Suppose you were someone else…
The learning environment of a web-based role-play simulation

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Abstract: Do role-play simulations help students with learning? This paper discusses the experience of 'playing a role' in a we-based role-play simulation in light of evaluations of students who participated as teams in two role-play simulations designed for a course on leadership in Early Childhood at the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne and run in 2002 and 2003. The learning environment created in using a role-play simulation, it is argued, not only facilitates the collaborative process of constructing knowledge in context. But perhaps more significantly, the experience of deploying solutions to problems in such an interactive and reflexive environment and the unintended consequences that arise from such deployments of solutions to problems is instrumental in creating a reflective and integrated understanding of course material.

Introduction

Suppose you were someone else and this someone was a character in a simulation that a group of students were playing as part of a university course about leadership issues in the field of early childhood studies.

Your name is Ann Peterson and you are the Director of the All-care childcare centre – You have been confronted with a scenario in which a parent, Mr. Zug, enters the childcare centre during playtime and proceeds to give his child Minnie some food. He is confronted by one of the female childcare assistants at the centre, Betty, but he ignores her. Frustrated and in the presence of Minnie, Mrs. Zug watching outside the gate and another childcare assistant, Betty yells at him that bringing food from outside the centre is not allowed and proceeds to push him directing him to leave the centre immediately.

What are you to do? What are your obligations? What strategies would best suit an outcome that is best for staff, parents and children? These are the initial questions you confront as a character and which arise out of the above scenario.

Luckily for you as Ann, you hear voices in your head. You're not crazy, it is the voice of three undergraduate students debating the merits and possible effects of reprimanding Betty as a first step to resolve the crisis that appears to have erupted at the Al-Care Centre. But when you take this course of action you find that others at the All-Care childcare centre did not respond in the way you expected. Ann now confronts an angry and dejected childcare assistant, Betty, a dissatisfied father, a distressed child, a government inspector who is about to visit the centre, the parent-meeting committee chairman etc.; and the choices of how to smooth things out gets more complex.

The effects of such choices raise cultural, ethical and professional dilemmas commonly found in the field under study. But apart from being fun, did playing a role in the simulation actually help students with the material of their course? And if it did, how and why did it do so?

If you have been following the introduction, for the last few minutes (in reading these words or hearing them in this conference hall), you suspended belief and briefly took on the role of Ann Peterson in an attempt to understand the idea of taking on a role. We have conducted a thought experiment to see what it feels like to be someone else, even if for a very brief moment in time. Now suppose you did this for a three week period and developed your role everyday for an hour. Would this fictional persona not develop a life of its own yet be sharing the experience with you?

Evaluation results and discussion:
The majority of students who participated in the on-line evaluations of the simulation (n=41) rated the simulation as helping them with 8 out of the 9 topics raised in the course and that it was generally helpful in learning about the early childhood field (see Appendix 1, Fig. 1.) The majority also agreed that this activity was useful in approaching the course material as a whole rather than one bit of information at a time (see Appendix 1, Fig. 2.).

Though such student evaluations are gratifying they nevertheless beg the question why? Why is it that participants rate such a learning environment as helpful? How does playing a role in a game, even when it does deal with the relevant pedagogical issues, help students understand their course material better?

There are a number of answers to these questions and here we can only discuss a few provisional and interrelated explanations.

One set of explanations revolves around the notion of taking on the attitudes of others as if they were our own. By explicitly taking the attitude of another, something we do implicitly as a matter of course in communicating with others in many contexts, students discover issues that they would not have otherwise encountered had they been viewing the material on the basis of their own attitudes and beliefs.

Social psychology and sociology emanating from the work of G.H. Mead placed great emphasis on the reciprocal process of 'taking the attitude of the other' as the basis for our ability to understand others and create the intersubjective world in which we live.[1] Similarly the 'empathic' psychology of George Kelley proposes that we understand others and are able to play a role in the social process to the extent to which we construe the sets of expectations others have of us and with which we create our attitudes, beliefs values and modes of behaviour [2]. R.D. Lang, likewise, discusses the refraction of self in the refraction of others in the creation of 'metaperspectives' or 'the spiral of reciprocal perspectives' in our understanding of our selves and others [3].

Taking on the attitudes of the other is thus not a new idea in trying to explain how social interaction occurs. The argument here is that this routine and implicit use of taking on the attitudes of others in order to understand ourselves and others' actions is what makes role-play useful in understanding the material for the Leadership in Early Childhood course. By using this implicit process in an explicit mode for learning, it brings to the fore issues that students might not have otherwise encountered and it becomes possible to explicitly explore them. Insofar as the material deals with attitudes, values, strategies, issues and pressures etc., faced by professionals in early childhood, playing at being professionals, students gain the sort of insight into the material that comes from the way they understand their own personal experience.

A second line of explanation is that the suspension of belief required in a role-play simulation frees students not only to explore attitudes and beliefs they may not hold but also modes of action they would not otherwise take. In philosophy, at least since Socrates, suspension of belief and thought experiments of the kind in which one assumes the position of the other in order to explore their implications is a fairly standard method of inquiry. Thus in suspending their own beliefs, students open up to possibilities for understanding beliefs and ideas that they may not hold. In playing a role in a simulation however they also become aware of the consequences when these attitudes and beliefs serve as the basis for action.

A role-play simulation of the kind the students experienced in 'A Different Lunch' is a sort of collaborative thought experiment externalised, made explicit and open to inspection, and perhaps more significantly, opens to possible modes of action and consequences that may even be unexpected.

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[1] In the now classic text in social psychology, *Mind Self and Society* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1934) George Herbert Mead argued that the social act is made possible because 'we take the attitude of the other'. The Interactionist, Dramaturgical and Ethnomethodlogical schools of sociology developed this sort of understanding as demonstrated in the works of Herbert Blumer, Irving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel respectively. For Goffman's work see *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, Garden City, 1959), *Strategic Interaction* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1970) and *Frame Analysis* (Penguin, Middlesex, 1974). For the position of Herbert Blumer and Ethnomethodology see Meltzer B.N. et.al. *Symbolic Interactionism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

[2] G.A. Kelley, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Norton, New York, 1955, pp. 94-95.

[3] R.D. Lang, *Interpersonal Perspectives*, Tavistock, London 1966, pp. 3-34.

This leads to the third set of explanations surrounding the consequences of possible modes of action in a safe environment. In a safe environment where personal beliefs are sheltered by the persona being played and the real identity of students is hidden from view, students can explore modes of action they would not have otherwise taken.

Moreover, where virtual effects substitute the real consequences of actions, students become free to explore issues, values, beliefs and attitudes they would otherwise feel emotionally constrained to explore. If just a game, any challenge to these emotionally laden issues would not threaten the edifice of identity to which they are linked. Further, when playing a role, students become aware of, and indeed as part of the game feign, the defence mechanisms that challenges to these values would normally arouse. The emotional consequences that would have been provoked under real conditions are thus prevented and students can deal with issues, perhaps in a more rational manner.

Finally the fourth set of explanations leans on the social constructivist emphasis on collaborative learning. Playing in teams allows students to challenge and explore their own ideas and beliefs amongst peers without the constraints, which the authoritarian position of teachers might impose. Having separated out the role from the student and in playing it in teams, the marks they might receive, though still a background concern is not as salient as would have been in the case of individual writing an essay or exam.

Moreover, the ability to discuss an issue with peers, to test ideas and modes of action creates an atmosphere of exploration much more difficult to achieve otherwise. Not only do the weaker students get the benefit of helpful attention from the stronger students, but the group as a whole seems to become infused with a 'buzz' or 'adrenalin rush' often found in team sports. Students motivate their peers and share views with each other in a more profound way than they would have in doing individual assessment work.

The arguments above are very general and point to a general explanation concerning the question raised by this paper. Students believe that Web-based role-play simulations are helpful with their course material because the experience of a collaborative thought experiment characterised as playful exploration in a safe environment gives them access to the way they naturally learn from their own experience.

However these arguments also point to a further avenue for exploration. G.H. Mead came to the conclusion that to understand society we need to look at the processes of communication. "Communication" he wrote "is in a true sense the organizing process of a community." [4]

Communication, however, can be viewed from very different and non-commensurable perspectives [5]. The next section will explore the issue from the perspective of Medium Theory [6] because what is unique about the web-based role-play simulations we are discussing is the medium of communication itself.

Traditional vs. E-learning

Medium theory contends that using different media of communication creates significantly different spatial and temporal effects for social relations. For our purposes this directs attention to the structural constraints imposed by the medium and the way it can both limit and create new opportunities for learning [7]. Here we will focus our comments and observations on the impact of web technology as a medium for role-play simulations in teaching and how they might impact on the students taking the 'attitude of the other' in order to learn.

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[4] G.H. Mead, op.cit., p 327.

[5] Generally there are four major models for understanding communication: the Message model, the Semiotic model, the Interactionist model and Medium theory. Above we have explored some strands of the Interactionist perspective.

[6] Based on the work of Harold Innes and Marshall McLhun. For a brief statement see Meyrowitz, J., 'Medium Theory' in Crowley, D. & Mitchell, D. (eds.), Communication Theory Today, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 50-77.,

[7] The general structural effects of traditional modes of learning and the use of modern CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) underlying the E-learning explosion has been explored in Linser, R. and Naidu S., "Web-based simulations as teaching and learning media in Political Science" AusWeb99 Conference Proceedings, Balina Beach, April 18-20, 1999, (http://www.ausis.org/SimPlay/papers/ausweb99.html).

To address this issue the different levels of interaction that the web-based role-play simulation created and in which it is embedded need to be briefly considered with regard to communication between roles (the contrast with f2f role play), communication between students playing the same role and student-teacher communication. Necessarily the discussion is incomplete and only serves as a very limited example of issues that need further elaboration.

With regard to role communication, the web-technology we used has at least one very significant limiting constraint that face-to-face role-play and more generally traditional methods of teaching and learning, as well as more sophisticated technologies, do not. The communication between roles was mostly written text (in Chat, NotePad, SimMail and Forums) rather than video or audio conferencing [8]. As a consequence, paralinguistic and non-verbal cues that form much of the backdrop to context dependent social interaction was absent. The tone of voice, stern or compassionate, the look in the eyes, the tilt of the head, body language, status markers associated with social positions like clothing, sitting behind a desk in the principle's office while talking to a standing childcare assistant, walking out of the principle's office and slamming the door, are all significant interpretive cues for participants in face-to-face interaction. The question is how important are these in playing-roles dealing with issues in the early childhood field? Is their absence a disadvantage or can it be construed as beneficial?

Some demonstrated great ingenuity in attempting to overcome this limitation by inserting staging cues, like in a play script, that explicitly stated the sort of paralinguistic non-verbal cues and status markers, they wanted to highlight. This awareness proliferated to other participants who also began using such devices. The absence of such cues thus became an opportunity to explicitly reflect on their importance in face-to-face interaction. Hence it may be argued that their absence had an important function for learning as the need to explicitly point them out in textual form required participants to reflect on their use in the different interactive contexts.

A second structural constraint enabled by the virtual environment, the space-time compression, had an effect on internal role-communication between team members and between roles. In the real world background organizational processes take time to develop - like the time it takes for organizing appointments requiring the co-presence of participants at particular locations and at a particular time.

Initially students attempted to organize such meetings to discuss issues arising from the scenario and from the actions of other roles. However, they abandoned this attempt after the moderator pointed out that it was unnecessary to actually meet face to face as they could simply leave messages (their concerns, ideas, questions, recommendations for actions etc.) in their NotePad for other team members playing the same role, or in the Forums and SimMail for other roles, and the addressees of such messages could answer in their own time (within 24 hours) – only the synchronous chat tool required organizing a time for the parties to be on-line. The effect was that substantive issues replaced organizational ones and the focus of interaction became the issues themselves while the process that in the real world enable the discussion of such issues were compressed.

Finally the teacher student relationship as well as intra-role and inter-role communication involves a third structural effect of the web-based role-play technology. The dynamic scenario, an evolving storyline initially authored by the teacher but developed by the students through their roles, enables the transformation in the focus of activity and the relations in which it is embedded. For example, face-to-face linguistic interaction requires linear turn taking so that only one person can hold the floor at any particular time. That has meant that in the teaching and learning environment, teachers set the agenda and in a one to many context mediated and directed the ongoing discourse about the material they were teaching. As a consequence, the teacher became the focus of attention. Learning then takes place in the occasional reflective utterances of single students in class or in the reflective silence of writing of material in libraries or at home (of course, as constructivists argue a lot of learning also takes place in the periphery of the official spaces for learning).

The de-centring of the learning process away from teachers timetable towards students timetable, away from linear organization of issues towards centrifugal organization, from teacher's priorities to the student's decision as to what is important at any particular time, and from individual learning towards collaboration enabled students to

[8] We took this decision for two main reasons: because we needed to be able to deliver it to students who may not all have the required technology (high speed internet connections, web-cam, microphones etc.) and secondly did not want to distract the students with attempting to produce sophisticated imagery. We did however provide all students with a video of the initial scenario produced on a CD ROM and images of their role.

foreground issues as they discovered them while playing and bring them into the learning activity rather than responding to pre-determined issues for discussion. On the other hand, the capacity of teachers to monitor the activities, to intervene, create 'new facts' that raise issues if and when they consider these issues important or useful at a particular juncture of 'events' (the 'just in time' approach), protects the pedagogical objectives in case students activities begin to displace issues they find unimportant or uninteresting. However the point is that rather than the latter being the rule for teacher-student discursive interaction over issues it becomes the exception.

This raises the question of who and how a learning agenda is determined or more broadly the question of authorship and authority [9]. While the teachers (lecturers) and the institutional hierarchies in which they are embedded still present an over-arching agenda for the course and the simulation (the initial scenario, the number and type of roles, issues which the simulation aims to raise, the assessment components, the organization of the web site etc. - in short providing the resource for learning,) it is the students through their roles which both author the texts and the issues to be negotiated as the agenda of the simulation which produce the learning outcomes.

Undoubtedly, as shown, the medium effects significant alterations to a whole range of relations - the simulated, the collaborative and institutional. It separates the learning space from the institutional space, the virtually interactive from the organizational procedural and replaces the context dependent verbal exchange with the content reflective written text embedded in context.

The technology as a medium for learning thus helps students by providing a secure environment for 'taking on the attitude of the other'. By using the identity of the role as the bearer of the beliefs, values and actions to be challenged, the identity of the student remains protected. It allows the students to suspend belief so that they can 'play' with these beliefs, values and actions, investigate them and experience their consequences.

Conclusion

Learning occurs when reflection on experience leads to new paths in handling situations. When the relation between experience and knowledge becomes knowledge/experience – when they are fused into a dynamic resource for handling situations.

We hold on to beliefs until they are challenged. Either by others, by the situations we confront or our own critical attitude – when we take the position as if we were someone else who is critical of our beliefs we are able to examine them – or put them to the test. These challenges in the educational environment come from all these sectors: from our teachers, the books they recommend, and our peers and sometimes from our own refusal to change beliefs.

Once challenged we either discard these beliefs and take on new ones, alter them and combine them with new elements or indeed keep them because they withstand the challenge.

Now suppose you were I, would you conclude that not only do we learn from reflection, but in the spirit of RD Lang from the refraction of these reflections on the world as reflected in the actions of others?

[9] For a more thorough discussion of this point see R. Linser & M. Waniganayake "Where is the teacher? e-Learning Technology, Authority and Authorship in teaching and learning" Forthcoming paper Ed-Media Conference, Lugano Switzerland June 21-26, 2004

Appendix 1

Figure 1.

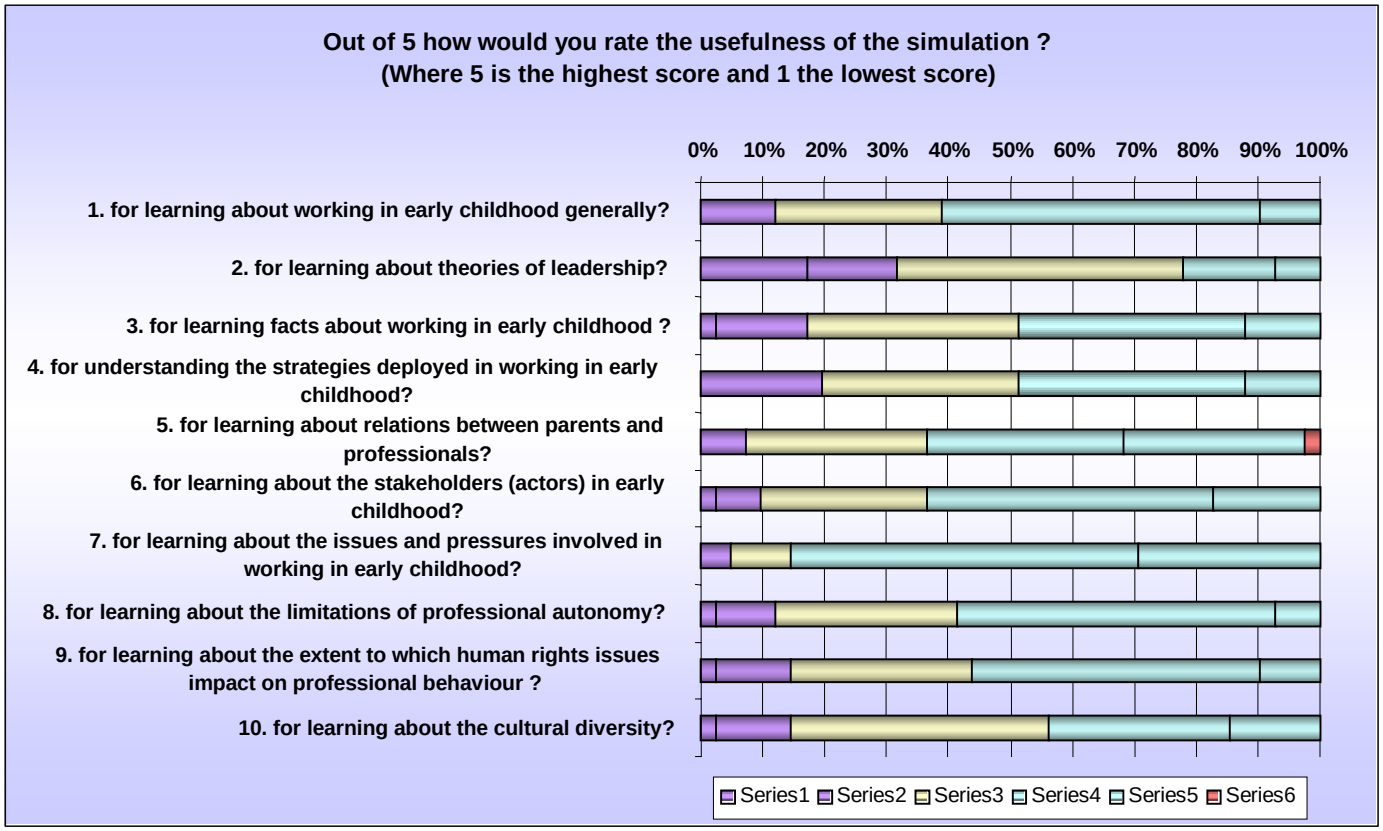
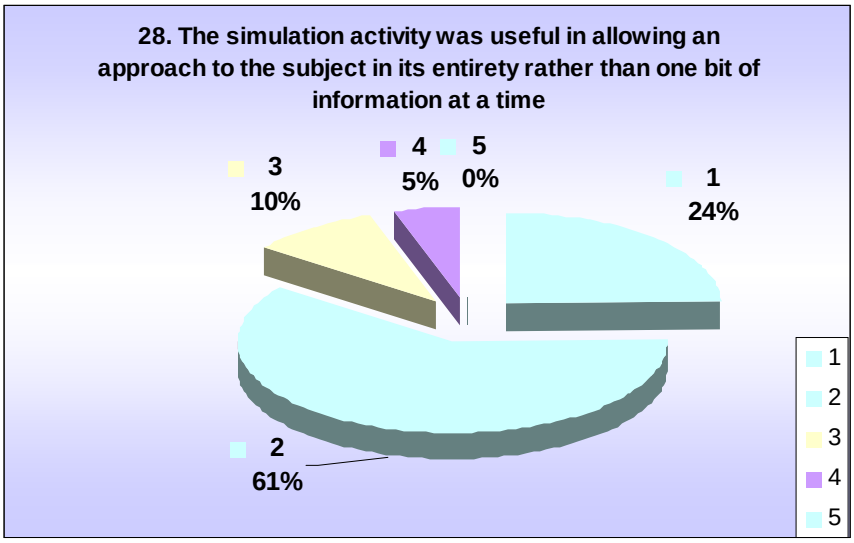


Figure 2.



1=Strongly Agree
2=Agree
3=Neutral
4=Disagree
5=Strongly Disagree