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RELIGION, READINESS, AND VIRTUAL REALITY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AIR FORCE CHAPLAIN CORPS COLLEGE

by

Chaplain, Major David S. Merrifield

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Instructor: Colonel Tony Millican

Air Command and Staff College
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Preface

Unless the soldier's soul sustains him he cannot be relied on and will fail himself and his commander and his country in the end. – General George C. Marshall

While deployed in Afghanistan, as the Chaplain for 48 Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) and 1,500 souls during the drawdown in 2014, I witnessed first-hand the atrocities of war that test the very foundations of one's faith. General George C. Marshall, one of the most decorated and respected leader's in American history understood the value of spiritual sustainment among those who serve and the implications for an entire Nation. Marshall was keenly aware that if the soul of America's warriors falters and fails the mission will be compromised.

Through long watches of the night on that tour of duty, the high honor and privilege to care for souls became overwhelming at times. As I reflected upon my many shortfalls personally and professionally, it was solidified in my mind just how critically important one's faith foundation is when you are placed in harm's way. When given the opportunity to explore whether or not incorporating Virtual Reality at the Chaplain Corps College (AFCCC) would bolster the readiness of those who would be entrusted sacred honor of caring for deployed souls, the gravity of the task was not taken lightly.

Ensuring Air Force Chaplains are expertly equipped and trained to excel in their critically important deployed roles is paramount. In an ever-changing world and wartime environment, Chaplains are faced with meeting a plethora of readiness and religious

requirements. With the availability of Virtual Reality technology, the future of readiness training is here.

First and foremost, I thank God for the strength and ability to do all that He has called me to do. Also, I would like to thank my incredible wife Monica for her unwavering support in this endeavor which took many evenings away from the family. Additionally, I would like to thank my daughter Makana and my son Stephen for understanding how important this task was and for their help creating and editing video content that was created for this project and for providing valuable feedback, which from a 12 and 9 year old is raw and honest. I would also like to thank my instructor and mentor, Colonel Tony Millican who helped me maintain focus on my research and guide me in the right direction throughout the process. I would like to thank the 908th Air Reserve Wing for allowing us to use their C-130 Hercules, as well as, the 42nd Air Base Wing Honor Guard during the making of the Dignified Transfer Virtual Reality 360-degree training video. Finally, I would like to thank the Chaplain Corps College leadership team for their faith and confidence throughout my research and for the resources to build the 1st Virtual Reality Laboratory for the Chaplain Corps College and to begin immersing our students in readiness training opportunities before they experience war for “real.”

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to evaluate and determine the best way to leverage emerging technologies at the Chaplain Corps College, in particular Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. In the summer of 2018, an interest arose at Headquarters Air Force through the Chief of Chaplains office to “Inspire Readiness” by bringing experiential learning theory to the Air Force Chaplain Corps College (AFCCC). Chaplain, Major General Steven Schaick’s guidance from the top was to “not just think outside the box but rather not include a box at all” and “if we fail, we will have tried and we will learn and grow from our mistakes.”

In the past, the AFCCC has trained their chaplain corps members primarily in the cognate domain of learning, however, experts in learning theory argue that experiential learning has great value. (KOLB) While the AFCCC began exploring the opportunities to advance its educational platform, Air University Commander, Lieutenant General Anthony Cotton developed an Emerging Technology Task Force to explore where leveraging Virtual and Augmented Reality in higher learning would enhance an already robust educational system.

The Task Force included Subject Matter Experts on Virtual and Augmented Reality from Air University and selected and brought together students at Air War College, Air Command and Staff College, eSchool, and the Air Force Chaplain Corps College both in physical presence and in virtual presence from around the world. As a current instructor and course director at the Air Force Chaplain Corps College and author of this paper was a privilege to be chosen as one of the

Task Force members embedded in a new initiative called “Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality and Related Technologies in Learning for the National Security Enterprise.”

The author of this study examined the current educational model at the Air Force Chaplain Corps College with the purpose of making recommendations to Air University Commander, additional recommendations to the Air Force Chief of Chaplains and finally the Commandant and Deputy Commandant over the AFCCC to determine if Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality could and or should be leveraged and implemented as a learning tool in the key developmental stages of Professional Continuing Education, impacting current and future Air Force Chaplains Corps members.

The author’s research considerations took into account what possible success would look like, potential hurdles to overcome, overcoming the hurdles, and what the appropriate applications are for integrating Virtual and Augmented Reality as learning tools in the Air Force Chaplain Corps College. Since there were not parameters put on the research, the author chose to focus the efforts primarily in the realm of Tier 1 Readiness Training curriculum delivery at the AFCCC based on the guiding direction of the Air Force Instruction 52-series.

Section I: Introduction

“While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive the higher duties of religion.”

-General George Washington

In November, 1775, under the seminal leadership of General George Washington, the Second Constitutional Congress directed military commanders to send chaplains into war to visit the wounded, take care of the dead, write letters home for soldiers who couldn't write, give discourses of a patriotic nature to keep the soldiers from deserting, and to function as a very important link between the commander and the troops. (cite)

The Air Force Chaplain Corps College has been entrusted with the sacred task of ensuring chaplains are best prepared to care for the warfighter's soul in and through the violent acts of war. This sacred task of chaplains caring for the warfighter's soul finds its roots even before the United States was born. The sacred soul care task remains foundational for Chaplain Corps members downrange in harm's way. For 70+ years, the Air Force has been training its Chaplains for ministry in the context of war.

However, should the traditional method in which we instruct our Chaplain Corps members remain the same? The question is important on several levels, but none greater than answering the question from the ultimate goal of preparing our Chaplain Corps for maximum

effort in the deployed setting. How one uses emerging technology has the potential to change the landscape of our College and shape the future of our Corps for good or for bad. What are the implications of incorporating Virtual Reality at the Air Force Chaplain Corps College?

In an ever-changing world and complex wartime environment, Chaplains are faced with navigating a wide array of readiness and religious requirements. Virtual Reality may be the preferred method used to inspire readiness at the AFCCC but careful thought and research needed to be accomplished before the Corps embraces the capabilities without careful thought.

From what the author could determine, historically and currently, the AFCCC typically trains its students utilizing formal lecture mixed with some discussion opportunity using very traditional methods of delivery. To the author's knowledge there has never been a study conducted at the AFCCC to actually make informed decisions on whether incorporating emerging technology in the AFCCC would have positive or negative implications. The researcher sought to understand the current emerging technology platforms available, the context in which the technology would be applied, consider possible risks and rewards of applying the technology, and finally assess the capabilities, and make final recommendations at the appropriate levels of authority.

Initially, as a skeptic to incorporating Virtual Reality teaching methods into the AFCCC instruction, the researcher brought his own bias to the project. In prayerful discernment, the author wrestled with the implications of the data collected in and through the process of observation and reflection. However, after investing nearly an entire academic year immersed in Virtual Reality instruction, the author's perspective was changed. In the author's recommendations it will be evident that the risk is worth the reward for incorporating limited and

appropriate use of Virtual Reality for the good of the Chaplain Corps College and ultimately the soul of the warfighter.

Section II: Understanding the Context

All new Chaplain Corps accessions (including Air Reserve Component) will receive Tier 1 Readiness Training IAW AFI 10-403 while attending either Commissioned Officer Training (COT)/Basic Officer Training (BOT) or enlisted Basic Military Training (BMT). The Air Force Chaplain Corps College, in coordination with the Career Field Functional Managers, will continue to build upon the strong warrior ethos foundation acquired through the accessions process IAW AFI 52-102V1, AFI52-102V2, AFI10-403, and AFI 36-2201 chapter 8, in all curriculum plans and course execution.

-AFI 52-104 6 AUGUST 2015

The AFCCC has its clear marching orders based on AFI guidance to continue build upon the Tier 1 Readiness Training and warrior ethos that was formative in the accessions process. However, within the guidance there is great opportunity to explore and incorporate emerging technology for the purpose of bolstering the Tier 1 Readiness Training curriculum delivery for maximum impact.

The author believes that shifting the current culture of Professional Continuing Education (PCE) at the AFCCC from a cognitive based learning theory to an experiential based learning theory will be a game changer for readiness training that is realistic, reliable, and relevant. This research project has provided the opportunity to evaluate and leverage emerging technology to

enhance how instructors at the College present its readiness curriculum to leave an indelible mark on the Corps.

All Air Force Chaplains and Religious Affairs Airmen complete mandatory Professional Continuing Education at the AFCCC which is located on Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama. The College graduates Chaplain Corps total force personnel from the Guard, Reserve, and Active Duty components. About 400 students are trained annually through 20 course offerings. The courses are geared to put the right student in the right seat at just the right time in his or her career. In addition to the base line courses of study, the AFCCC is currently considering emerging Virtual and Augmented Reality technology in appropriate blocks of instruction across the board for all 20 course offerings at the AFCCC to enhance the quality of the product offered.

The AFCCC has utilized very traditional classroom teaching methods of lecture and discussion in the cognitive domain of learning theory and has not explored to a great extent incorporating the affective domain. The affective or feeling domain is critical for impacting long term remembrance and understanding. To allow space for emerging technologies to be implemented at the AFCCC, the historic teaching method paradigm of the AFCCC will need to shift to a broader educational platform.

In order for the College to leverage educating and training its Chaplain Corps personnel with Virtual Reality it is crucial to gain “buy-in” from leadership and course instructors. Fortunately for the AFCCC, the directive to move forward in leveraging technology has already been championed at the upper echelons of the Chaplain Corps. Chaplain, Major General Steven Schaick, the current Air Force Chief of Chaplains has mandated that the AFCCC “Inspire Readiness” and to be innovators willing to fail. Additionally, the Chief of Chaplains has personally experienced the value of VR and AR resulting in the approval of the AFCCC to build

a VR Laboratory at the AFCCC. Additionally, approval has been given to begin implementing Virtual and Augmented reality on an increasing platform in the appropriate blocks of instruction. Lastly, there is an initiative in progress for creating a series of 360-degree VR video content to enhance the affective domain of education delivery in Readiness Training.

Section III: Descriptive Research Design

Virtual Reality is really a new communication platform. By feeling truly present, you can share unbounded spaces and experiences with the people in your life. Imagine sharing not just moments with your friends online, but entire experiences and adventures.

-Mark Zuckerberg, CEO Facebook/ purchased Virtual Reality's Oculus Rift in 2014

The research method for the study primarily followed a descriptive research design which is a scientific method which involves observing and describing the behavior of a subject without influencing it in any way. Investigating through formal and informal assessments and interviews, the author collated data from 2 Virtual Reality experiences offered to 24 Basic Chaplain Course students, 36 Wing Chaplains along with Superintendents and Noncommissioned Officers in Charge as well as, 7 Senior Leaders in the Chaplain Corps, and 2 PhD level Subject Matter Experts in the Virtual Reality realm.

Careful observations were made and described in detail of the participants before and after the immersive 360-degree Virtual Reality video experiences. All participants volunteered to participate in two highly immersive 360-degree Virtual Reality experiences. The author focused the data collation on empathy levels, cultural awareness, and observing appropriate dignity and honor during military Dignified Transfers.

The author makes recommendations for the Air Force Chief of Chaplains office and the Air Force Chaplain Corps College Commandant, Deputy Commandant, and Career Field Chief. The recommendations include considering to implement Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality into appropriate educational curriculum, create additional Chaplain Corps specific 360-degree immersive storytelling content. The content creation would happen both in-house. as well as contracting professional software developers to develop specific and relevant educational content. Additionally, the author recommends sending one instructor from the Chaplain Corps College to be trained in Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality and other emerging educational technologies each academic year to continue to maintain and build upon the expertise of Subject Matter Experts in the field.

Section IV: Religion and Worldview Consideration

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being. –Dr. James W. Sire, The Universe Next Door

Why is the convergence of religion, worldview, readiness training and the use of Virtual Reality important for discussion in a paper such as this? It is important for discussion in the context of the Chaplain Corps because incorporating new technologies comes with inherent risk or reward. Virtual and Augmented Reality has the real potential to change how we view reality and life. Worldview and Virtual Reality converge in a space and time that intentionally challenges status quo assumptions and perspectives. Even though all people have a worldview, the assumptions and perspectives people hold dear in their doctrines of belief may or may not be based on truth. Therefore, the compelling use of Virtual Reality in immersive 360-degree storytelling cannot be underestimated as a powerful tool of worldview shaping and perspective tweaking.

Dr. Ronald Nash, renowned scholar and author of Philosophy, knew the importance of worldview and invested his life teaching seminary and secular students in the university about its importance before his death. Dr. Nash, in his transformational work *Worldviews in Conflict* stated, “*Worldviews must pass not only the test of reason; they must also satisfy the test of experience. Worldviews should be relevant to what we know about the world and ourselves.*”

Virtual Reality lives and moves in the realm of experience, reason, and practice which are all components of evaluating worldview. One’s experience, whether virtual or non-virtual, matters a great deal (Kolb). However, experience must not be the only measure because it is subjective. Experience must work together with all realms of reality and be integrated alongside reason and prove to be cohesive with one’s practice. A worldview must be consistent.

Of additional importance, the reason the discussion of the convergence of worldview, religion, readiness training, and the use of Virtual Reality is imperative is because of the distinct role chaplains play for their commanders. “It is Air Force policy for commanders to provide for the free exercise of religion. Chaplains are the commander’s resource to accomplish this task and serve as the principle advisors to commanders regarding the impact of religion on military operations. Further explained in Joint Guide (JG)1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, Air Force “Chaplains advise the commander and staff on the ethical, moral, and religious dimensions of armed conflict.” Chaplains may also be tasked with certain liaison functions. Chaplains shall serve a religiously diverse population, providing comprehensive religious support to all authorized individuals within their area of responsibilities.” –AFI 52-1 5 NOVEMBER 2018

According to the Secretary of the Air Force, Heather Wilson, Chaplains are to provide or provide for people who hold to a wide range of worldviews and religions. Chaplains are Chaplains to all and pastors for some. -AFI 52-1 5 NOVEMBER 2018

A military Chaplain must also consider the implications of using emerging technology in such a way that may lead to discipline from their Endorsing Agency. Each military Chaplain is endorsed by a particular faith group Endorsing Agency who has very specific guidelines for conducting ministry in the military context. These endorsing agencies hold firmly to doctrinal truths and hold their chaplains to those same doctrinal truths. If a Chaplain loses his endorsement due to a violation of the Endorsing Agencies guidance, the Chaplain will no longer be a Chaplain in the military.

The author considered potential danger zones and questions that may arise within an Endorsing Agency policies. What scenarios will Chaplains encounter within the near future that the AFCCC need to prepare them for in Tier 1 Readiness Training? What things are coming down the pipe that Endorsing Agencies may have to right policy letters for to guide their Chaplains?

Incorporating Virtual and Augmented Reality in Readiness Training at the AFCCC may spur on other unintended discussions and ripple effects that instructors will have to be prepared to address as counseling blocks of instruction are taught.

As religious leaders in an organization, Chaplains must consider and anticipate worldview questions that have ethical and moral implications. So returning to the question, “how to best leverage emerging technology at the Air Force Chaplain Corps College?” It is imperative to understand some details about learning theory which will be discussed in the next section.

Section V: Learning Theory

“For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.”

-Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics

Experiential learning involves learning from experience. Psychologist and educational theorist David Kolb is perhaps best known for his theory of experiential learning. According to Kolb, experiential learning is a “process by which knowledge results from different combinations of grasping and transforming experiences. We can grasp experience two different ways; through concrete experience and abstract conceptualization.” (Kolb 1984) Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory presents a cycle of four elements. The cycle begins with an experience that the student has had, followed by an opportunity to reflect on that experience. Then students may conceptualize and draw conclusions about what they have experienced and observed, leading to future actions in which the students experiment with different behaviors.

Figure 1. Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

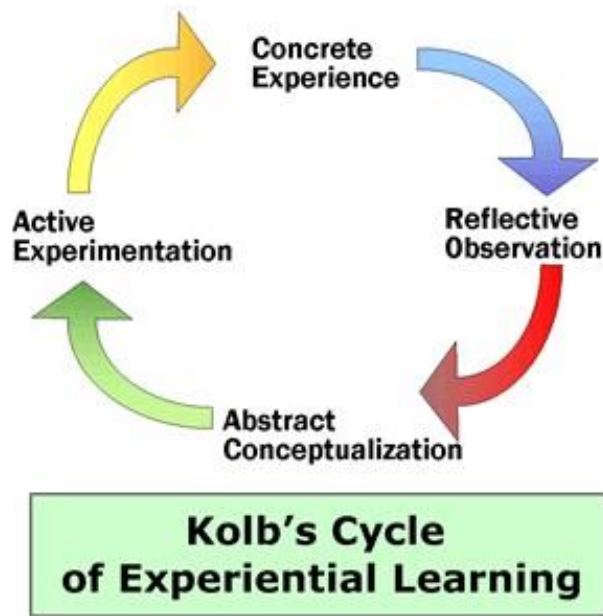


image by Karin Kirk

Experiential learning is effective for many but not everyone can easily learn by doing. However, with the rapid development of Virtual Reality over the last few years, people can learn through experience inside a virtual world from any location. Learning by doing, such as working for a company as an intern or learning how to ride a bike consists of a person being immersed in an experience and then reflecting on it afterwards.

Experiential learning “occurs outside of the traditional classroom setting and it is effective because it leads to lasting behavior changes through the acquisition of new habits.” (Chapman 1995). Chapman stated that if an activity has the following 7 characteristics then it is experiential learning. First, “A combination of knowledge and experience.” The learner must understand the theory and then put this into practice. Second, “Reduced external evaluation and more reflection.” The instructor is less involved and instead, the learner plays a critical role in

assessing themselves. Third, “Learning outside your comfort zone.” This used to be the case but with the introduction of virtual reality courses this criteria is not entirely applicable. Forth, “The activities must be relevant.” The experience must be relevant to the learner so they feel motivated. Fifth, “Reflection.” Learners should reflect on their own learning to provide them with personal insights. Sixth, “See the big picture.” The learning must encourage the students to link their learning to the world. Ie. How is what you are learning applicable to real-life? Seventh, and finally, “Emotional investment.” Learners must want to engage in the experience and not just do it because they feel they have to.

Readiness training at the AFCCC prepares students to care for the warfighter’s soul in the most austere conditions. How does experiential learning link to Virtual Reality? Virtual Reality is experiential learning. Individuals are immersed in a world that simulates real life where one puts their knowledge and skills into practice. Chaplain Corps personnel are often inserted into a violent experience that is shocking or horrific. It is imperative that the AFCCC provides every possible tool available to best prepare our Corps for caring for the deployer’s soul.

Section VI: Case Study

“Talking about virtual reality is like dancing about architecture.”

-Chris Milk, 2015 Ted Talk

The research conducted to complete this case study could not be effectively accomplished by just talking about Virtual Reality, so the author immersed 68 volunteers into two 360-degree Virtual Reality video experiences to gain an understanding of if Virtual Reality could and should be utilized at the AFCCC. To accomplish this the assessment focused on empathy responses. Chris Milk, the founder of *Within*, a Virtual Reality technology company and immersive artist, stated in his 2015 TED Talk, “Virtual Reality is the ultimate empathy machine.” (Milk, 2015 TED Talk)

The author assessed pre and post empathy levels of the volunteers using Virtual Reality as the experiential mode of instruction. The case study also assessed the advantages and disadvantages of integrating Virtual Reality training curriculum into the AFCCC. The goal was to determine if utilizing immersive 360-degree Virtual Reality videos was a more effective and advantageous way to instruct Tier 1 Readiness Training rather than the traditional method of lecture.

The analysis of this research revealed that there were noted differences in using immersive technology and that using Virtual Reality enhanced the students understanding of the subject material and the students were able to more effectively demonstrate proficiency in the training areas taught. Additionally, the data revealed that long held perspectives were changed throughout the process. All of the volunteers were immersed into two very different 360-degree VR scenarios.

1st 360-degree VR video scenario: *2015 Clouds Over Sidra: created by Gabo Arora and Chris Milk: time--8:35 Meet Sidra.*

This charming 12-year-old girl will guide you through her temporary home: The Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan. Zaatari is home to 130,000 Syrians fleeing violence and war, and children make up half the camp's population. In this lyrical VR film, Sidra leads you through her daily life; Eating, sleeping, learning and playing in the vast desert city of tents. (Rubin)

When the experience begins, you're in the desert, footsteps and tire tracks traversing the sand. "We walked for days crossing the desert to Jordan," a woman says in a voice-over, translating young Sidra's words. Over the next seven minutes, you glimpse daily in Zaatari through a series of vignettes, narrated by Sidra's words: you see her family bustling inside their small house, boys playing first-person shooters inside a small gaming café. As the film continues, the sense of normalcy mounts; whether you're watching men stacking fresh hot flatbread inside a bakery or a cluster of young girls playing soccer, you find yourself lulled by the seemingly universal daily routines. "Here in Zaatari, unlike home, girls can play football too," Sidra says. "That makes us happy." Lulled, that is, until a shot fades in and you see Sidra and her family eating a meal—under the shelter of a UN Refugee Agency tent. "My teacher says the clouds moving over us also came here from Syria," Sidra's narration says. "Someday the clouds and me are going to turn around...and go back home." (Rubin)

The VR experience has immersed you in the Zaatari camp and you no longer have to imagine the emotions of a young girl living in a refugee camp. You've been there with her. And now, you can appreciate how she feels.

2nd 360-degree VR video scenario: *Dignified Transfer 360 Video: The AFCCC created original content Dignified Transfer 360 video creation as an IVE (Immersive Virtual Experience)time-- 6:33 year made in January of 2019.*

The powerful footage features a dignified transfer case solemnly moving from a military vehicle with a 360-degree camera positioned to give the perspective of the deceased in the case. 7 Honor Guard personnel move the transfer case to an awaiting C-130 Hercules on the runway for immediate return to the United States following the death of a US serviceman killed while serving in the Theater of Operation. The chaplain follows the transfer case up onto the aircraft as senior ranking officials render salutes from outside the aircraft. As the honor guard stands at attention after lowering the case to the metal floor of the aircraft the chaplain proceeds to read a holy text. The honor guard exits the aircraft leaving the senior leaders and chaplain to pay final respects with a salute and place a coin on the transfer case as taps plays in the headset.

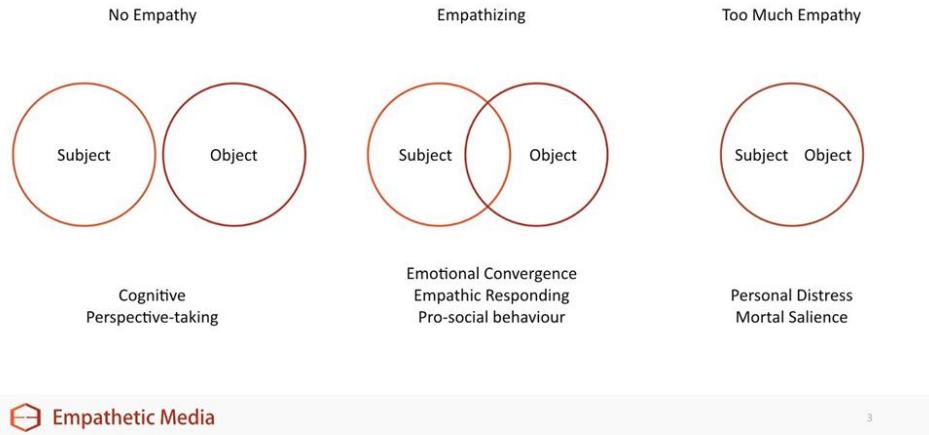
Resources utilized to accomplish the hands-on portion of the assessment included the author securing an Oculus Rift, Alienware laptop, and a Samsung 360-degree camera to build the content and conduct the assessment. Additionally, 24 of the volunteers received an “Introduction to Virtual Reality” by Subject Matter Expert Colonel Tony Millican. A vital question needs to be posed for any organization looking to incorporate Virtual Reality. Does this need to be in Virtual Reality? The case study assessed pre and post empathy levels of empathy. Specifically, did the volunteer become too emotional in their response to the content and were unable to engage in appropriate discussion following the event due to personal distress? On the other end

of the spectrum, were volunteers unmoved and completely distant after being immersed in the experience? I.e. The subject was only engaged on a cognitive level and with a mere perspective-taking and non-empathetic. Lastly, was the convergence of empathy between subject and object demonstrate appropriate emotional convergence? Additional assessments were collated using a Likert Scale to rate perceived levels of “immersion”, “presence”, and “perspective taking.”

The research method primarily followed a descriptive research design which is a scientific method which involves observing and describing the behavior of a subject without influencing it in any way. Investigating through formal and informal assessments and interviews, the author collated data from 2 Virtual Reality experiences offered to 24 Basic Chaplain Course students, 36 Wing Chaplains along with Superintendents and Noncommissioned Officers in Charge as well as, 7 Senior Leaders in the Chaplain Corps, and 2 PhD level Subject Matter Experts in the Virtual Reality realm.

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Figure 2. Empathy Chart



The above figure shows the reader of the case study in visual form. The goal is to move our Chaplain Corps members to the middle for appropriate response. Those members who become self-aware that they fall to the extreme left or right know that they now have areas for growth and maturity. The good news is that, “Empathy isn’t a fixed quality. Our capacity can be changed by our culture.” (Bailenson)

Chaplains must operate with appropriate levels of empathy to be an effective care taker of the soul of America’s warfighters. “Empathy, has been the subject of much psychological research and debate in recent years, but many psychologists agree that two different systems, physiologically distinct, appear to be at work when we experience empathy.” (Bailenson) Thus, it is believed that the AFCCC can better develop the Corps with Virtual Reality methods of instruction.

“One is an emotional system which reacts reflectively when we encounter the suffering of others. It is activated when you flinch upon viewing footage of an athlete getting injured, for instance, or when you turn away from a particularly gruesome scene in a horror film. The second

major ingredient of empathy is cognitive, the ability of your brain to form theories about what other people are feeling and what might be causing those feelings.” (Bailenson)

Section VII: Recommendations

“Virtual Reality is the ultimate empathy machine” -Chris Milk 2015 TED Talk

Section VIII: Conclusion

Cultivating the next generation of Chaplain Corps personnel, will depend upon our ability to adapt approaches and enhance educational practices to achieve mission success. Accordingly, this requires a change to the Air Force Chaplain Corps College mindset, culture, and processes. It is time to incorporate emerging technologies into the AFCCC in limited and appropriate usages to produce the most capable, ready, and empathetic chaplain corps personnel to lead the United States Air Force now and into the future.

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