

Introduction

Role play in face-to-face contexts has been shown to be a powerful teaching design at all levels of education (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999; Levy, 1997). This paper will illustrate how role play can be undertaken in online environments. The technologies required need not be sophisticated. In fact, a wealth of very powerful role play designs have been implemented in Australia over the past 20 years (Wills, 2010). This paper sets out to compare the role play designs adopted in Australia with more recent examples of role play and simulation found in other countries.

Role Play

Role plays are situations in which learners take on the role profiles of specific characters or representatives of organizations in a contrived setting. Role play is designed primarily to build first-person experience in a safe and supportive environment. Much of the learning occurs because the learning design requires learners to explore and articulate viewpoints that may not be their own. It is a similar learning experience to that of debating except there is potential for the learning to be more personal and less abstract as participants actually put themselves in somebody else's shoes. Many learners find the personal aspect more engaging than the formal aspects of debating. One student interviewed by the author describes the experience in the following way. This student was a participant in "Environmental Decision Making Round Table Discussion" (Brierley, Hillman, & Deronshire, 2002) at Macquarie University, Australia.

I was Minister for Fisheries and I had to research it quite thoroughly

before I went online in order to understand where someone in that position would be coming from but I also had to research all the other roles in order to be able to state an argument and one that possibly could not be challenged ... I found out many aspects of my own character and personality that I was not aware of so it was not just a learning tool for understanding fisheries, it was a learning tool for understanding the processes for how I think about things. I was quite surprised at times about the way I developed my argument to try and convince people that my position was one that the committee should take. I learnt communication skills, negotiation skills and also how to articulate those ideas that I developed through my research on that topic ... It is very interesting in a role play to see how things change and fluctuate through the whole process. You might think things are going a certain way then someone throws something in and you hadn't thought of that so you have to start reconsidering how you came to your ideas ... It was a different teaching method. It was stimulating. It wasn't just sitting in a lecture theatre listening. You are interacting with each other and it made you think in different ways.¹

Educational Rationale

As a theoretical basis, the focus on designing for learning through the use of games, simulations and role plays draws on the work of a range of constructivist, constructionist and connectivist authors including Rogers (1969), Vygotsky (1978), Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), Brookfield

¹ Details can see the website: <http://www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/guides/info/G1/more/C3Clist.htm#esm>