A DIFFERENT LUNCH: ROLE-PLAY SIMULATIONS IN PREPARING EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS

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Abstract

This paper is based on a project where an on-line role-play simulation facilitated the creation of an interactive social environment containing leadership challenges from diverse perspectives. By stepping into the roles of key stakeholders, students were required to respond to an incident at a child-care centre. Insights gained from the evaluation of simulations conducted with two groups of final year Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies students, highlighted the benefits and challenges of E-learning as a tool to promote critical thinking in relation to decision-making as early childhood leaders. These findings also evoke debate about long-term implications of using on-line technology in teacher education.

Key Words

Role-Play, Simulations, E-learning, Teaching, Leadership.

Introduction

This paper describes and analyses a computer mediated role-play on leadership issues in the preparation of early childhood leaders. Leadership literature rarely examines the nexus between leadership growth and leadership training. Definitions of leadership do not usually refer to the training of leaders (M. Waniganayake, 2002). Early childhood research suggests that the positions of leadership in the field tend to be held by accidental leaders with little or no training (M. Ebbeck & M. Waniganayake, 2003; Hayden, 1996; and J. Rodd, 1998). This paper however shows one way in which leadership training can be achieved using an on-line role-play and presents some of the feedback by the future leaders who experienced it.

Leadership issues are inextricably linked with decision-making and working with others. The on-line role-play simulation allowed us to gain access to an appropriate social space for students to engage their critical thinking and decision-making skills necessary to become leaders in early childhood.

Through the on-line role-play a "community of inquiry" (M. Lipman in S. Wilks 1995) was created where participants began to think and respond in a reflective manner, respectful of diverse perspectives and the need to consider alternative points of view. By stepping into the roles of key stakeholders (n=10), participants (n=120) experienced the full impact of exercising the rights and responsibilities that are aligned with specific roles. In response to the evolving story line, the 'game' provided an authentic context for more reflective dialogue between participants on issues of concern.

Insights gained from the evaluation of this simulation conducted with final year undergraduate students at the University of Melbourne, Australia, highlight the benefits and challenges of e-learning that combines 'playing' (in the tri-fold senses of having fun, play acting and playing with possibilities) with critical thinking, particularly in relation to ethical responsibilities of today's early childhood leaders.

The Creating Thinking Professionals Project

Funded by a research grant from the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, the primary purpose of the Creating Thinking Professionals (CTP) Project was the development of an interactive Web environment to support the teaching and learning of early childhood education students. Specific aims and educational objectives included:

- ·To enable students to engage in critical thinking when relating to professional issues/concerns within everyday contexts;
- ·To enhance teaching and learning of key professional concepts through problem based learning strategies which allow students access to meaningful contexts as if they themselves were direct participants in the ongoing dialogue;
- ·To facilitate better access and understanding about critical debates in education though real-.life scenarios encountered by early educators.

The delivery of the program to students commenced during 2002 using the role-play simulation and was repeated in 2003. It involved fourth year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies in a subject dealing with leadership in early childhood. The content of the course included the familiarization of students with issues involved in (a) working with parents, colleagues and other professionals; (b) developing networks and working with government and non-government agencies; (c) methods of communication and identification of typical problems associated with decision-making in children services centres; and (d) policy development and the role early childhood professionals may play as advocates in a wider societal context

An on-line evaluation instrument was included on the web site to systematically obtain objective feedback from students. The data was used to analyse the overall effectiveness of the simulation as an innovative IT-based teaching/learning framework.

Role-play simulation

An interactive Website generated by the Fablusi Role-play software developed by Fablusi Pty Ltd provided the platform for this project. The inbuilt design features of the Fablusi platform was judged to most suit the objective of the CTP project as it enabled the generation of an interactive web environment supporting the role-play. These features included:

- Authentic and active narrative: both engaging and entertaining
- Anonymity: role specific and unique user interface
- Adaptability: run multiple groups at the same time
- Re-playability: re-run the same role-play
- Archive: of all material for research and evaluation
- Additional learning resources: updated any time
- Administrative support: on going and integrated
- Assessment: on-going and integrated
- Evaluation: on-line survey; data collation and analysis

This platform allowed students to engage in a range of reflective activities directly linked to the objectives of the CTP Project and more specifically enabled the issues of leadership in the early childhood field to become the environment of teaching and learning. The platform also provided the lecturers with progressive overviews of students' work that permitted focus on identifying changes in students' understanding, commitment, reflections on their learning, and feedback. Staff were able to adapt lecture/tutorial content and learning activities in response to the continuing dialogue online.

The on-line role-play simulation involved students accessing site daily. All students were required to attend a training session before the simulation started, and also participate in a post- role-play 'community meeting' at the conclusion of the simulation. During the simulation students were engaged in a range of learning experiences that combined open-ended tasks and reflective activities.

A video that constituted the start-up scenario and photographic images, with voice-overs that provided a short background narrative on each character were produced on a CD and distributed to individual students who could view it at their convenience. Together with resources placed on the website, there was sufficient visual imagery and text to bring to life each character to facilitate the role-play on-line. Resources such as on-line journal articles and government documents such as Licensing Regulations and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, were linked to the website to provide easy access and support students to reflect and extend their knowledge and understanding about critical debates of relevance to early childhood educators.

Called "A Different Lunch", the role-play involved professional dilemmas that were centred on social diversity. The start-up scenario portrayed an altercation between a member of staff and a parent at a fictional child-care centre. It highlighted cross cultural communication issues and policy, raising questions dealing with the appropriate behaviour of staff and parents, appropriate policy development regarding food, relationship to other professionals in government and media and other issues. Students, in teams of 2-3 players, confronted these issues as one of 10 characters associated with this incident, and the role-play was online and interactive for three weeks. This meant that, effectively over 21 days, students had to act out their roles in response to the evolving story line. Students needed to make decisions concerning these issues, they needed to liaison with government and media agencies, and they developed appropriate food policy for the child-care centre. The aim was to promote critical thinking about leadership issues that required participants to examine their own and others' professional and moral values. Their combined actions directed the path of the role-play - there was no set script to follow. By playing the role of one of the key characters including a child, her parents, centre staff, management committee members, a government adviser and a newspaper journalist, students could step into the shoes of another person and discover multiple perspectives in responding to the same incident. It is important to note however, that including the time involved in preparing for their roles and reflecting on the

roles they played, the students were engaged in the whole activity for at least 8 weeks. Students worked both individually and in groups of three carrying out the various tasks, which constituted part of the assessment requirements of the course.

The role-play thus addressed moral and professional issues associated with what makes a good early childhood leader. The evolving storyline required students to make decisions and take action to ensure the safety and well being of all concerned.

Evaluation of the simulation – selected issues

Though to us the role-play indeed seems to have met the objectives of the project, it was deemed important to find out whether the students actually thought the simulation was effective in helping them learn about issues associated with early childhood leadership. Students were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the role-play simulation for learning various issues, and their responses were collated and analysed. Selected findings are presented and discussed next.

A majority of students, 86%, agreed that the simulation was effective in terms of learning about the impact of human rights issues (57% thought it was very or extremely useful as opposed to 12% who thought it was only somewhat useful and 2% who thought it was not useful at all.)

Similarly 86% of the participants agreed that the simulation had been successful in raising their awareness of cultural diversity issues (44% thought it either extremely or very useful as opposed to 12% who thought it was only somewhat useful and 2% believed that the simulation had not been useful as a tool for learning about cultural diversity.)

In two of the key areas associated with enhancing their understanding about professional practice as early educators, students agreed that the simulation was highly successful. An overwhelming majority of participants, 95%, declared that the simulation had been effective in learning about the issues and pressures involved in working in the early childhood field (85% thought it was either very or extremely useful and only 5% thought its was only somewhat useful.) Likewise, 91% of the participants agreed that the simulation was effective in learning about relationships between parents and professionals (62% agreed that it was very or extremely useful.)

Learning to work effectively with families is one of the fundamental aspects of being a leader in the early childhood field. It was therefore particularly gratifying to note that this simulation had facilitated the growth of valuable skills and knowledge pertaining to the development of partnerships with families.

Using technology in teacher education - some continuing conundrums

While it was clear from the data we collected that the overwhelming majority of students felt that the simulation was an effective way to learn about leadership issues in Early Childhood, it is also clear that the use of computer mediated communication raises a number of issues that as educators we need to address. Here we will only discuss a few of the more salient issues that the use of this technology raises.

Risk Management: Initiating and responding to change are integral dimensions of contemporary leadership in the real world. Highly effective transformational leaders work with others to stimulate debate and seek innovative solutions to challenges like those presented in the "Different Lunch" scenario. As such leaders expose themselves and their community to risks. Their solutions and innovations are not guaranteed to succeed in the real world and the consequence could have flow-on effects to both themselves and their community. The on-line simulated environment created by the technology we used helped in eliminating these risks while training. It enabled students to initiate and respond to the challenges in a safe environment. The consequences of their actions were contained in the simulated world they were playing and had an effect on the roles without the risks associated with such actions in the real world. It is thus important to remember to maintain a clear separation between student and the role they are playing. This means that students should not take the consequences of their role's actions, and other roles, on a personal level, but rather view these consequences at the level of the simulation.

Using the technology thus offered a sense of security from external forces though the players themselves could behave in unexpected ways and such cases may be highlighted for discussion and debriefing during the community conference.

Traditional vs. E-learning: Whilst most students quickly acquired the necessary technical skills to manipulate and direct the role-play, and the evaluations suggested that the change from paper-based tasks to on-line experiential learning was an easy one, as educators we need to be aware that the current limited data cannot be generalised to conclude that such a change may be easy for everyone.

Patterns of social behaviour that have been acquired through everyday practice and internalised overtime are often difficult to abandon. However our early data indicated the potential for computer-mediated simulations to offer skill advancement.

The two areas that students thought the simulation technology helped them the most were in organizing and processing of information relevant to their course and in presenting their work for assessment as a process rather than paper based assessment. An overwhelming majority of students, 93%, agreed that the technology helped them present their work for assessment as a process rather than as paper based essays. Similarly, 84% of students agreed that the technology helped them process and organize a very large amount of information about the complexities of an early childhood professional's work.

While the data indicates that the simulation technology was helpful in a number of ways, it does not tell us why this method of learning was felt to be useful. Some clearly agreed that it was a 'refreshing' approach as indicated by the comments below:

- "I think that the simulation was a really innovative way of introducing issues to students. I am concerned that many students will be negative about this experience because it was new, but I personally appreciated a new approach to assessment and to learning in general." - Student R, 2002.
- "It was refreshing to be taught about leadership and advocacy through the simulation process. There are far too many essay assessments so it was good to be involved in something a bit foreign." - Student B, 2002.
- "It was a very interesting and different way of completing a subject. It was somewhat a release from the previous years work and fantastic to complete towards the end of our course. Congratulations of creating such an experience!!!" - Student S, 2002.

From these and other comments we can infer that the novelty factor may have been influential in the perception of the usefulness of this method of learning. On the other hand, the excitement and exuberance with which students embraced this 'novel' learning experience cannot be discarded as unimportant. Motivated students are more likely to learn than unmotivated ones.

Communication and the Social Construction of Knowledge

Self-knowledge arises in collaboration with others as it allows for the better exploration of ideas, beliefs, values, problems and solutions. Collaboration and interaction, as has been argued by social constructivists (R. Linser and A. Ip. 2002), not only facilitates learning, but also constitutes the essential context in the production of knowledge and learning. However, even at the best of times, talking about values is not easy, and asking students to consider rights and ethics for instance, requires them to be engaged "in the kinds of discussions they seem to want to avoid." (S. Wilks, 1993: 1). The Fablusi platform enabled the creation of a communication environment for interaction that simulated the spaces found in a childhood services centre and the design of the role-play simulation created three levels for the students to interact: the interaction between roles, the interaction between students playing a particular role as a team, and the interaction between students and teachers. Playing a role that is characterised as having these ideas, beliefs, values etc., enabled students to explore these without the emotional difficulties associated with them had they held these themselves. At the level of the team playing the role, these beliefs and values could then be discussed among team members further clarifying and deepening the experience. And finally at the level of student-teacher interaction it becomes easier to discuss these even if students hold such values and beliefs.

The findings from the first evaluations surprisingly showed that the use of this tiered communication technology facilitated greater active interactions between students but not between students and teachers. As the data reveals, 78% of participants thought that the technology was instrumental in enabling more interaction with peers as against 22% who thought otherwise. But only 44% of students agreed that the technology was instrumental in interacting with teachers as against 51% that disagreed.

This was surprising because teachers were the simulation moderators, and we expected that students would feel that they had continuous access to their teachers. One explanation is that teachers were not overtly present as teachers. As moderators they overlooked the learning process rather than taking an explicit role of teaching. Perhaps students perceived the role of the moderator as significantly different from being a teacher. This raises a number of interesting issues about the pedagogy of the simulation and more specifically about the relation between teacher/lecturer/tutor versus moderator – or more broadly it raises the issue of authority relations in the learning process. These questions cannot be answered here but they are an issue being addressed in an upcoming paper.

It would therefore be fair to say that the simulation enabled, in the words of Cox, "the affirmation of self (that) comes from working with others in a group; through the collective exploration of new ideas and the reworking of old ones." (E. Cox, 1995: 5) However, the question whether teachers are part of this group, or 'learning community' is mute. The exact role of teachers in a learning process where students are the centre of the learning activity rather than teachers needs further exploration and debate, as does the non-authoritarian mode of teaching that this type of learning activity encourages.

Paralinguistic and non-Verbal Communication cues: Leadership, however, not only arises through interactions with others, its development and survival is dependant on relationships and shared meanings derived through contact and communication with others. Given that on-line communication is not conducted in direct physical proximity with peers or teachers, the paralinguistic and non-verbal dimension of communication cannot play the same role as they do in normal face-to-face interaction. Does this mean that by embracing on-line technology as an instrument or platform for knowledge creation and transmission we are 'dehumanising' teaching and learning? And to what extent does the absence of tactile and temporal stimuli generated through physical contact between human-beings impact on the teaching/learning that happens in simulations such as ours? Though we can create environments that simulate reality, features such as the warmth or coldness that could result from a human embrace, or the glare of eyes indicating anger cannot be fully realised by engaging in a computer mediated role-play. Strategies such as scripting action – 'staging cues' like in a written play -can be, and have been used in our simulation. For example a role might write, " I don't think so. [*said while walking out and slamming the door.*]" can in some way overcome this difficulty. But these 'staging cues' can never reproduce the full gamut of what goes on at spontaneous paralinguistic level.

Communication and learning incorporating non-verbal signals or body language can therefore be lost in a technologically powered simulation. On the other hand, the very absence of such paralinguistic and non-verbal communication cues can be highlighted and made more obvious for reflection and discussion and may enable a less emotional and more rational dialogue to take place.

Teamwork: In the design of the simulation students were assigned to work on their roles in teams because we anticipated that it would help with the workload and more importantly we thought that as teams they would be able to develop their ideas and reflect on the developing scenario more effectively than they would have as individuals.

In the student evaluations of their experience our expectation that working in small teams would help in coping with the amount of work involved proved correct as 83% of students thought that it was useful in coping with the workload (61% thought it was extremely or very useful.)

The second assumption, that the simulation would help them develop their ideas, was also born out by the results. The majority, 81% thought that playing the roles as a team was useful in that it enabled them to develop ideas with their partners (69% thought it extremely or very helpful,) and from their comments it is clear that they thought this was the major advantage in working as a team. Only 14% preferred playing on their own rather than as a team as opposed to 64% who preferred playing as a team and 23% who had no preference.

On the other hand when asked about the disadvantages of working as teams many commented that there were problems in this regard as reflected in the following:

- ·"Hard getting everyone to do their fair share. Also relying on people to complete tasks" - Student 2002.
- ·"There is always one or two people doing all the work in the team, whilst the other team member do little or no work at all" - Student 2002.
- ·"You are relying on other people to pull their weight in order to play effectively and it is often too late when you find out they haven't done what they said they'd do." - Student 2002.

There is thus a real danger that without appropriate monitoring of team interaction, the technology may encourage isolation and non-collaborative input, as the simulation technology itself does not require any physical face-to-face meeting amongst participants. Our students however, did generally meet face-to-face at least twice a week. Any evaluations that are conducted therefore need to monitor and reflect on the nature of strategies used by students to maintain communication and interactions during the role-play.

Access and Equity: There is potential danger in embracing computer mediated technology to promote thinking skills without due consideration to its limitations as a teaching/learning tool. External factors of availability and access to appropriate technology hampered students' participation in the simulation as reflected in the following comments:

- ·"Because of practicum and not being at uni it was hard to access the computer and I don't have the Net at home and the simulation didn't really flow as I could see it would if there was regular access to the Net." - Student D, 2002.
- ·"In our group, one of our players has no access to internet at home and therefore could not play when not at University. In writing emails we completed these individually, and at times input was completed from only a few of the team members" - Student M, 2002.

Access limitations of the technology can thus hinder learning rather than enhancing it. One must be mindful about the extent to which we enforce technologically driven solutions as a way of teaching and learning. The digital divide is one way of describing poverty today. Failure to address not only the skills and resource implications but also attitudes and beliefs about using technology, cuts across equity considerations, and can result in dis-empowering both teachers and learners.

Conclusion

Was this simulation effective in creating thinking professionals who can deliver leadership to the early childhood profession? Whilst students' evaluations reflected a high level of satisfaction in terms of understanding the divergent roles and responsibilities of early childhood professionals, it is difficult, from our limited data to assess the extent to which this learning will be effective in the long term. This highlights the need for research that systematically explores the long term implications of the modern technology mediated pedagogy described in this paper. As teacher educators we need to ensure that we are not simply being seduced by technology, but are providing an education that is appropriate for the new era of e-world learning.

Acknowledgement

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