Online Role-Play: Anonymity, Engagement and Risk

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Abstracts

Role-play is a recognized face-to-face teaching method for developing skills, knowledge and attitudes. It is now possible to combine the powerful learning experience of role-play with the advantages of the online environment. A case study of an asynchronous, anonymous, online role-play conducted as part of a teaching course for academic staff is reported. Findings suggest that online role-play may be an effective teaching method for developing understanding and exploring complex issues, and for experiencing and understanding differing views. In addition, the personal comfort inherent in anonymity supports involvement, although this may be affected by cultural and personal factors; while the high level of role engagement often found in face-to-face role-play may be reduced within the online environment. Further research is needed into: levels of involvement and role engagement; the optimum number of participants; and the effects of asynchronicity and anonymity.

Le Jeu de rôle en ligne: Anonymat, Engagement et Risque

Le jeu de rôle est une méthode d'enseignement face à face reconnue pour développer les compétences, le savoir et les attitudes. Il est possible maintenant de combiner l'expérience éducative puissante du jeu de rôle avec les avantages de l'environnement en ligne. Cet article rend compte d'un jeu de rôle asynchrone et anonyme conduit en ligne comme une partie d'un cours de formation destiné à des enseignants. Les résultats suggèrent que le jeu de rôle en ligne peut être une méthode d'enseignement efficace pour favoriser la compréhension et explorer des problèmes complexes pour faire des expériences et pour aider à comprendre des point de vue différents. De plus le confort personnel lié à l'anonymat contribue à l'implication bien qu'elle puisse être affectée par des facteurs culturels et personnels tandis que le haut niveau de l'engagement que l'on trouve dans le jeu de rôle face à face puisse être réduit dans l'environnement en ligne. D'autre recherches sont nécessaires sur les niveaux d'implication et l'engagement dans le rôle, le nombre optimum de participants et les effets de l'asynchronisme et de l'anonymat.

Online-Rollenspiel: Anonymität, Verpflichtung und Risiko


Background

Role-play is a highly regarded teaching method for skills, knowledge and attitude development within therapeutic and educational settings (Carroll, 1995; Craig, 1987; Eitington, 1989; Gredler, 1994; Ladousse, 1987; McGill and Beaty, 1995; Shaw et al., 1980; Turner, 1992). Tertiary teachers and trainers are beginning to combine the learning possibilities of role-play with the advantages of the online environment. Reports of online role-play (Collings, 1998; Maher, 1999; Vincent, 1998), online simulation (Ip et al., 2001; Wills et al., 2000) and online role simulation (Freeman and Capper, 1999) have appeared recently.
Online role-play has been used to increase involvement in existing online activities (Harasim et al., 1995; Wills et al., 2000) and to enable students to develop changes in understanding of complex issues (Freeman and Capper, 1999; Maher, 1999). Studies suggest that involvement in online discussion and role-play is enhanced through anonymity (Collins and Berge, 1995; Connolly et al., 1990; Freeman and Capper, 1999; Hartman et al., 1995) and asynchronicity (McComb, 1994; Tiene, 2000). However, it is possible that anonymity may increase antisocial behaviour and the text-based medium may pose problems for students from different language backgrounds (Chester and Gwynne, 1998).

Online simulations is coming to be seen as a particular stand alone learning tool and the consideration of new learning tasks that become possible with new learning tools should be part of the educator’s strategic learning plan (Freeman and Capper, 1999). It was decided, therefore, to design and trial an asynchronous, anonymous, online role-play as a learning activity within one module of a teaching course for academic staff at an Australian university. Previously, completion of the module had required participation in a face-to-face workshop and completion of an independent study handbook. The online role-play was designed as an alternative to the existing face-to-face workshop that would offer more flexibility of access for participants and enable them to explore various approaches to a controversial topic within the course.

The role-plays were set up within a WebCT bulletin board and ran for five weeks. At the end of the role-play, participants were given access to the postings from both role-plays. Marks were not allocated to the role-play, but a specified level of participation was a requirement for course completion.

This paper reports on the process and outcomes of the online role-play, explores some key emerging issues and suggests some areas for further investigation.

**Evaluation methodology**

The central endeavour of the ‘interpretive’ research paradigm is not to predict but ‘to understand the subjective world of human experience’ (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 205); to understand not only what is happening but also why it is happening. The evaluation methodology of this study, therefore, is grounded in the interpretive paradigm.

Case study method was utilized, in which the researcher ‘observed’ the activity in order to ‘probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which the unit belongs’ (Cohen and Manion, 1994, pp. 106–107). In this case study, the role-play moderator is a ‘participant-observer’, participating in the activity being evaluated and analysing the issues that surface within the participants’ online postings. The case study attempts to determine the effectiveness of the online activity as a method for developing understanding of a complex issue through the exploration of differing perspectives.

Qualitative methods are useful where complex, socially constructed ideas need to be understood (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p. 6). Techniques for qualitative data collection were analysis of participant accounts, a face-to-face discussion group and an open-ended questionnaire. Quantitative data was also gathered by a set of closed questions on the questionnaire. The closed questions were on a four-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaire covered the effectiveness and purpose of the role-play; feelings about taking part; anonymity; and role engagement.

It had been planned to evaluate the role-play using an online questionnaire, but because participation had been variable, there was a concern that some participants might not go online for the evaluation. The debriefing and discussion, therefore, were conducted face-to-face and the questionnaire was administered on paper. Eleven of the 14 participants completed the questionnaire and participated in the discussion. (Initially 16 participants were allocated roles but two left the course without participating in the role-play.)

**The role-play**

*Description and purpose*

The educational purpose of the online role-play was to support course participants in exploring a key, controversial decision that needs to be made by all academics who assess their students’ work: whether to use norm- or criterion-referenced assessment. A further purpose was to support participants’ orientation to the university by having them interact with various roles within the wider university community, in this way to
become more aware of the context in which decisions are made within the university sector. A third purpose was to develop their skills in the use of online teaching technologies.

The role-play was designed to provide participants with a realistic forum to discuss the issue: the letters column of a supposed local newspaper, the Daily View. The role-play took place at a mythical university called Idontgoto University, in which criterion referenced assessment had been used within a subject. All students in the subject had achieved 100%. Participants discussed the merits of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessment through letters to the editor posted on the WebCT bulletin board.

Participants were divided into two groups of eight and given the same directions, information and role statements. (Two participants from group 2 left the course without participating in the role play which reduced that group to six.) Each participant was allocated an Idontgoto University role within one of the groups as follows:

- Vice Chancellor;
- Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic);
- Superi Or – a high achieving, high distinction student;
- Medi Um – a low achieving, pass grade student;
- Concerned Citizen;
- Faculty Member;
- Dean of Students;
- Chair of the Student Representative Council.

Participants were informed that only the moderator knew which role each participant was playing and participants were not able to access the other group’s discussion. Roles were allocated alphabetically according to surname, except for one group of three participants from the same department who were split between the two groups. Participants in both groups were provided by e-mail with the same scenario and directions.

Participants were required to monitor the bulletin board and respond in character to the postings at least once each week over four weeks. The postings were not required to be long or complex although they were to make a contribution to the discussion through the role being played. In the fifth and final week, participants were required to comment on how the issue might be resolved. Background pre-reading was the university’s Code of Practice – Assessment and two brief articles on criterion and norm referencing.

**The players**

All 14 participants were newly appointed members of academic staff and most were taking the teaching course as a condition of their appointment to the university. For most, this was their first academic appointment and the topic for discussion was novel. Seven of the 14 participants were Australian born and seven were from countries in Asia, the Indian Subcontinent and on the Pacific Rim.

**The scenario**

The opening scenario was posted to both bulletin boards as a Daily View news article:

A lecturer at Idontgoto University, Dr E. Galitarian, has given all of her students 100%. All 38 students in the subject PHR356 Professional Skills in Phrenology have received grades of 100%, because Dr Galitarian claimed each of them gained mastery on all of the required skills according to criterion referenced tests.

An expert in higher education, Dr Norm Alcurve was contacted for comment. Dr Alcurve is quoted as saying: ‘Normally universities use norm referenced assessment, which means students can be sorted into different grades somewhere between 0% and 100%. With norm referenced assessment you would expect quite a spread of scores. On the other hand, where criterion referenced assessment is used appropriately, it is quite proper that all students should gain 100% if they have all reached the set criteria. It depends on what kind of assessment you consider appropriate’.

During the role-play, the moderator made various postings in the form of a newsflash, news item or editorial comment. These items were not pre-planned but were in response to the ongoing action. For example, when in one role-play group most postings were proposing that criterion referenced assessment should not be used in universities because it would compromise standards, the following newsflash appeared:

A leading educator at Ialwaysgoto University medical school (where criterion-based assessment has been used successfully since 1992) has challenged the academic staff of Idontogoto University to clearly explain to the international academic community the reasons why criterion-based assessment is unacceptable.
Professor Will Igetafarego claimed ‘we have been turning out medicos since 1992 using this system and our graduates haven’t lost a patient yet. I’m sure the community doesn’t want doctors who have been graduated by universities that give out degrees to students who only got half of everything right’.

When some postings demonstrated an apparent lack of understanding of norm- and criterion-referencing, the moderator posted a news item that purported to be an interview with one of the experts in the field describing what he saw as the difference between the two. The expert in this case was John Biggs whose book *Teaching for Quality Learning in Universities* (1999) is the set text for the course. The expert quotes were taken directly from the text and referenced.

**Findings**

**Analysis of the participant accounts**

Even though participation was a requirement for course completion, it was almost two weeks before participants began to make postings to the role-play. The moderator sent several e-mails to individuals and groups reminding them about the role-play encouraging them to take part, then reminding them about the course requirements and requesting their involvement. A few participants experienced initial difficulties in logging on and/or understanding instructions, despite having had introductory WebCT training.

*Role play 1.* Nine days after the role-play began, the first posting was made by the participant playing the Vice Chancellor, adopting a dictatorial role, espousing norm referencing and signing the postings Dr D. M. Igod: ‘I can assure readers that all (former) students of the late Dr Galitarian have been re-tested and the expected 5% have failed’. Several characters responded to the Vice Chancellor’s various postings offering advice ranging through tolerance, freedom of speech and even suggesting medication.

All but one participant in group #1 posted at least four times (the minimum requirement). Most contributions displayed some evidence of thoughtfulness about the topic if not extensive knowledge and there were some challenging contributions. Issues such as equal opportunity, academic freedom and power were mentioned if not explored fully, for example: ‘the norm referenced system is a means by which academics control the teaching of subjects for their own needs and thus their promotion chances’.

Role engagement varied. Some participants like Dr D. M. Igod adopted their role and had fun. Another participant engaged with the student role, writing about an imagined, positive student experience with criterion referencing and adding a sarcastic twist.

We all felt proud of our achievements and it gave us additional confidence in our professional skills until you [The Daily View editor] came along and ruined it for us. Thank you for that.

For the final posting, participants were to indicate what the next step should be. Most summarized aspects of the issue and offered some kind of solution that might be considered to be at least partially educationally sound.

*Role play 2.* The first posting was made 12 days after the start. Of the six participants who contributed, only two posted the minimum required. These and one other began to explore the topic in some depth, for example:

With criterion-based assessment, we are testing to see if students can perform a particular range of tasks. I fear that some of your readers have become blinded by the influence of statistics on modern life in that they seem to believe that by comparing students through a recognized statistical model that this somehow guarantees some quality of ‘truth’.

Three participants posted twice and one only once. Two of the participants rephrased Daily View postings or asked questions rather than contributing to informed debate, for example:

I am very glad to hear that the Ialwaysgoto University medical school is successful with using criterion-based assessment. It would be interesting to know how many universities in this country are using criterion-referenced assessment successfully and how many other universities are using norm-referenced assessment successfully.

Fewer participants in group 2 appeared to became engaged in their roles than in group 1, for example, the following response might be considered uncharacteristic of an authentic Student Representative Council chair: ‘It looks very fair for all students since everyone got the same marks. In fact, it is not fair for bright students’.
Only two of the final postings, in which participants were to indicate what the next step should be, were insightful. The others who had not fully participated made final postings that demonstrated little or no evidence of having done the reading or understood the concepts, for example:

... criterion based assessment involves high level of subjectivity which might cause discomfort for many people.

I believe a normal curve on students' results is reasonable and should be the criterion-reference assessments of standards model.

Group 2, with its smaller number of active participants, did not achieve the same levels of participation, interactivity, role engagement or depth of discussion as group 1.

In both groups. Three of the participants from overseas countries had been noticeably quiet in the face-to-face workshops during the course, requiring extra effort on the part of the moderator to involve them in discussions. It was hoped that these quiet participants might find the online environment more conducive to interaction than the face-to-face workshops. These low-verbal participants were also 'quiet' in the role-play. They made fewer postings than most other participants and their postings were generally shorter, sometimes repeating statements from other postings and/or making uncritical and sometimes confused statements, for example:

I believe a normal curve on student results is reasonable and should be the criterion reference assessments of standard model.

It is my opinion that a better performed student in number of subjects likely to perform better in the rest of the subject.

Findings from the discussion group
The face-to-face discussion was intended to reinforce learning, clear up misconceptions about the discussion topic, debrief on roles and provide the opportunity to discuss the online activity. Several participants were interested in further discussion of criterion- and norm-referenced assessment and of the role-play process. It was again noticeable that the previously mentioned low-verbal participants did not volunteer information unless asked and then made fairly non-committal statements. Apart from the questionnaire data, these people’s views on the process are not so well represented as the views of the more vocal participants.

From the discussion it appeared that most participants did not enter the role-play immediately because other academic activities took precedence, and this was also the case for those who did not make the required number of postings. Several did not know how to access the WebCT bulletin board initially. Some indicated they enjoyed the role-play and were annoyed that others had not really taken on their roles.

Findings from the questionnaire
Eight of the 11 participants who completed the questionnaire agreed the role-play was an effective process for exploring the controversial issue. Three disagreed. All indicated they contributed seriously to the discussion. Nine agreed that anonymity was a key factor in their involvement and comfort. Five indicated they felt engaged with their role. Two did not know how to go about the role-play and one did not know why the role-play was held. Three felt anxious about the role-play and uncomfortable about having their postings read by others, despite the anonymity. Only one participant agreed there should have been more people in the role-play group. Five agreed they might use online role-play for teaching in the future.

Written comments about positive aspects varied and included: playing a role; seeing how differently other people see things; seeing how role interpretation is based on culture; being in other shoes; discussion; interaction; chance to learn (topic and online skills); have fun; explore issues; anonymity; and feedback, for example:

It was interesting to have people comment on things that you do and say; particularly things you don’t think are being transmitted!

Ability to integrate learning, debate and fun.

Written comments about negative aspects were fewer and included: other participants who did not contribute seriously; other participants who did not take on roles; anxiety; time consuming; having to speak out; understanding some of the roles; and initial access problems, for example:
Those who didn’t do the ‘fun’ stuff as well as the serious stuff. Caused me a good deal of anxiety to participate.

Discussion

The findings above raise several key issues in relation to online role-play:

1. What is role-play and do the characteristics of face-to-face role play transfer to the online environment?
2. How do anonymity, asynchronicity and the text-based environment affect involvement?
3. What causes differences in role engagement?
4. What are the appropriate participant numbers and time frame?

What is role-play and do the characteristics of face-to-face role-play transfer to the online environment?

Crookwell et al. describe face-to-face role-play as ‘a social or human activity in which participants “take on” or “act out” specified “roles” often within a predefined social framework or situational blueprint’ (1987, p. 155). The use of face-to-face role-play in education has been described as an ‘attempt to understand human action and experience’ (Yardley-Matwieczuk, 1997, p. 5). Van Ments writes, ‘The idea of role-playing is . . . to give [participants] the opportunity to practise interacting with others in certain roles’ (1999, p. 9). The adoption of the role may be short and episodic, as simple as a teacher asking a student to show a class how they think another person might react to a situation, or as complex as a group of people acting out a conflict situation.

Gredler (1994) describes simulation as a complex, evolving exercise and role-play as a subset of simulations, being a single incident with less complexity and length. In simulation, participants do not invent background information or improvise facts or events. Instead, they execute a particular set of responsibilities (e.g. manager, client) using given information. In contrast, participants in a role-play do not receive detailed background information. They receive a brief outline of the situation and sketchy information about the role (e.g. you are an angry student who has failed an assignment) and they are free to improvise reactions and events. Ladousse (1987) also indicates simulations can draw out more subtle nuances than role-play. Yardley-Matwieczuk views role-play as much closer to simulation, stating that role-play describes ‘a range of activities characterised by involving participants in “as-if” or “simulated” actions and circumstances’ (1997, p. 1).

So role play is simulation in that it simulates the participant’s idea of some other ‘real’ world; but a simulation goes further by setting a system in place for the role players to operate within. Role-play may be described as a teaching method that provides an imaginary context in which issues and behaviours may be explored by participants who take on a specific role or character.

Why should educators use role-play? Role-play is a form of experiential learning that is widely used in training because it can lead to powerful behavioural and attitudinal outcomes (Craig, 1987; Eitington, 1989; McGill and Beaty, 1995; Shaw et al., 1980; Turner, 1992). Role-play can be used to practise skills, explore sensitive issues, expose behaviours and sensitise participants to other ideas, attitudes and values. Role-play offers a unique potential for the generation of action (Yardley-Matwieczuk, 1997) largely because it is such a flexible method with respect to range and depth of focus.

A well organized and operated role-play can provide the experiences and, importantly, the opportunity to reflect on those experiences that help change attitudes or behaviour. It can be highly motivating and enables students to put themselves in situations they have never experienced before, where they can empathize with, and come to understand, other people’s motivations. It can also give life and immediacy to academic descriptive material (Van Ments, 1999, pp. 10–15). There is evidence that participants remember the learning from face-to-face role-play long after they have forgotten much of the learning they learned in other ways (Gredler, 1994; Van Ments, 1999). Rapid feedback for both student and tutor is provided. Importantly, as noted by Ladousse (1987), role-play can also offer the opportunity for people to have fun while learning.

Can we expect the same advantages from online role-play? Are online role-plays being developed simply because the technology makes them possible? Is the use of role-play an attempt to improve poor participation in the online environment? Harasim et al. (1995) indicates that online forums moderated by novice website designers are not well used and suggest role-play as one of several approaches to improve participation. Wills et al. (2000) use role-play to enhance the use of an online database that was being searched in a shallow, perfunctory fashion by the online database users.

While improving participation in existing activities might be a reason to use online role-play, more positive
reasons include the advantages of an asynchronous, text-based medium within what is assumed to be a safe and low-risk learning environment. Examples of this approach include: a role simulation that enabled students to understand the complex pressures that impact on people in the financial sector (Freeman and Capper, 1999) and a role-play simulating international political events (Maher, 1999).

Face-to-face role-play involves acting as another person through voice, gestures and actions. It involves immediate interpretation of, and reaction to, signals from others. Online role-play is text based; the writing can be done after reflection and may be edited. Written contributions may be more considered and more permanent. Obviously, participants are able to utilize resources (people and materials) to prepare their contributions and can even discuss the role-play with each other outside the forum. A participant can simply compose messages in the way they think would be expected of that role rather than acting in the part, engaging with their role and developing empathy with their character. This might increase the possibility of stereotyped responses, which are a hazard of face-to-face role-play (Craig, 1987; Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997) – and stereotyping can create and reinforce prejudice.

How do anonymity, asynchronicity and the text-based environment affect involvement?

Berge (1995, p. 25) recommends that computer conference moderators constantly keep in mind individual differences within the conference. There may be a wide range of intellectual, personality, emotional and technical levels. Differential involvement is therefore to be expected, but it is a significant issue where learning is interactive and dialogic. Anonymity, asynchronicity and the text-based medium may be significant contributors to increased levels of involvement.

Online role-play, unlike its face-to-face counterpart, can be anonymous. Most participants indicated their approval for the anonymity of the role-play but is there any educational reason for anonymity? Does anonymity actually help people participate more – or even learn better? A problem in face-to-face role-play is the level of emotional risk involved where a student is asked to perform a role in public and the performance is observed and criticized (Van Ments 1999, p. 49). This risk is significantly reduced where roles are anonymous to other students.

Some writers have suggested that anonymity in online discussion may increase equity (Collins and Berge, 1995) and participation rates (Connolly et al., 1990; Hartman et al., 1995). Freeman and Capper (1999) found anonymity helped non-English speaking background students to contribute to role-play because students felt more free to ‘criticize’ others, which they would not do in an environment where they could be identified. In this study, three participants expressed anxiety about taking part. While the reason for this anxiety is not clear, it may relate to the moderator knowing the identity of the role players.

Conversely, Chester and Gwynne (1998) speculate on the possibility that antisocial behaviour may be a consequence of online anonymity in computer conferencing, at least with short-term interactions. This may relate to the concept of ‘social presence’ – the degree to which other people in an interaction are perceived as ‘real’ (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997). Social presence is a factor of both the medium and of the communicators, and it is a strong predictor of ‘learner satisfaction’ in computer conferences (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997). Social presence is high in face-to-face and relatively low in text-based media. Anonymity would seem to reduce social presence even further.

A further argument against anonymity relates to the proposition by Palloff and Pratt (1999) that the keys to success in (distance) learning are honesty, empowerment, responsiveness, relevance, respect and openness. Within the higher education literature, Laurillard (1993) and Ramsden (1992) describe learning as a dialogic, constructive activity that requires learners to explain and critique their own and other’s beliefs in order to test them. This requires honest and open interaction. Few offline interactive learning activities in higher education are anonymous. Educators expect their students to communicate and defend their ideas and develop discussion and presentation skills and self-confidence. Pence (1996) actually suggests anonymity may be a hazard to the development of academic community.

Tienne (2000) found the asynchronous text-based medium to be a valuable aspect of online discussion in that some students were less inhibited and took the opportunity to carefully express their ideas. McComb (1994) indicates asynchronicity is a particular benefit for those who are shy, uncertain or linguistically less able. Chester and Gwynne (1998), however, note the difficulties for an Asian student communicating in a text-based medium. In this study, the three participants identified as low-verbal participants whose first language was not English did not make the required number of postings and posted responses that were either short, superficial or apparently confused. However, the non-English speaking background participants who had demonstrated strong verbal skills in face-to-face activity were actively engaged in the role-play using written language for critical analysis and sometimes humour.
What causes differences in role engagement?

Is playing a role online a comfortable activity for students from non-English speaking cultures? Differences in cultural styles have been noted by Ballard and Clanchy (1991) and Chalmers and Volet (1997) who indicate that many overseas students need time and support to adapt to an educational context where self-direction, active participation and critical thinking are emphasized.

Role-play, like any other teaching method, has epistemological implications: ‘Game culture will always reflect some complex interaction between the prior beliefs brought to the game by the participants and the scenario postulated by the simulator’ (Benson et al., 1972). A role-play scenario is, in reality, a statement that encompasses the designer’s beliefs and cultural background. In this study, the scenario encompassed the designer’s western cultural assumptions and sense of humour, as well as ideas about the role of the local media, relevant stakeholders and university culture.

Those participants who were less actively engaged with their roles were identified as from non-English speaking backgrounds with low-verbal involvement in face-to-face workshops. It is possible that for those participants the idea of role-play was unfamiliar, even threatening, because of differences in cultural style. However, as noted above, the non-English speaking background participants who had demonstrated strong verbal skills were actively engaged in the role-play. It may be that language proficiency rather than cultural background is the more significant factor in both involvement and role engagement.

What are the appropriate participant numbers and time frame?

Wills et al. (2000) suggest that although there are technologies for role plays such as First Fleet Online that support a large number of roles, involvement in a ‘character-rich’ interaction can be challenging for the participants. In order to achieve specific learning objectives, Wills et al. suggest that making a representative group of characters available is more important than having large numbers of characters. While short, episodic, face-to-face role-play can be effectively carried out with two people, the asynchronous environment might dictate a certain ‘critical mass’ for an online role-play to succeed. The size of the required critical mass would be significantly influenced by the motivation and involvement of the role players.

In this study, only one of the 11 participants who completed the questionnaire believed there should have been more people in their role-play group. This suggests that small groups of approximately eight participants are manageable for participants who are required to read multiple postings. Despite the above response on the questionnaire, the moderator considered the group of six to be in danger of failing through lack of involvement. It did not achieve the participation, interactivity or critical content of the group of eight. It is suggested that eight may be the minimum number for an online role-play group except where all participants are highly motivated and actively involved.

The role-play took place over a five-week period with only one posting per week required. It may be that a shorter timeframe and a larger number of required postings would have led to greater participation.

Conclusion

A case study into an asynchronous, anonymous, online role-play with members of a course for academic staff has been discussed. Most participants reported the process to be effective for learning about the topic and analysis of the role-play postings suggests that most may have achieved meaningful understanding of the issue under exploration. Most participants approved the anonymity of the method and some valued the opportunity to explore the issues from differing perspectives. Only a few demonstrated engagement with their roles, and levels of involvement in the activity varied. Of the two role-play groups, the smaller group with six active participants was less effective than the group of eight.

The case study suggests that while online role-play can fulfil a valuable educational function, the asynchronous, online environment might reduce one of the key advantages of face-to-face role-play; that is, the development of empathy through role engagement. It gains an advantage in that for many participants the online environment makes role play an emotionally safer and lower-risk activity than face-to-face role-play.

This case study suggests some issues for further exploration as follows.

- What level of role engagement is to be encouraged?
- What is the appropriate time frame and number of participants?
• Will students from overseas countries participate in different ways from local students?
• How do asynchronicity and text-based interaction affect involvement?
• Should online role play be an anonymous activity?

It is suggested that exploration of these issues should increase understanding of online role-play as a teaching methodology.

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