

Chapter XVI

The Use of Online Role Play in Preparing for Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter sets out a number of ways in which effective use of the online discussion board in a virtual learning environment can contribute to the preparation of assessment tasks. In particular, it examines the specific advantages of the use of online role play as a means of effective task preparation, and reviews various examples of its application in different academic areas and contexts. The primary emphasis of this chapter is the use of the VLE in general, and the use of role play within the discussion board in particular, as a means of preparing assessment rather than undertaking assessment online using a series of automated processes.

INTRODUCTION

The expectation that, one day, the virtual learning environment (VLE) may be able to handle all forms of assessment and be able to scan and grade essays online much as multiple-choice questions are automatically marked today is perhaps drawing attention away from the more pragmatic and effective uses of the VLE when it is combined with other forms of learning. Whilst some interesting advances have been reported in this area, the general consensus appears to be that a totally reliable online automatic marking facility is still a long

way off, and may even be regarded as unhelpful in an educational context where the role of the tutor is to establish a relationship with students that might be impaired if assessment of discursive material is undertaken by a third party in the form of a machine that automatically grades it.

Such limitations in the ability of the current state of technology to provide reliable summative assessment beyond the range of multiple-choice questions and similar closed interrogative methods has sharpened the focus on blended learning, which is here simply defined as combining virtual with other forms of learning and assessment.

There are a number of well-documented ways in which assessment can be assisted and prepared within a virtual learning environment. The assessment itself could be partially or even completely conducted online in the form of Web-based assignments, reflective journals, e-portfolios, and so forth, or could equally remain as the traditional essay, report, or presentation, but the means of preparing the task assigned could be more effectively assisted by a variety of uses of the tools on offer in the VLE.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Linser and Ip (2002), in their review of the applications of online role-play simulations, illustrate the range and potential value of the various forms of this approach, and emphasise that the use of discussion boards in a VLE provide new modes of interaction that are not, and should not, set out to be virtual replications of the social interaction of the classroom.

Gilroy (2001) stresses the importance of the social dimension of the discussion board and its encouragement of collaborative learning when participants engage in role-play simulations.

Deeper learning, empathy, and an understanding of attitudes are outcomes that have emerged in some of the simulations as reported by Fetherston (2001), and in particular by Vincent and Shepherd (1998) in their reporting of Middle East politics simulations in a pedagogic context.

Role play itself is a well-established technique of learning, and it has been used by a number of educational practitioners effectively to promote and deepen learning. Bollens and Marshall (1973) and Ladousse (1987) have attested to the benefits of role play in teaching and learning in the pre-Internet era, and its subsequent online applications are also well documented. In some instances, as will be discussed, the online role-play activity itself has formed the central element of the as-

essment task, but it is its particular function in preparing assessment that forms the focal point of this chapter.

Linser and Ip (2002) highlight the limitations of e-learning environments that have simply transferred content from the classroom, but go beyond this to question the viability of simply transferring the traditional assumptions and strategies from the classroom or lecturing environments into e-learning. Gilroy (2001) has similarly indicated the importance of the social space provided by online interaction, which transcends the function of VLEs as a repository for course content. Similar criticism of a straight transfer of content from classroom to an online environment has been made by Stills (2001), who endorses a thorough and systematic preparation of customised online material. Linser and Ip question the appropriateness of transferring the social space of learning in the traditional learning environment to an online environment for two basic reasons. First, the two learning spaces may not be reconcilable, and second, there is the technical difficulty of transferring “the dynamic intimacy of face-to-face interaction” to an online environment. Given the constraints of such transfer, they endorse creating a “simulated social space in hyper reality to bring to life the course-content itself.”

Naidu, Ip, and Linser (2000) develop the concept of dynamic goal-based learning, which broadly refers to the notion of learning through achieving the objectives as set by the participants in the game or online role-play exercise, and they argue that this adaptive and constructivist approach is particularly well-suited to asynchronous online discussion conducted in the form of a role-play simulation. The main thrust of their proposal is the importance of enabling participants to act out a role in character, and to react to others in their respective roles, thereby having to acquire more information, reflect, and adjust to their changing situations. As various subsequent examples will demonstrate, one of the principal aims of such an approach might well be to influence and broaden

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