forget to explore the other educational sites on the list that we provided during the presentation.

Attachment B

Pilot Data

Attachment B

Pilot Data

Data Collection Method. To implement the pilot investigation for Project Phase 1, RCET recruited Kent State University students to field test the virtual environment. Two of the students were enrolled in the graduate program for Counseling and Human Developmental Services. A third student graduated from KSU with a nursing degree in May 2010. The three students attended a two-day face-to-face Abundant Life workshop and then received training from Dr. Zapytowski in using the Second Life platform to navigate the Abundant Life grove. Dr. Zapytowski also provided training to representatives from Catholic Community Connection in using Second Life and then conducted a group training session on navigating the Abundant Life environment in Second Life for both the KSU and Catholic Community Connection participants in Kent State's AT&T Classroom. Following the group test run of the site, the KSU students were asked to continue to pilot test the environment through continued simulations of group meetings. Specifically, students were asked to explore the Abundant Life grove and then to meet at a designated time in the grove two times per week for two weeks. At those meetings, students piloted two activities in the virtual environment: the Abundant Life Activity and the Listening Activity. After their meetings, students wrote written reflections of their experiences addressing the following prompt:

- Please provide content recommendations and technical recommendations to improve the Abundant Life Activity and the Listening Activity in Second Life.

Analysis of students' reflections revealed the following common themes regarding their impressions of the Abundant Life environment:

- Value of the environment for fostering community
- Considerations for Second Life novices
- Factors in developing content/activities

Student comments relative to each theme are documented below:

Theme: Fostering community

"Overall, I find the grove environment in Second Life able to provide an on-going community to enhance the Abundant Life participants continuing experience of the objectives and mission. To create change in one's life, individuals need a community to support the changes through experiences. The grove offers an environment to facilitate growth and change individually and with community. The Gospels speak loudly to us about the need for community and thus communion. "

"Meeting with others at a designated time in the grove (Second Life) with the agenda to participate in the predetermined activities provided community support and held me accountable to continue the Abundant Life experience. A leader for the activity helped

decrease anxiety, provide support and engage in the experience. A leader also provides the structure to pace, breathe, and experience LIFE.”

Theme: Supporting Second Life novices

“Challenges are to help participants who are new to the technology and Second Life virtual world decrease concerns or anxieties through providing experiences woven throughout the Abundant Life workshop by using virtual world snap shots to allow for a visual experience, create opportunities to create a login, password and an avatar with the grove coordinates as “home” in Second Life. This provides a pathway that is familiar to “do it again.” In addition, building in the opportunity to “do it again” through group/community meeting times for specific exercises would seem crucial to the success of a welcoming on line virtual world Abundant Life community.”

Theme: Developing content/activities

“Choosing Abundant Life exercises that are supported by the virtual environment are essential to decrease distraction of participants and increase comfort level...The exercise on progressive relaxation (handout 3.4) might be better suited to enhance the Abundant Life vision through Second Life.”

“In my experience workshop participants want more in-depth information/experience during follow-up/aftercare meetings. I would suggest focusing on one topic, such as active listening, for a follow-up meeting and then building enough content around that topic to cover the length of time the session is to last. If the workshop was broken down into 12 key concepts and each of these was covered in more depth during a monthly follow-up session then a year-long follow-up process is developed. Participants could enter the after-care program at any point (after they have taken the workshop) and over the next year they would have an opportunity to attend each session.”

“In addition to group exercise times, opportunities for individuals to go to the grove when they need support of breathing, relaxing and/or re-focusing would seem instrumental to support the change as individual seek to care for the body, mind and spirit of themselves (fill their cup) as well as care for the body, mind and spirit of others.”

A summary of students’ responses specific to the questions are discussed below relative to each of the two targeted activities.

Abundant Life Activity

Content Recommendations

While students positively rated the content of Abundant Life (AL) activity in Second Life (SL), it appeared that new SL users initially found it difficult to focus on AL content while learning to navigate in Second Life. One of the new SL users shared:

“At first, I was more focused on what my avatar was doing in Second Life and dealing with the new technology. Could I get my Avatar to sit down? Should I relax under the tree? How did I get lost in the tree? And how do I get out of the tree and back to the grove? What

should my avatar be doing to indicate I was participating in the LIFE activity? Was I using the head set correctly? How do I get comfortable in my physical body as I sit in front of the computer? In short, multitasking and being comfortable with the new environment and participate in the activity consumed my energies. I felt inadequate as I attempted to massage my ears with a headset on. With additional Second Life experience my comfort increased in the Second Life environment resulting in a decrease in anxiety with a new experience and new technology.”

As students’ comfort level with SL grew, they were more able to focus on the AL activity and offered some recommendations regarding activity content to extend and enrich the activity while working toward the targeted outcomes. The more experienced SL student suggested,

“Adding content to the exercise will provide a way to move the exercise from something that is completed in a few minutes to a deeper, more rounded session...I would add content around each of the activity sections. For "L" adding content around yoga/breath-work would enhance this portion. For "I" I would talk about the benefits of acupressure/reflexology. "F" could have content around bodywork/energetic healing concepts. "E" might have content around mindfulness/meditation... Participants might be encouraged to choose one "letter" to explore deeper and incorporate into their life until the next session... If content is added to the session then additional materials could be presented in world to enhance the topic. An example would be: when talking about reflexology/acupressure a chart of the points on the ear/feet/hands could be shown.”

Finally, one student reported having difficulty with the AL activity when assuming the role of facilitator/leader but also offered suggestions for revising the activity while still meeting targeted outcomes:

“As an exercise facilitator I found it difficult to judge the amount of time needed for the participants to have a pleasant and relaxing experience. For me to lead this activity in Second Life, I would need to judge time needed for the experience through using the real time experiences to judge participant needs during the exercise...I imagine this exercise occurring in the following 2 ways through the Second Life environment. First, I envision the importance of community experience in Second Life with this exercise. Meeting a group with a leader [designated facilitator] who could be engaged and questions could be asked would aid in increasing comfort level of participants. Asking questions about headsets and physical comfort in front of the computer could provide important feedback to aid future participants to increase comfort and enhance the learning experience for participants. Working to have the words in the exercise reflect the experience complete with technology will evolve as participants give feedback that will be able to be utilized in future Second Life experiences.”

Technical Recommendations

Students also positively rated the Abundant Life activity in SL, many of the technical issues seemed somewhat dependent upon participant’s level of expertise with Second Life. As reported previously, the two students who were new to SL reported awkwardness with initial use but also

shared that their comfort level increased as they spent more time in the grove. Other issues surrounding the Abundant Life activity seemed related to difficulty managing technology while trying to participate in the movements associated with the activity:

“I think the activity itself should be altered slightly, as it is hard to rub ones ears when wearing a headset. Perhaps hands could be rubbed instead? Spontaneous movement is also slightly limited when you have a headset attached, so I think movements such as rolling the neck around, wiggling fingers and toes, and rolling ankles around could be suggested for this part of the activity.”

Students also offered ways that the technology can be modified to facilitate the exercise:

“I think it would be good to have either something you can click on or perhaps a TV screen that has an audio/avatar video recording of the activity so that Toni does not have to be present in order for someone to access it. This also cuts down on microphone issues, which the students encountered during this activity. If it was on a TV screen in Second Life, it would be neat to show Toni’s avatar going through the motions of taking a gathering breath, etc., all while the audio recording of the activity plays so that one can follow along better.”

Listening Activity

Content Recommendations

While students found tremendous value in the goals of the Listening Activity, they uniformly reported having difficulties conducting the activity in SL but also offered some suggestions for modification:

“This exercise really does not work well in the Second Life format. The format for the exercise requires paying attention to body language/tonality. These are difficult to impossible to do in a virtual environment. The handout material around active listening is useful and a good reminder of how to listen effectively. I changed this exercise and used a modified version of what is called a Couples Dialogue developed by Harville Hendrix. This type of dialogue is much more interactive as the receiver is required to actively paraphrase what they have heard the sender saying. A couple's dialogue is a back and forth process that engages both sender and receiver in the experience. During our session I gave a brief introductions to this dialogue. The introduction pulled from the handout materials for active listening and then had the participants practice the dialogue... If the Couple's Dialogue was being used as an exercise I would present the instructions on a prim so that all participants would be able to read it over while it is being discussed.”

Technical Recommendations

Overall, concerns surrounding the Listening Activity seemed related to the difficulty in trying to implement the movements for the exercise while trying to manage the technology. Such difficulty seemed to impact the quality of the experience:

“This listening exercise is great in person, but not so much online. The talker does not benefit and it is also hard for the listener as there are too many distractions. Even looking at the avatars as they sit there distracts one from what the speaker is saying. It is hard because one cannot pick up on nonverbal feedback and cannot make eye contact, which are vital to an exercise such as this. The other students and myself practiced a different listening exercise called Couples’ Dialogue... I felt that the Couples’ Dialogue would be a much better exercise for the online medium that enables both parties to be more involved. With this exercise, communication and listening skills are enhanced for both parties, and can easily be executed in Second life. Scenarios could be provided to those online so that they can role-play and effectively carry out the activity. Perhaps even an audio example of Couples’ Dialogue could be provided so that those who come to Second Life and may be fuzzy on what Couples’ Dialogue is have an example they can follow when they practice the activity themselves. If indeed Couples’ Dialogue is adopted, it would also be good to practice it at the Abundant Life workshop if time permits.”

Similarly, another student reported similar difficulty in trying to participate in the commented Listening Activity in a virtual environment vs. face-to-face:

“As I participated in this exercise, I realized how much of my active listening involved non-verbal communication cues. The absence of the non-verbal cues affected my listening. I found myself preoccupied and distracted as I experienced the loss of visual cues as I sought to Connect through Listening. While I wanted to ask questions for clarification, which is similar to what I experienced during the real time activity—I found that I was concerned about miscommunications due to lack of verbal cues. I never experienced a comfort level with this particular exercise in the Second Life grove...As a listener, I became aware that much of my observations were based on the verbal and non-verbal cues given by the talker. An emphasis on inflection and tone with an explanation or recognition of the lack of visual or non-verbal cues might be helpful. As a talker, I found the absence of non-verbal communication created a void of non-verbal encouragement to continue talking. Instead of engaging in the exercise, I felt as if I were delivering a monologue. The exercises directions encourage the talker to share observations with the listener, but this is not available through this medium...I wonder if an avatar can be linked to a specific topic and thus be the talker to provide a visual for the exercise.”

Attachment C
Considerations for Continued Site Development

Attachment C

Considerations for Continued Site Development

Based upon the students' feedback regarding their experiences with the Abundant Life activities in Second Life, the following recommendations are offered for the exercises targeted in this pilot as well as the overall virtual environment.

Provide training and support to new SL users

Because new SL users initially found it difficult to focus on AL content while learning to navigate in Second Life, it is important to provide sufficient training and support at the onset so that SL novices reach a comfort level that allows them to focus on AL content. Suggested supports included:

- Overview of SL at the face-to-face AL workshops
- Use of SL in the face-to-face AL workshops
- Inclusion of an instruction sheet in the face-to-face AL workshop folders to guide participants through initial SL use
- Orientation in SL

The Second Life application can be included on the "Resources" sheet included in each participant's packet. It can also be included on the "Resources" Power Point slide. An additional Power Point slide can be added to describe Second Life and provide information about training sessions that will be available for those interested in learning to use Second Life as a support resource. An instruction sheet such as Attachment A, "Getting Started in Second Life" can be given to each participant who attends the training session. Training sessions would include hands on instruction of the steps in Attachment A.

Offer scheduled, facilitated support sessions with access to resources that are available 24/7.

Students noted the importance of having designated meeting times with designated activity leaders for keeping participants connected to the Abundant Life approach and community. Successful sustainability requires that participants facilitate meetings, designate meeting times, and designate a facilitator (activity leader) for individual or group follow-up sessions in world and in Second Life. Students also noted that it is equally important for individuals to have opportunities to revisit workshop materials and explore specific concepts at their own pace through the provision of such resources in the SL space. Designated meeting times and agenda are recommended with a mixed structure of individual and group exercises, along with access to materials and resources for individual exploration.

Focus on exercises that emphasize the key concepts of the Abundant Life model and that also make the best use of the unique features of a virtual environment.

When designing new scenarios for the site, it is important to maintain a focus on the five key concepts of the Abundant Life model:

- Wellness through human dignity and wholeness
- Dimensions of wellness: physical, psychosocial, and spiritual
- Healthy communication and relationships
- Understanding and responding to spiritual pain
- Wellness practices

The exercises included in the *Handout Booklet for Wellness Education* further these key concepts with more in-depth information/experience during the follow-up sessions in world and in Second Life. Sessions are intentionally freestanding to provide maximum benefit at the rate and availability of the participants. Consecutive sessions are impractical for those who cannot participate in follow-up sessions in sequence. After participating in the two-day education program, participants are able to complete the activities at their own pace in world. With sufficient training, participants could also complete the activities at their own pace in the Second Life environment. Additionally, it is also important to note that during the pilot, the students concluded that some exercises from the face-to-face training are better suited for a virtual environment. Consequently, when selecting exercises for the grove it is important to consider ways that such activities can be modified to utilize avatars, videos, note cards etc. to create a meaningful experience for participants. For example, additional content from the curriculum could be included on a note card or displayed on a billboard, which participants would access in the grove.

Consider the technology when creating routines and movements within an activity. Again, because some exercises from the face-to-face training are better suited than others for a virtual environment, it is important to consider when the movements used for an exercise in face-to-face training might interfere with technology use (e.g., rubbing ear lobes). In such instances, alternative movements in Abundant Life exercises in-world can be adapted for practice in Second Life, i.e., In the Abundant Life Activity, rubbing the hands, etc. can replace rubbing the ears.

Modify the content of the Abundant Life activity to offer opportunities for individual topic exploration. It was suggested that additional content would offer an opportunity to extend the exercise from one that is “completed in a few minutes to a deeper, more rounded session.” It is important to note that the Abundant Life Activity is intentionally brief, providing participants an opportunity to become comfortable with basic breathing and relaxation techniques in world. Students’ challenges confirm that initially, a basic exercise is necessary as an opportunity for participants to experiment and become comfortable with basic breathing and relaxation techniques in Second Life. More in-depth breathing and relaxation exercises, taught throughout the education program, can be added in the Second Life environment in the next phase of this initiative. Further, individuals may adapt the time for each exercise when practicing it alone. A designated group facilitator communicates with participants, adapts the time to the needs of the group, and supports participants through a group discussion in keeping with this method of successful adult learning.

Modify the Listening Activity so that participants are more cognizant of the underlying purpose and model. Students found the format for the Listening Activity required attention to body language, non-verbal cues, tonality, etc. and that the activity was difficult to implement in a virtual environment. An alternative format such as the Couples Dialogue technique was suggested and tried by the students as an alternative for meeting the targeted outcomes of the exercise in a virtual environment. In considering the students’ comments, it may be that they did not fully understand the philosophical model underlying the Listening Activity. The Listening Activity is specifically designed to develop the listeners’ ability to intentionally listen in “the silence of their heart” to what the talker is saying without interruption or listener control.

Consequently, the first step to effective listening taught in this model is to stop talking. Further, the Listening Activity provides an opportunity to practice good listening skills, to be present and attentive to the talker, regardless of distractions. This requires the listener to discipline one's self to concentrate on the talker's words, voice inflections, pauses, and nonverbal movements, rather than their own response, despite distractions in world. The talker has the unique experience of uninterrupted communication. In Second Life, the Listening Activity also provides an opportunity to practice good listening skills, to be present and attentive to the talker, regardless of distractions. This requires the listener to discipline one's self to concentrate on the talker's words, voice inflections, and pauses, rather than their own response, despite distractions in Second Life. The talker in Second Life also has the unique experience of uninterrupted communication. This activity develops the listener's ability to hear what the talker is saying without one's own interruption or control. While the Couples Dialogue suggested by a student may be a valuable addition to the Abundant Life curriculum when a two-way dialogue is desired, the "Listening Activity" as designed is the initial step to good communication used in this model. Therefore, the use of a note card or accompanying video to clarify the model for participants would be useful for individuals who initially have difficulty with this activity in SL.