Personal Journeys: an examination of the use of text based role play in constructing knowledge

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Discussion Schedule
Discussion: 20 - 29 November 2000
Summing-up: 30 November - 1 December 2000

Pre-discussion paper

Experiential Learning is recognised as an essential element of any learning situation at all levels. However, in the Humanities, it is perhaps true to say that the higher the level of education, the less frequently experiential learning is employed as a technique. ‘Role play’ is sometimes used and it will be suggested here that the online environment allows for ‘role play’ or assuming the mantle of ‘another’ to happen particularly effectively.

Critical thinking and analysis is a required skill in H.E. undergraduate study and the general means of moving the student towards this stance is by having them consider and interrogate text. Many students in H.E. find this a difficult task at first. Some improve with practice over time. Repeating tasks and attending to constructive feedback from teachers is the fundamental justification for the traditional time-period of study. But for many students, the development of their confidence in critical analysis and engagement with material is slow to develop. The reasons for this are complex but may be rooted in a learned or acquired deference to textual authority, and a kind of self-consciousness rooted in poor sense of self and self-worth. Often, a student will exclaim, ‘who am I to question this authority or that author?’

The student profile is changing significantly with, for example, increasing numbers of ‘non-traditional’ entrants to undergraduate study and the trend is set to continue. Many ‘returners’ to education bring more than their bodies to the lecture theatre or classroom; they bring with them an emotional package which is coloured by their own personal history of learning and life. Motivation is often high among this type of learner however, their ‘difference’ from the norm can increase their awareness of ‘self’ which can be challenging to their progress.

Access for students with different capacities of sensory and physical abilities is improving (too slowly in many cases) and this arguably is a successful outcome of Equal Opportunities policies. However, equality is not apparent in the classroom - rather difference and diversity and with it, I would argue, an increased focus on self and individuality.

So if sense of self is arguably a key to successful learning, how can the teaching and learning strategy usefully recognise this and in particular, can leaving the traditional classroom behind contribute to this process? Can leaving the self behind actually increase the possibilities of critical and creative thinking?

When I am attempting to guide a student who is having difficulties in acquiring an academic style in their written assignments, I often find myself suggesting that they adopt, - or ‘play’ with - a different voice - become another person. In my experiments with online environments which have encouraged the practice of role play in communication, I have observed with interest how the adoption of an ‘other's' voice can release a kind of energetic emotional engagement with the subject or field of knowledge. Paradoxically, leaving the self behind in becoming an ‘other’ seems to have the effect of deepening the awareness and involvement of self in a curious way.

A valuable pool of knowledge can be tapped via the mechanism of play and I would suggest that the potential anonymity of the virtual world is more likely to enable this to occur than the traditional, self-conscious, classroom environment. The involvement of self and particularly the involvement of the emotions in learning and research is an important area of interest and controversy which has been opened up in recent years. Reflection and reflexivity has become recognised as a learning strategy which produces a form of knowledge.
which essentially acknowledges the role of self and autobiography in its production (Smyth and Shacklock, 1998; Steier, 1991; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

I would suggest that the online environment, when used to encourage a collaborative engagement with materials within a framework of creative role play, can enhance the awareness of self in the learning process and as such, deepen the learning experience. To give some specific examples, I will describe an online ‘world’ which was collaboratively achieved through the suggestion that students travelled back in time to ‘become’ characters in past educational settings. This was part of an undergraduate module entitled, Children and Schools, the object of which was to examine the origins of the present State Educational system in Britain. I have commented on the first experiments with this model in 'Personal Journeys: student evaluation of electronic 'role play' in learning online' (see Active Learning, Number 11, December 1999).

The students were encouraged to role play by means of a self-composed set of web pages (http://cfs.bretton.ac.uk/). I used a basic HTML editor to construct the set site, which integrated images and text alongside appropriate links to further internet based resources and prompts to report back to a small asynchronous discussion space as a character from the past. A constructivist learning approach was adopted. To successfully report, the student had to gain some insight into their new circumstances as an inhabitant of a past world. They were required to report their feelings, their observations and their knowledge with a voice of another.

Here is an example of a learner adopting the voice of a girl from the past.

Papa doesn't think that sending me away to boarding school is worth spending money on. He thinks the money should be saved for my dowry. Besides I can learn all I need to at home. Mother is interviewing Governesses tomorrow so I will soon learn to read and write like my brothers.

Social class and location were hinted at markedly in the adoption of certain voices with distinct dialects and nuances peculiar to time and place. This was constructed entirely by the students involved and took on a dimension, which in effect created an exclusive world. The particular use of regional dialect is illustrated here.

I wish mam would hurry up and cook the tea. I'm really hungry. The bairns are getting fractious. Of course as I'm eldest I've got to look after them. It wouldn't be so bad if it were just our mabel, jane, seth, freddie and ALBERT-I've always got to look after them while mams preparing for tea and we are waiting for father to come home. But tonight the BROOKES have come to us. Our lot are deliberately playing up because they're being egged on by mother Brookes horrible brood. Besides our Mabel's got her head on her arms and is sobbing on Kitchen table. Poor cow, she is right upset because that so called 'gentleman' has cut her few strands of hair off. Mam always keeps us clean, we're cleaner than Mother brookes brood. By, eck they don't half hum tonight! We had to move into my gran's house because Sanitary inspector took mam and dads old one away. There's five of us in one bed in this house and you can bet if one gets lice than we all bloody will!
It was the intention of the project to allow a critical stance to develop through the students in a sense leaving their own selves behind in the classroom, and having them assume the mantel of another - a child or a contemporary of a past time. The thinking behind this was that in assuming another persona, the speech they were ‘listening’ to or the situation they were ‘inhabiting’ through the imaginative reading of text might become more vivid and significant. The students were drawn therefore, through the imaginative use of role play, towards a critical engagement with text.

In the site, the decision to stay and explore or to travel to other points on the journey rests with the learner. This freedom to roam is challenging to many students who wish to be directed in their learning, but it is a feature which is integral to a pedagogical experience designed to encourage student autonomy.

The pedagogical implications of this form of exploration are expanded upon by Robert Chia (1990) who discusses ‘Three Versions of Learning’, one of which is Learning as discovery, advocated by those who view learning as very much an exploratory process. Chia goes on to say, however, ‘Whether ‘absorbed’ or ‘discovered’, learning in these two instances may be easily differentiated from the third view which regards learning as a ‘creative process’...(whereby)...in Nelson Goodman’s (1978) terms, a form of ‘world making’ within which the ambiguous flow of experience is punctuated and ordered in a creative act of sense making.

Flow theory of Optimal Experience, developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, attempts to explore the psychological state of learning when the learner is taken along by the experience almost in spite of self, the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter.’

Lloyd Rieber, in his piece ‘Seriously Considering Play’, suggests that one achieves ‘flow’ when an activity ‘frees the individual, at least temporarily, from other worries and frustrations and...all feelings of self-consciousness disappear’ Rieber relates this to his focus which is the role of play in learning however, I would argue that ‘flow’ can be enhanced by a computer supported learning environment as is evidenced in the following remark made by a student of mine in reflecting on her experience of taking the ‘journey’ suggested by the Children and Schools web site.

*When I first started, I felt I was in front of this machine, struggling with this computer. Then, when I entered the web site, I forgot all about the computer altogether - I was in there - in the ‘journey’. It was as if Robert Owen and the others were still alive! I had fears that I would not be able to gather information through computers, but once I entered into the computer into my journey of education there was no ending to the information I gained. I forgot about computers and my identity - instead I became a character in the past.*

What you can do online which is not easy to achieve in the traditional classroom is of interest to many educators around the world today. Supporting learning ‘as a creative process’ necessarily involves the emotions and engagement with self. It is difficult to be creative dispassionately!

To adopt a different voice or persona inevitably draws attention to the actual persona of an individual which is of course hidden from view in an online environment. To become another, draws the attention of the individual them self to ‘who I am not’ and can raise questions about similarities, differences and connections. Perhaps it could be suggested that interrogation of self is intimately connected to the successful critical interrogation of an ‘other’ and with it leads on to a critical and analytical approach to the texts or products of others.

**References**


Post Discussion Summary

To begin with it seemed that general interest in the discussion paper and the issue of text based online role play was low since there was some delay before responses came. However, the discussion which did emerge became engaging, philosophical, and took on a dimension in relation to research which excited myself and I think other participants.

Initially, I had hoped that the following matters could be considered in an attempt to widen the scope of the discussion from the base of my own case study outlined in the paper.

- the status of knowledge which emerges from a constructivist learning environment.
- how critical engagement with text can be enhanced via collaborative online interaction
- whether the ‘role play’ as outlined in the paper can be considered to deepen the learning process
- the role of the emotions in learning - and whether the emotions can be tapped in a productive way in online environments.

What did emerge was an interesting discussion around

- what we mean by role play and an attempt to define the scope of possibilities open to educationalists;
- some consideration of the relationship between computer supported role play and constructivist learning theory;
- the role of the emotions in learning.

In this summary, I will summarise these elements in turn.

What is Role Play ? What is Simulation?

John Laurie was first among those who attempted to define the remit of role play and in particular raised the fundamental question of management and facilitation; in particular, how certain kinds of role play are demanding of considerable skill and management to avoid any harm brought to individuals. Marshal Anderson introduced ‘simulation’ into the discussion asking how the two relate. But Albert Ip suggested that simulation itself needed careful consideration as it can be understood and practised differently. He suggested that we should distinguish between "role play simulation" and "rule-based simulation". Indeed, he suggested we use the term "role play simulation", rather than just "role play" because simulation includes the sense of unreal, imaginative environments and provides the learner with a clear distinction between reality and simulation.

Barry Kort introduced the notion of "model-based" role play as a more accurate descriptor of simulation. The discussion proceeded to consider various system models which might be designed to simulate the ambiguity and unpredictable nature of actual role play in the context of reducing for moderators the labour intensive nature of the activity through software. The essentially binary rule based structure, which underpins computer systems, it was suggested, seriously limits the extent to which systems supporting simulation can develop. Mary Harrsch suggested that apparent "behavioural" subtleties of systems already developed are merely obscuring a limited rule based sequential functionality. It was not yet possible to simulate peer learners in a systems model since the emotional states of self and others are not replicable. But Barry Kort reminded us that what makes for such interesting exchange i.e. peer group collaboration, can also risk "derailment" of learning due to group discord and individual unease. Might limiting the ambiguity or human elements ensure a more predictable outcome?

Michael Cenkner offered a problem solving framework through which role play can be understood via the structuring of activities that are "open-ended in the sense that several solutions could be found to a given problem, but close-ended in the sense that certain proposed solutions don't fit the allowed ranges (as in real


life”). The closure on certain possibilities was crucial in relation to assessment of learning or as he put it “valid inference about what learning is happening”. And making a wider political point, structured play often being an individual experience, Cenker argued that within the publicly funded institutions of learning, that group or collaborative structures should be prioritised.

Albert proposed that a useful way towards a definition of the broad spectrum of role play / simulation made possible in online learning was to see it as a continuum, from on the one hand, “free form exploration” to what might be called an “educational environment approximating (in a simplified way) a real complex situation” to a “rule-based (or model-based) simulation”. The level of facilitation or management reduced from high to low, in line with the level of system involvement along this continuum.

Role Play and the construction of knowledge

A constructivist approach to learning was remarked upon by Michael Cenkner who talked about the importance of structure in enabling freedom to learn and argued that an appropriate balance is required in order that students are adequately supported. But should this freedom extend to defining the learning outcomes? Albert Ip reminded us that we as facilitators do have learning objectives in mind and that the key to successful constructivist learning via role play might be ‘to design the scenarios, the social structure and the triggering events so that the players will “naturally” arrive at the outcome as specified by the learning objectives’.

Eric Flescher in his remarks about students using simulations seemed to suggest that a strongly led and instructive moderation was necessary if the student was not to ‘wander about’ as a ‘high technology passive engagement explorer’. There is a need to ‘force’ students to use such programmes in the ‘right’ way.

My own response to the comments on structure and construction refocused on the paper and I tried to draw the discussion towards an acknowledgement that in any teaching & learning situation, structure is imposed by teachers and learners usually in unequal measures. A central feature of this structure being the hierarchy of power and control embedded in the ‘classroom’ environment. I argued that web based pedagogy offers the potential to challenge orthodoxies and to encourage a move towards autonomy in the learning process. The online environment can be designed as a virtual world but its obviously constructed character provides the opportunity for teachers/ facilitators - or whatever - to reveal to the learner the essentially provisional basis of knowledge and their part in its emergence.

The advantages / disadvantages of traditional classroom learning compared with online participative and collaborative exchange were discussed and the notion of reflexivity in the learning process was raised by Albert Ip who put it this way: “does the participation (in the form of text sent to the role play environment) constitute articulation of the understanding of the subject matter by the earner as in the sense of the Laurillard's "conversation model"? My guess, “no”. During such text production, does learning occur? My guess, “may be”. During debriefing, does learning occur when learners reflect on the experience? My guess, "likely". The reflexivity which was such a powerful element in learning might be enhanced in text based asynchronous role play as it required the learner to enter into a simulation and come out from the simulation for reality check.

The role of the emotions in learning

The dramatic attraction for the learner of ‘immersive’ worlds which could be created by software was suggested as advantageous in that the emotions were engaged. Barry Kort, in further outlining what he understands as ‘immersive learning environments’ such as games and simulations proposed that the ‘natural drama’ of the activity was essentially ‘intriguing and enthralling’. But one of the means by which one could assess the learning taking place was through participant collaboration as participants discussed among themselves ‘their insights and solutions’.

The ability for simulation models to recreate the circumstances of emotional engagement in the learning process or “Affective Computing” as it is termed was discussed with reference to ongoing research in the field of intelligence modelling.

And I raised the question of whether the nature of asynchronicity in text based role play had the effect of engaging the emotions and encouraging reflexivity in a productive way. The archived discussion in allowing the learner to ponder the meanings associated with the text, the emotions of the speaker and the intent of the fellow
learner provides the facility to make valid and imaginative comparisons and connections is, I argued, a crucial factor in developing learning and in critical analysis.

In responding to the question of how exactly are the emotions involved in learning and can computer supported role play enhance usefully this aspect, Simon Heppenstall provided an example for the list to consider which illustrated how intensely children can identify with characters and scenarios in role play. The question of diversity and difference among learners was one which I wanted to return to and I remarked that according to my experience I felt that immersive approaches work for some and not for others. For whatever reason, some students do feel threatened by 'immersive' approaches and this can compromise their learning.

Conclusion

The discussion raised important questions about support, control and management of learning in, in this case, a non-traditional learning environment. A focus such as this does illuminate where we position ourselves pedagogically, philosophically and politically. The differences among participants in the discussion, particularly expressed through the effort to define our terrain is important to acknowledge and even celebrate. The difference in our student bodies both as individuals and in group also needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. This diversity and essential humanity will remain a challenge for educationalists striving to supplant human support and learning systems with technological solutions. Long may the challenge continue.