

Peter Sobota [00:00:01] And is it possible to be a social worker and to be cool? Hi, everybody. Welcome back to the In Social Work podcast. I'm Peter about. It's good as always to have you on. Yes I do have a cold but you know the show must go on today two hip social work educators and one semi instructional designer will dismantle the Luddite stereotype of social workers and talk about how they are imagining the possibilities in utilizing virtual reality, in supporting learning instruction and practice settings. We didn't have to go far for this one. Today, we'll hear from Steve Sturman, instructional designer and faculty members. We went back and spruik all who exist, both virtually and literally here at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Our guests will provide an overview of VR and describe how it can be utilized in effective and creative instruction and the practical ways in which VR can be used in social work practice. Who and Back Ph.D. is Clinical Associate professor and director of the DSW Program here at the School of Social Work. Mickey Sperling, Ph.D., is assistant professor, and Stephen Serman, JD is instructional designer in our school. And by the way, he's also the chair of the In Social Work Podcast Committee. It's great to be with my colleagues from the UB's School of Social Work and to have the opportunity to talk with three people who are developing applications of virtual reality, studying it, evaluating it along the way, experiencing it, and applying it to their work. So welcome to in social Work Mickey Louanne and Steve.

Speaker 2 [00:02:00] Well, thanks for having us.

Speaker 1 [00:02:01] All right, so that was a little round at the end. So in the beginning, folks, if you wouldn't mind just saying your name may be the first time so our listeners can get used to your voices, but they've. As a long term instructional designer and a tech guru. I'm not shocked that you're working in this area. I see your headset and goggles right next to your lightsaber and your Star Wars lunchbox in your office all the time. So I'm not going to ask you because this is your wheelhouse. But I am curious because, you know, Louanne and Mickey are social workers and some of us are Luddites. So how does the two of you, if you're willing, before we get going, how does the two of you find your way to virtual reality?

Steven Sturman [00:02:53] Right. Land, actually. Do you want to feel this? Because really, it was you that came to me as you were working on the DSW program.

Speaker 2 [00:03:03] Sure. I'm happy to talk a little bit about this. So we launched our DSW program in fall of 2019, and prior to our launch of it, we went through a fairly rigorous state approval in order for us to offer the doctorate in social work and social welfare. Reviewer's comments as they came back to us there, a strong suggestion that we consider the use of VR within our DSW program. And honestly, we thought that was brilliant because social workers are the number one providers of mental health services. And there have been several meta analysis that have been done over the years that look at reductions in stress, anxiety, depression, using VR. So this is really how we came to incorporate the idea of VR into our DSW program. Steve, Given his wealth of knowledge in technology, as well as being an instructor designer, it seemed like a really nice fit for us to explore this a little bit further and really more fully consider how we could use or apply VR in the DSW program.

Steven Sturman [00:04:15] Yeah. Yeah. So Louanne came to me at that time, and, you know, this was really the first time I had started thinking about virtual reality in the program. Oh, yeah. So Louanne and I got some technology, and we went to a couple of

conferences, and really, we just started playing with the technology, exploring what was out there and started to think about how would this really apply in the field of social work.

Speaker 1 [00:04:40] So. None of you were using it before this story you just told.

Speaker 2 [00:04:48] Right. You're absolutely correct.

Speaker 1 [00:04:49] No necessity. Interesting. Sounds familiar, actually. A lot of us a lot of us overcame our aversion to online teaching because you know that little pandemic.

Speaker 2 [00:05:02] Go ahead. Louanne. My first real experience with it was, was Steve. When we each had our own respective headsets and we went into our room and I remember we were playing checkers. I was in my office at that time about 60 miles from campus, and it was on campus and it literally felt that we were in that same environment together. And again, that was me being a very new user of it. So yeah, pretty cool. And we had that immersive experience for the first time.

Louanne Bakk [00:05:30] Yeah, Thanks. And how about you, Mickey?

Mickey Sperlich [00:05:33] Oh, I have to say that. I would put myself in the light. I can go, Peter. You know, my. My most famous. Marker for that is the fact that I made it all the way through my first graduate degree without typing. I literally wrote everything out longhand and to rely on my mother and my husband and other people to type for me. Yeah. No, I'm not kidding.

Louanne Bakk [00:06:04] I thought you're going to tell a story about Dragon, naturally speaking. But you wrote it. Oh, wow.

Mickey Sperlich [00:06:09] Okay. Yeah. Yeah. So. So, you know, I really only learned to type and to use a computer. When I first first started working on a book project years ago. And it was just it was out of control. I had to I had to learn to use the computer, so. So it's been a real superstitious learning curve for me, I have to say. And you know, and I can share with my students, like, I feel like if I can learn to be in VR, like anyone can, you know? Yeah. But having said that, I. Prior to, you know, these projects here at the school. My kids are into VR right.

Louanne Bakk [00:06:52] Now, and that's how it always happens here.

Mickey Sperlich [00:06:54] My adult children and so. So they've given me some opportunity to go in there. And of course, the favorite thing I liked was this program where you can like create your environment and paint things and it's all like psychedelic. And, you know, I thought that was super fun. Know? But I would say I had until we started this collaboration, I had a more limited. Orientation to VR that much included whatever my kids showed me that they thought I might be interested in. Right.

Louanne Bakk [00:07:25] Well. Well, props to you for being open to it, then. And, Steve, can we note, I actually think Mickey might be worse than me in terms of kids. It's just nice to know that there's somebody out there who says.

Mickey Sperlich [00:07:38] And the kicker, Peter, is I wrote everything out longhand, and my handwriting is terrible.

Louanne Bakk [00:07:44] But nice. I like this. Okay. Well, thank you for first. Starting off with that, I'm curious because we do it seems like a lot of us put this off until we almost have no choice. And then, you know, we get on board and wonder why we waited so long. So thanks. I'm going to make the assumption that a fair number of folks who end up listening to this episode are people who are curious and who are kind of like me, who really don't know a lot about it. So if you would just bear with me for a second. I want to start really simple and just so we have a foundation to have the rest of the conversation. Steve, would you be willing to talk a little bit about. Let's do one, two, one. What is it? What is it? What is virtual reality?

Steven Sturman [00:08:34] Right. Right. So what we have been focusing on is really called immersive virtual reality AR, Immersive VR, and for that what we use is called the Oculus or Meta Quest. It's one of those headsets you put on your head and then you have two controllers. And with those controllers and the headset, you can go into a computer generated environment and experience that environment. So usually what you're interacting with is either someone who's gone out into the real world and done an actual 360 degree video recording of that real world. So you might see something like this if you visit one of the virtual tours of museums or something like that. But in the head that it's more immersive. So you can actually feel like you're walking around that museum and you can actually walk up to a piece of art and interact with that art.

Louanne Bakk [00:09:41] Yeah, I was surprised when you said immersive. And I guess now that you're talking, I think I get it a little bit. Would that immersive VR be contrasted with. Like a two dimensional computer screen where you don't get the 3-D effect or the sensations associated with moving around.

Steven Sturman [00:10:00] Right. Right. So it's much more the environments around you. And it's hard to explain. But as Ann was saying, you actually feel like you're really in that space for some reason. It kind of tricks the brain to make you feel like you're actually in that real world environment. So doing these 360 degree tours is really interesting. The other way that they're using immersive VR is that they're actually creating computer generated environments that you can go into. A good example of this is. From informed agency that Mickey will talk about a little bit later on. But basically it's creating a virtual space that you can go into and experience what's in that virtual space.

Louanne Bakk [00:10:52] How? Oh, sorry, go ahead. How similar or different is what you're describing from the I'm going to show my naivete here that my is it my space thing where you have an avatar and walk around? Is that even still going?

Steven Sturman [00:11:11] There are worlds like that in VR. But rather than just being a flat two dimensional space. This is more three dimensional and you can interact with things more realistically. So you could walk through the environment, pick up an object, turn it around, look at it. They're using this a lot in the health related professions, like medical schools are allowing their students to go in and see a 3D representation of the heart and see what the heart looks like. And one of the cool things is, you know, you could do this with the cadaver and have them actually look at the heart. But in virtual reality, because it's all computer generated, you can actually pick up that heart and see it as it's functioning in the real world as if it was still alive and working like it should be, which you can't do with a cadaver. And, you know, they're using it and a lot of other health related professions, too, and social work.

Louanne Bakk [00:12:18] Some of them, Yeah. This is I'm sorry, Steve. This is what I wanted. And this is if I could. So to me, I get it. Like physicians, nurses, dentists. That seems the clean application. This is what I'm really curious about. How do social workers. So it's us, You know, we're the relationship or the. That's the mechanism. So I think you were going there anyway, so.

Mickey Sperlich [00:12:42] Great. Yeah. Yeah.

Steven Sturman [00:12:43] So from our perspective, what we're trying to do for our students is give them really experiences in situations that we wouldn't normally be able to give them in the classroom. So some of the more interesting stuff that social work is doing is like virtual home visits. It would be impossible for you to take a class of 30 students and parade them through someone's house and ask them what to look for the strengths and the weaknesses in that house or identify any. Things that might need to be remedied or fix because they might be dangerous. But in the virtual world, you can do that and you can have your instructor in that space with you, viewing you to what you should be looking at the types of environment or issues that you might want to address in an interaction. So really the VR is giving us an ability to give our students an experience that they wouldn't normally be able to have in the regular classroom. And we're using this in an online program. So it really if you tried to do something experiential like that with an online program, it would be even much more difficult because your students are all across the country and the world, But doing it through VR, we can give them that consistent experience and give them the training and the background they need before they actually get out into the field and are working with real people, real clients in having real world effect. So it's really a safe way for them to practice in the environment, make mistakes without really impacting real people.

Mickey Sperlich [00:14:31] I just want to say, I mean. I love what Steve just said. And I and it also just I think we have to underline that a lot of people are using virtual reality, right? Like millions and millions of people are using virtual reality. Right. And and people are having relationships in virtual reality. And I think it's important since we are I think the relationship people. Right. For us to show up in those facets to you know other disciplines are making their mark in VR are making contributions are doing some of the stuff that Steve was talking about. And I think it's important for social workers to show up and do those kinds of things to, you know.

Louanne Bakk [00:15:15] Absolutely.

Mickey Sperlich [00:15:16] That that's we're going to reach some people that way. It's I mean, it's not just showing up, but understanding what the potential is. And I think of our DSW program. Yeah. We're not using it so much to teach some of the important skills we learn in our master's program. But what we're trying to do more importantly, I think, is encourage our students to think about because all of our DSW students are advanced practitioners that can actually bring this into the practice environment. Many of them are working in mental health summer schools. They're in a wide variety of settings. And what we're actually challenging them to do after they experience this form of technology is think about can you adapt an intervention using less? Can you think of a new intervention that might be more VR related? So this is really how I see that the fit for VR within the program predominantly as more thinking about how might I apply this to practice either while I'm a

student or later on when I'm a practitioner. Because as Miki said, lots of people are using this the like. Think about how we can benefit the profession through its use.

Louanne Bakk [00:16:24] Well, it's a pretty good bang for your buck, actually, because the students who are using it as part of their educational experience, either you're double dipping because they're going to take that in to the real world and apply it in their own work. Yeah. Thanks. I'll ask a naive question. That's going to be my job here. When you. Steve, I think it was you, Steve, you mentioned that, you know, you couldn't take 30 people in a in a course to one place. But here is my very simple, maybe perhaps kind of naive question. When you're using virtual reality and taking somebody to a room. Is a person walking around by themselves? Or are 30 people experiencing the same room at the same time?

Steven Sturman [00:17:16] Yeah, that's a great question. It all depends upon what type of environment you're getting them into and it really how that environment is structured. The simulation that we built is just that person going in on their own and interacting and exploring on their own, kind of have a narrator that helps them work through the environment. But there are also social environments where you can get online. You can go into one of these virtual worlds where you can explore that virtual world with other people. You can meet up with other people. They're having concerts in these virtual worlds. Go in there. You can do virtual karaoke, can do dance clubs, you can get together, play games. So it all depends on, you know, what you're interested in and what you're hoping to do. In our program, we also have a virtual classroom that we've been experimenting with and seeing what works well in VR as compared to Zoom and what things are better in Zoom. So we're also looking at that too. So it all depends upon the the space that you're going into and really what you are looking at VR could do for you.

Louanne Bakk [00:18:36] Got it. I think.

Mickey Sperlich [00:18:38] I did. I wanted to say, you know, so this has been around for a while where people are going in and creating their own worlds and interacting in these worlds. They have jobs and families and whatnot going on in their right. I think in the instructional realm, that's not so much what we're focusing on, right? We're focusing on how can we use this for instruction and how can we use it for fostering connectivity, especially in online programs? Yeah.

Louanne Bakk [00:19:11] So I think.

Mickey Sperlich [00:19:12] When we talked.

Louanne Bakk [00:19:13] About eventually getting to in our discussion today was mainly two things How can this be used in instruction and teaching? And then also how can it be used in. We were and were seeing earlier than the real world of practice. So. Maybe this would be a good time to talk a little bit about how. You are using. We are. To facilitate teaching. And in your classes and you alluded to this earlier in the DSW program, but would you be willing to talk a little bit about the.

Mickey Sperlich [00:19:57] Okay. Yeah, I'll take that. Peter. So I teach both in the DSW program. I teach the Trauma and human rights course. And then I also teach that course the different version of it, obviously, for our master's students. And so as in those courses and in our programs sort of writ large, you know, we're really big about talking about self

care, right? As a way to sort of attend to trauma informed needs, not only of the clients that we serve, but for ourselves. Right. And the idea that. We have a program that addresses trauma and adversity and a lot of tough things, and we want our clinicians that we're helping to. Educate. Develop those capacities within themselves. So in my in those trauma courses, I always have something really focusing on self-care, on a sort of ongoing basis straight, whether it be a discussion word or journaling or some kind of activities or there's something that's always focused on self care. So, so that's one way in which I use VR and have used it in the DSW courses. I have students go in and just look across the wide variety of options that are actually are in VR for self-care, whether it be a mindfulness meditation type app or. Some kind of vacation traveling app or some kind of, you know, there's apps where you can go in and like pet an animal or you can do art or you can, you know, there's all kinds of different things that you can do in VR. So. So another way we've been using VR with the DSW program is, is through creating an app ourselves, which is another amazing adventure for this. Louanne was able to get some funding for us. As part of the DSW start up to really dedicate towards technology projects. And so we came up with this idea of how can we. Create an environment where students can go into a sort of prototypical mental health agency setting and look at the physical aspects of the the clinic and assess varying levels of. Being trauma informed.

Yeah. So and you know, Peter, because you and I both teach and teach this course to the MSW students, we're always asking them to assess the trauma informed environments in them, in their placements and stuff like that. So we wanted to say, okay, for DSW students who are online all over the place. How can we have them do a little assessment in there? So we actually were able to work with a developer. We came up with all of the essential components and they sort of made it so and did the programming. And Steve was really a point person for that. The go between between our crazy ideas and actually being made into. Virtual reality components. So it's pretty cool. Students can go into this environment. They have, like Steve was saying that. They got their headset on, but they've got their hand controls and they can point at different objects in the environment and they get a little voiceover instruction. They have a little tablet. They can almost feel like they're doing a little inspection and different things. We can preset it to different levels of trauma informed in this. Oh man. So they can react to that. There's a place for them to add text and information, and we can see all of that data later. And for them to just experience. A clinic and to look at it in a different way. So that that's been a major project we've been looking at and we. We've done beta testing. And the beta testing was really important because it also helped us identify some of the barriers. We were able to. Adjust some of the frame speed to deal with some of the motion sickness that students were having in there. They gave a lot of feedback for things that were unclear that we needed to change. And then we're continuing to research it because we want to look at how does this stack up against a 2D version of doing something like this or, you know, just written materials or complementary is is a replace it? Is it, you know, how acceptable it is? Is it that sort of thing. So actively going after funding to keep on researching that. But it's been a really cool project and. Not something I saw coming many years ago. I could. Yeah.

Louanne Bakk [00:25:04] And I would imagine students would dig that a heck of a lot more than writing another paper. Right. Yeah. So it makes sense to me.

Mickey Sperlich [00:25:14] I've also gone into we have a couple of classrooms that we've used, so our class has actually met in VR and you can actually, even if you want to do a PowerPoint in virtual reality, which I don't know, you know, it's you can't escape PowerPoint, apparently. I was.

Louanne Bakk [00:25:30] Going to say, even in virtual.

Mickey Sperlich [00:25:32] Reality environment and the planet. Right. But but you can move around. You can you know, you can have your Kumbaya moment with your students or you're all standing around in a circle and and get a lot of really great laughs. And you know, how people have designed their avatars and and how they're coming together, so. So those are two just, you know, sort of regular ways that I've been using VR in the DSW program. It's not a requirement for our master's students to purchase the headsets. So we haven't haven't done so much of that with the MSW students, but. But with the DSW students, you know, they've it's been honestly fun. You know.

Louanne Bakk [00:26:20] She says that with surprise.

Mickey Sperlich [00:26:22] You know, it's really fun, you know, to go from being a Luddite who couldn't type to like interacting with students in a virtual reality classroom is pretty amazing. And and then the and the other thing I can share about that is that. And just how important some of those experiences have actually been for some of our students. I got permission from one of our GSW students to share a little story with you.

Louanne Bakk [00:26:50] Good. Okay. Yeah, go right ahead.

Mickey Sperlich [00:26:52] So, you know, there's various apps that you can do, you know, visiting different places in the world, like National Geographic has an app. There's another app called Wander that you can just go and sort of immerse yourself in in an actual environment. So that's sort of that using that 360 technology Steve was talking about where they've just done all of these. For photographic recordings and created these environments that are really based on reality, Right? And so. You know, I have students go in the DSW class, go in and do one of these apps, and then I have them go and just kind of report. Over a video discussion board that I have about their experience in it, and not only their own experience in it, but whether or not it would be something that they would recommend for their clients down the road. So they're sort of going in on a weekly basis and evaluating what works, what doesn't work. And I'm asking them to keep in mind how might this work for clients? Would it be something useful? Can you think of particular clients, that sort of thing? Well, I had one student who was in the National Geographic App. And. She was very curious about Machu Picchu. Right. The same in South America. Right. And the story she told was really incredible. So. Apparently her and. Her mother's sister. Had gone to Peru. As an exchange student and had lived there and very beloved sister and had an incredible time. And on her journey home, her plane went down and she lost her life. And so the Machu Picchu was, in fact, the last place that she had ever been. And so the whole family kind of had a high level of curiosity about this and a lot of feelings about Machu Picchu and whatnot. So she happened to have her mother over one day and she had just gone into Machu Picchu and she was describing this experience to her mother. And asked her mother if she wanted to try it. And so she went in there and got to really see what her sister saw before she passed away. And. And it was just this incredible moment between my student and her mother, very cathartic, which she was so happy to see that she had had this amazing curiosity about it for many years. And it really was this kind of bonding moment for them to experience that together and to. Put it a little bit more in context. It was just a really incredible, poignant story. One, you know, at the time, just sitting here down here in my basement watching these videos from these students posting these incredible things. They're so touching and I'm just sitting there crying at my students

stories. But. I just thought it was so touching and and something I hadn't thought about in terms of the value of an app like that to facilitate a little bit of healing.

Louanne Bakk [00:30:20] Yeah. What are just. Well, first of all, it's a wonderful story and just a I mean, what a. I connective bridge to that experience and that person that that's a that's a good story.

Mickey Sperlich [00:30:34] It's a great story and it also speaks to you know her. Our students mother was at an age where she was not going to ever travel there herself. So actually going to Machu Picchu was not an option. Right. But she could see it nonetheless. All right.

Louanne Bakk [00:30:54] Wow. How do we top that now? I don't know. I don't know what we do from here on in. But, you know, I hate to get to the mundane, but I'm going to do it because I'll bet that other people have a similar question. And I'll just you know, whoever wants to take this one, go right ahead. But. And this again, I'm going to own this and I'm a neophyte. How would conducting a class session if that happens in VR? Be different from a Zoom meeting.

Mickey Sperlich [00:31:32] Well, we've actually been trying to look at that. So done a little study that we're still working on pulling the results together. Okay. Looking at doing the exact same thing and to the degree possible in Zoom for a class session. Very similar protocol and then doing the same protocol in VR. So we have a couple of years worth of data that we're really looking at and seeing how how acceptable it was. What did they learn, what their impressions of it, Right? Yeah. And so I think that's a good question, actually. The thing that I think that VR provides that Zoom does is. Is that sense of having someone right next to, you know, like.

Louanne Bakk [00:32:23] That's really why I asked. I was I wasn't sure if you get that.

Mickey Sperlich [00:32:27] You know, we're on Zoom right now. We're having kind of a 2D experience with each other. I'm glad that we can do this. I'm living my life over it and it's great. And there's something missing, right? We don't have that proximity. Yeah. And so that's what we really want to look at. Like, does that in fact, enhance students experience of. That sense of feeling. Presents and feeling like you really are with one another. Mm hmm. I think that's what it can contribute.

Louanne Bakk [00:33:02] You know, I didn't know that you were actually doing that work. I was just really And I guess that the sense of having somebody next to you would enhance the experience. I probably would for me. Yeah, that's something I missed during the months we spent in the pandemic is that we kind of did our job. But all of those like accidental meetings that you have in the hallway or, you know, the things that happen in unplanned and spontaneous ways that I mean, you can't yet replicate that, but it sounds like we're moving a little bit closer to that. And and I think we've probably all had our full zoom at this point. Yeah.

Steven Sturman [00:33:45] I just like to jump in, too. Um, you know, we're very we're very excited about the possibilities. But I also think that there's some drawbacks and some limitations with VR. Our initial studies with the classroom. We have found that the zoom is better for some things. If all you're going to do is present the PowerPoint in lecture. Zoom's definitely much easier than using the VR headset. And there's also limitations in terms of

the amount of time. The headsets are kind of bulky and heavy, so you can't really spend more than 50, maybe an hour in them before you start feeling the strain.

Louanne Bakk [00:34:30] Mm hmm.

Steven Sturman [00:34:31] And then there are also other drawbacks. Before jumping into this with both feet. Lujan and I met with our Office of Accessibility Services over here. You. B Because we were really concerned that we may have students that aren't able to use VR. It's obviously a very visual medium, so we might have students with visual impairments that can use it. People without fine motor skills would have trouble navigating with the handheld. That and we were really concerned that this might be a barrier for some of our students. So as we went into the program, we really thought about that and wanted to be purposeful about making sure that any activities we were having the students do. We had other activities that wouldn't require the VR, but would give them the same types of experiences and the same learning opportunities so that they wouldn't feel excluded. And also things like the virtual classroom. When we were looking at the options with that, we wanted to make sure that. A VR classroom that we chose was also accessible through a regular computer so that someone that couldn't wear the headset would still be able to join the class or participate with their other students. They might not feel as fully immersed, but they would at least be able to get the content to interact with each other and participate just like any of the other students would. And then one last thing is motion sickness is kind of a concern with me.

Louanne Bakk [00:36:18] I was going to ask about that.

Steven Sturman [00:36:20] Yeah. Yeah. So a lot of people, me included, it's been really tough for me. I find that I can only get in there for maybe 30 or 45 minutes and then I might start feeling a little headache or a little motion sick, depending upon the type of environment. That I go to like my kids. They love this because. I've been able to show them the International Space Station. You can go into the International Space Station, float around and ride rollercoasters, do all that type of stuff. But for me, I get motion sick very easily, like like riding in a car or stuff like that. So those apps disagree with me and I can only spend like two or 3 minutes before I start feeling it. So that's a big concern that I think still needs to be worked out with the technology.

Louanne Bakk [00:37:13] But that caveat sounds like it's person to person. Yeah, that individual that some people tolerate it quite well and some don't.

Steven Sturman [00:37:23] Yes. Just like with regular motion sickness, driving a car, taking a train or a plane. Some people will experience it, some won't. You can do things like take Dramamine or wear those little bracelets, little pressure point bracelets, and they say that helps with the VR motion sickness, too. Yeah. So I think it's you know, it's a new technology. So we're still working around the edges and figuring out what the barriers are and how we need the technology to advance so that everyone can use it. Maybe Lou-Ann could talk a little bit more about this, but that's kind of one of the goals of the DSW in general.

Louanne Bakk [00:38:08] Yeah. So let me ask this question that came to mind, Steve, when you were talking about accessibility issues, because I was so focused on the goggles and the experience through the vision. That you had mentioned earlier that you can pick things up. So here, here's my again. You know, my. Please tell me what's going

on here. Question. How do you how do you wear gloves? Is there a joystick? How does that work?

Steven Sturman [00:38:41] Yeah. For that you have two handheld controllers and there's a bunch of different buttons on the controllers and you can walk up to something In the app, you see a virtual hand that represents your actual hand. So you can then place your hands over those objects and hit the buttons and the controllers, and that will allow you to pick something up, rotate it, move it around, you can throw it. There's a lot of games where you're doing like. Basketball, tennis. And, you know, using the controllers, it allows you to manipulate the environment.

Louanne Bakk [00:39:17] Okay. So so that has to be accounted for or accommodated as well for for some students. I get it. Okay. Yeah. Thanks.

Mickey Sperlich [00:39:25] It's something to that thought, too, because we're also talking to our audience. I realize too many of them may be working in practice thinking about, hmm, I don't have the capacity to actually purchase this headset. There is I mean, as we're talking about VR and this is something we're exploring as well, the three of us is there's the option of what's called the Google cardboard. Essentially, it's over a cell phone. These are about \$3. And there are apps that you can go in. You do lose the functionality that sees referencing with your hands, but it does still give you that immersive experience. You could still maybe go to a concert with others or meet somebody in that environment. But it is it's a much less it's a less costly investment, but it still will give you that virtual reality experience. So I did want to mention that just recognizing what some of our listeners as well.

Louanne Bakk [00:40:23] Yeah. Parenthetically, could that little cardboard box get me into an Eric Clapton concert?

Mickey Sperlich [00:40:30] Yeah, my my topic.

Louanne Bakk [00:40:33] All right And I'm I'm in.

Mickey Sperlich [00:40:35] Depends if you might be able to find an older YouTube that somebody I don't know.

Louanne Bakk [00:40:40] Yeah. We'll come back to that. Okay. All right. Well thanks. So now if we could. Let's talk. Well, we've done this a little bit, but let's let's do this kind of deliberately. Let's talk about the work you've done. Especially you. And when it comes to using VR in practice, you know, in the real world.

Mickey Sperlich [00:41:04] Absolutely. And I got a couple examples I'm going to give. And these are all also part of my own research that I'm working on. The first did involve one of our doors involve one of our DSW students as well as one of our students. What we did is about two years ago, really, right prior to the start of the pandemic, we were working with a program of all inclusive care for the elderly. So those of you that don't enter our case program. So for those of you that don't know what a PACE program is, it's really a community based alternative to nursing home placements. So in order to go into a case program, we do need to bring nursing home eligible. So I say that because keep in mind, they're the participants that we work with. We're a bit compromised. They were an older, more frail group. And we were actually able to get a small supply of what are called

random beer headsets. So it's a little different than the experience Steve mentioned where you've got your VR headset, you have an app you can go into an experience or Micki mentioned of some of her students experiences. This is controlled by an individual. They get a tablet and they can control the experiences that people go into. So I might be able to go swimming with dolphins or it will even enable me to take someone and transport them back to maybe a community where I grew up. Or they could show others. That was the church I went to. Here's the school I went to. Oh, I remember that stories to be down the street from me so they can use it also as a form of reminiscence. So we did a very small pilot study and really keep in mind, VR was new to me. I didn't know what to experience. They absolutely loved it. The small group of older adults that we took on that experience. They wanted more programing. They had savvy because they were using this. They were hit, also gave them choice. Where do you want to go today? What would you like to do today? So just giving them that feeling of empowerment. But they did love doing this. Unfortunately, the agency was unable to continue that bus. I went for coffee with a colleague at the College of Rockport, Dr. Jason down Howard. He was doing a lot of work with Lifespan of Rochester. We talked a little bit about this and he said, I wonder if there's an opportunity to do something with caregivers or the agency. So we met with the agency there, say they absolutely love this. And again, we had no idea what to expect. We did a little demo with the staff that work with caregivers. We took them into different experiences and they basically thought, you know, this is a great fit for our respite program. So this is a study we're actually working on right now. It's a project that we have one of our DSW students working with us on the implementation of this. We also have one of our students continuing to work on us. What we're doing. In conjunction with the cultural support as we are actually doing a respite volunteer program using VR. So what we're doing is we're recruiting volunteers at this point. The volunteers are going to go up in the home of a caregiver and a person living with dementia, and we're going to do one of a couple of different things depending on where they're at. We're going to be able to take that diet into different experiences. And keeping in mind these caregivers, many of them have not been out of the home in a very long time and yet very little interaction even with their loved ones. So we can take them into a joint experience. They might go to an animal park. They might go. Swimming with dolphins. They might go to a site that they have really fond memories of. And we're going to engage someone that. Alternatively, if you know what, they just need a break for that day. We're going to give the caregiver an opportunity to go into some type of meditative experience and we'll do another activity with a person living with dementia. Really, the goal of this is to help reduce social isolation and loneliness that are experienced by the caregivers. We're also this is pretty new. We there's really we haven't found any evidence of this being tried before with caregivers as a form of social connectedness and interaction. We're looking to see, do they feel more connected to each other? Because keep in mind, this is the first time that they're able to do something together outside the home. Yeah. The other thing is we're curious, can this because the person live with dementia reduced some of those behaviors. So, for example, nighttime wandering, we don't know where. And this is a very early stage. We're literally implementing this later in February and we're going to do it over a multiple time period to just see what we're learning from it. But it's so exciting to me because VR being used as a forum of maybe repeated physical therapy with older adults, but we haven't really used that much as a form of social interaction and help decrease really some of the social isolation people might be feeling.

Louanne Bakk [00:46:28] You know, this is very synchronous because before you gave that example, while while all three of you were talking, I was listening, of course, but I was really just kind of thinking. I was thinking, quite frankly, about my father. My father is 86

and he has Parkinson's. And in July, it got amped up. It got worse. He had to leave his home. He moved into assisted living. So my father is older, his mobility is decreased. Then the pandemic comes. Isolation. Now he's in assisted living, but he's fairly high functioning. But he can't. You know, there's four months of the year here in western New York where you can't even go outside. And so the isolation and the loss of freedom and autonomy is really what his chief complaint is right now. And this sounds like a what I would love to try this with him.

Mickey Sperlich [00:47:33] Yes. And the thing is, to what you're mentioning, Peter, is you could go outside and see the sky. So that's what's so cool about this, because you're in that different environment. It's just really building on what you said. I mentioned I'm working with my colleague Khalil Gibran, where he actually has had several meetings with just people that they're associated with. He had a woman come up to say, you know, my partner has Alzheimer's. More middle stage. I think this is a really nice option for us to use. Can we be involved in the study? And if not, how do I purchase the equipment to be able to actually go out or to use this with them to help give them that sense of being immersed in a different place? But again, I think there is tremendous potential for this, particularly with those that are more socially isolated at this point.

Louanne Bakk [00:48:25] Yeah, it sounds like it. All of it is a great fit. I never really even thought about that. I want to ask you like a big question at the end, but I actually a bunch of light bulbs went off. I heard a lot of. No, I'm not a gamer. I know. I know. You're shot. Their sounds to me based on what I know about it, there sounds like tremendous overlap. It sounds like if you're good at gaming or even if you just do it for fun. I'm thinking of students. The virtual reality piece would be. They may never want to get in a room with us again.

Steven Sturman [00:49:07] Yeah, I agree. Gaming is the area where it seems to be taking off the most right now. Just because working in these big, big companies, that's where they see the money in it. But, you know, the way we're looking at it, there's other opportunities here, too.

Louanne Bakk [00:49:23] Yeah.

Mickey Sperlich [00:49:24] Yeah. And I think it is sold more as gaming or not sold. But in the middle class, I would say there is a there are a number of apps that are it's largely gaming. But I think there's also it's really what we're doing and going back to partly our reason for incorporating this in the DSW program is to think about alternative ways this could be used. And it was really ourselves. So partnering with the community and learning more about what some of their needs were and helping them to help us identify how this could be used. When I went into this, I had no idea how we could use this with caregivers. They were the ones that said, you know, we could use this in our respite program. How about if we do that in going back to Steve's accessibility piece? Because I know we've talked a lot about the medical's, the controllers. Again, we're using a tablet with the devices. This nice decrease, the nausea that we were talking about. Yeah, somebody can essentially be sitting or a man laying someone and use that headset. There's also some work that this has been done with hospice patients to take them to alternate environments. So I think it's thinking a lot outside the box, too, because the way it's marketed is more, I think, more gaming. But we also need to think about how can we use it in other ways.

Louanne Bakk [00:50:43] Like that's a bad thing though too, right? Yeah, it's not a bad thing.

Mickey Sperlich [00:50:46] No gaming in the spot. I mean, gaming, this is as we think about our programmatic and our students, I mean, it's all fabulous waves and get a break and do sort I mean, to just take to do a little stress reduction, put on the headset for 10 minutes and go into some alternate environment, do something fun. All right. Well.

Louanne Bakk [00:51:06] Thanks. We are getting close to the end of our time here. But first of all, a lot of light bulbs went off listening to you folks. You know, I'm thinking about the implications for, for example, exposure therapy. Teaching or giving people like I think one of you mentioned earlier, safe practice with developing social skills. Even like assertiveness training that used to be done in those really horrific, boring psycho educational groups could be done, you know, via this. That kind of mechanism. So. So here's my last question. And be fanciful, you know, go wild. What?

Mickey Sperlich [00:51:47] How how do you think this?

Louanne Bakk [00:51:51] Technology, I think that's a better word is or has the potential to shape the future. You've been talking about this a little bit, but how do you think it will shape the future of, you know, social work, education and practice? At minimum. Any takers?

Mickey Sperlich [00:52:10] Well. I can jump in a little bit. I just want to say, if if you're asking me to think fancifully. Yeah. If we could keep on with this trauma informed waiting room concept. The initial idea I had was could we provide almost like a simulated patient kind of an opportunity for everybody therapists to go in and experience like. Different interactions.

Louanne Bakk [00:52:39] Or a home visit.

Mickey Sperlich [00:52:41] Doing trauma informed assessments to do doing. A first session with someone and have a variety of responses based on what they say. Where it would be sort of no, no harm, no foul, like no one was injured in the course of this doing this activity. Right. You know, to try it out. I came to understand really early that that, you know, that's very complicated because now you're talking about programing people in there and it's it's more costly and time consuming kind of the thing to do. But if. If if I'm thinking fancifully, that's where I would love to see that. Right now you can do you can certainly watch a video of therapy interactions online. You know, if you're in a large university and maybe in some kind of a psych program or certainly medical schools use them all the time, you can do interactions with simulated patients or patients who are actors, right? They're acting out these parts. But maybe in VR would be a way to do that. Ultimately more cost effectively. And. At someone's computer, they could really start honing some of those skills, you know, and getting feedback in real time about what works and what doesn't work.

Louanne Bakk [00:54:02] Exactly. I think this is going to move very fast. I mean, I don't think that that doesn't sound like, you know, too soon reaching out to me. And that's an awkward way to say it. But. Yeah. Thanks, Mickey. Lou and Steve, take a shot.

Mickey Sperlich [00:54:19] Mine is, I think, more related to practice. And what we're starting to see is experience, because social isolation among the aging is very real and it's become much, much more prominent since COVID. I'd love to see this really scaled up and this type of intervention available in so many different modalities. We're using it with a small target group, but maybe we could do some programming through our senior centers or thinking about ways particularly different groups are isolated in the community to help bring them together. In the winter times, it gets harder and harder for people to leave their homes, but this gives such it can. It gives so many benefits because you're able to move outside of that home environment into an alternate space that feels like you're outdoors or it feels like you're in a place that's fun or at a beach, or being able to be creative and think about how we could use this to hopefully reduce some of the social isolation that we're seeing among the aging population.

Louanne Bakk [00:55:24] I hope so. Thanks. Thanks a lot.

Steven Sturman [00:55:28] For me. I would like to see it progress in terms of empathy development for people. You know, we have a lot of different people that have different experiences, different life paths. And I, you know, I think VR would be an opportunity to have people experience situations that they might not be accustomed to, to see how other people are living and the challenges they face.

Louanne Bakk [00:55:59] Yeah. Yeah, that's. That's. You know, again, another light bulb. I'm thinking about an exercise I did yesterday where I asked people questions that were related to their family's socioeconomic status and their race and their gender as a part of talking about determinants of health and and employment, educational aspirations. It would be much more, I think, powerful to do it in the way that you're describing. So. Thanks to all three of you for for thanks for taking the time and and being patient with the. The novice questions, but I have a feeling that this is actually going to help a lot of folks. And, you know, you stick your toes in it, so why can't the rest of us? So thank you again. Thanks so much.

Mickey Sperlich [00:56:57] Oh, you're so welcome. It was fun. Thanks, Peter.

Steven Sturman [00:57:01] All right. Thank you.

Louanne Bakk [00:57:02] The ENSO short podcast is the semi hit and occasionally called Steve Sturman, our extraordinarily hip graduate production assistant, Nick Desmet. Say Hi, Nick.

Mickey Sperlich [00:57:15] Hey, everyone.

Louanne Bakk [00:57:17] And meet or meet Peter Savona, who should not even have the word hip in the same sentence as his name. Thanks for joining us. We love making the podcast. We'd be interested in your take. Contact us and tell us what you'd like to hear about Comment on an episode or ask if Steve Sturman really has the Star Wars lunchbox. Check us out on all of your favorite social media. And until next time. See you later, everybody.