Creating Thinking Professionals: Teaching and Learning About Professional Practice Using Interactive Technology

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In this project, an on-line role-play simulation facilitated the creation of an interactive social environment containing leadership challenges from diverse perspectives. By stepping into the role of a key stakeholder, students responded to an e-incident at a child-care centre. Insights gained from the evaluation of the simulation conducted with final year undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education highlighted the benefits of e-learning’s combination of entertainment with its ability to challenge thinking about values held and time management.

Aims

The primary purpose of the Creating Thinking Professionals (CTP) Project was the development of an interactive Website to support the teaching and learning of both early childhood and primary education students. Specific aims and educational objectives included:

- To enable students to engage in critical thinking when relating to professional issues/concerns in within diverse societal 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
- To encourage students to critically evaluate their own roles and responsibilities as future leaders in education by linking theory with appropriate applied contexts.

Background

The project was funded by a research grant from the Faculty of Education, and it was required that the production and delivery were completed within less than 12 months of the grant being received. So, apart from our belief in
the usefulness of an on-line role-play, two of the key factors influencing the development and progress of this project were time and funds available. It is important to remember that whilst technology can offer attractive options for teaching and learning, the initial costs of production as well as delivery are high. In our case, much time was spent on locating, negotiating and hiring a suitable production company to produce the video that was to act as the central stimulus and form the basis of the teaching and learning associated with the project. At the same time, a specially designed web page to insert the edited video footage and photographs as quick-time clips and digitised images with captions was underway.

The delivery of the program to students commenced during 2002 and the first simulation involved fourth year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies. An on-line evaluation system was added to the web page to systematically obtain objective feedback from students. The data was used to analyse the overall effectiveness of what we considered to be an innovative IT-based teaching/learning framework.

Details

An interactive Website using the Fablusi Role Play software developed by Digital Learning Australia Pty Ltd provided the platform for this project. This included a web page specially designed for the project that provided the initial access point for students. Using this website students were able to engage in a range of reflective activities. The platform also provided the lecturers with progressive overviews of students’ work that provided a focus for identifying changes in students' understanding, commitment, reflections on their learning, and feedback. Where appropriate, academic staff running the program, adapted lecture/tutorial materials and on-line learning activities in response to students’ on-line interactions amongst themselves and with staff.

The CTP Project involved students accessing an on-line Website on a daily basis for three weeks. Students were expected to attend pre-role-play training and a post-role-play “community meeting”. During the simulation they were engaged in a range of learning experiences that combined open-ended tasks, reflective activities and feedback, via email, between students and staff. On-line video images, photographic images and other multimedia resources were available and accessible at any time through the website. These included set readings, on-line journals and government documents such as Licensing Regulations and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, all provided to assist students to review their understanding and extend their knowledge about critical debates in the field.

The role-play involved a professional dilemma that was centred on social diversity. Students participated as one of the 10 characters involved in a critical incident, and the role-play was on-line and interactive for only three
weeks. This meant that, effectively over 21 days, students had to act out their roles in response to the evolving story line. Their combined actions directed the path of the role-play – there was no set script to follow. 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 10 weeks of the semester. Students worked both individually and in groups of three carrying out the various tasks described below in terms of assessment requirements.

Over time, it is anticipated that the CTP will provide the template for other academic staff responsible for relevant Professional Studies strand subjects to contribute appropriate teaching-learning activities. This will include linked reflective exercises to encourage students to ‘stop-think-grow’ as they move through course material in a more integrated way.

**The role-play**

Called “A Different Lunch”, the role-play is a self-contained, on-line simulation that aims to promote critical thinking about leadership issues and cause participants to examine their own and others’ professional and moral values. In teams of three (nb, this number can be varied) students play the roles of 10 key characters including a child, her parents, centre staff, management committee members, a government adviser and a newspaper journalist. Through these roles, students step into the shoes of another person and discover multiple perspectives in responding to the same incident. It is important to note that the website does not contain the incident described as “A Different Lunch”. There were strong indicators that not all students would have access to hardware that would allow them to view the video effectively as a ‘streaming’ facility. Accordingly, in order to maximise the flexibility and portability of this teaching tool, “A Different Lunch” was reproduced as CDs that individual students could use at their convenience. The website contained digitised images with voice-overs that contained a short background narrative on each character. Together with the CD, there was sufficient visual imagery on each character to facilitate the role-play dramatisation.

**Assessment components**

The CTP project was embedded within the specific subject dealing with leadership in early childhood in the undergraduate degree program. The assessment tasks were geared to address the objectives of this subject. There is sufficient flexibility within the Fablusi platform to vary the assessment to meet the particular teaching and learning objectives of a given course of study. In our case, the assessment tasks consisted of both group and individual tasks. Students were expected to
1. Write an expanded role profile (10%).
2. Maintain a specified E-mail output (15%).
3. Write a position paper from their character’s point of view (20%), and
4. Write a reflective essay (55%) - the only task that was assessed on an individual basis.

Specific features of each of these four tasks are identified below.

1. **Expanded role profile**
   Students were required to extend the profile of their character by taking into account their experiences within early childhood settings/organizations. On the basis of some given characteristics set for each role by the teaching staff, each group imaginatively developed additional characteristics for their role. These characteristics could be either positive or negative but consideration of long term implications were important and necessary in playing the role. The objective of the expanded role profile was to get the students to ‘own’ their character and prepare them for the ‘fictional’ world they were about to enter.

2. **E-mail output**
   During the role-play, e-mails formed the primary method of communication between the roles. E-mails were generated specifically as a result of the simulation and contained within the website. Only those that were sent to other roles were assessed. A maximum of 10 e-mails per team per week was set primarily in order to make the task manageable for the moderators and also to give the students an appropriate work load. All e-mails were accessible to moderators. Other channels of communication were available, but not monitored formally by moderators.

3. **Position paper**
   This was developed on the basis of the role played by each team. Each character selected three topics about which to identify and describe changes in policy and practise. These were couched as recommendations. The topics to be covered were set by the teaching staff and consisted of the following: parent-staff relationships; staff-child relationships; centre staffing; centre management; food and nutrition; media; and public relations. Major aspects of each group’s position paper were presented at a “Community Conference” which took place at the end of the fourth week of the role-play. The aim of this meeting was to allow the players (in character) to address the child-care community, discuss their concerns, and present recommendations to resolve the concerns raised through the three weeks of the role play.

4. **Reflective essay**
   Each student was required to independently think through underlying moral and ethical considerations of the simulated scenario and critically analyse the experience as a learning tool/technique. It was
recommended that the focus of this discussion be based on one of the following: issues concerned with conflicting rights; equity and justice; or communication.

Learnings from the simulation

We believe the role-play addressed issues associated with the lack of clarity about what makes a good leader. A fairly simple occurrence like the one in A Different Lunch quickly uncovered unclear and ambiguous attitudes and behaviours by staff at the child care centre. Questions about beliefs connected with nature versus nurture and experience versus training emerged during the role-play. Due to the limited time allowed for the role-play, the storyline quickly builds to one where moral and professional decisions must be made and action taken to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all concerned.

Students were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the role-play simulation from a variety of perspectives, and their responses were collated and analysed. Selected findings are presented and discussed below.

As can be seen from Figure 1, when those who rated the usefulness of the simulation at 5 & 4 are taken together, a majority of students (i.e, 62%) agreed that the simulation was effective in terms learning about the impact of human rights issues.

Less than 50% of the participants (i.e., 46%) however agreed that the simulation had been successful in raising their awareness of cultural diversity concerns. A small minority of less than 10% of the students also believed that the simulation had not been useful as a tool for learning about cultural diversity (see Figure 2).
Two of the key areas where the students believed the simulation was successful were associated with enhancing their understanding about professional practice as early educators. An overwhelming majority of those who participated in the survey (i.e., 78%) declared that the simulation had been effective in learning about the issues and pressures involved in working in the early childhood field (see Figure 3).

Likewise, nearly three quarter of the participants (i.e., 73%) also agreed that the simulation was effective in learning about relationships between parents and professionals (see Figure 4)
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.

**Additional Comments on QOT forms**

As well as the evaluation, students completed the generic Melbourne University Quality of Teaching assessment form. A few chose to write comments, and these will be helpful when planning future simulations.

- 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. Whilst there were some teething problems and at times there was confusion in regard to what was expected, I don’t think that this was any more than with trialing any new experience.

- I strongly recommend that students choose their own groups for the simulation. I was lumped with ALL the emailing and the others just cruised along.

- The simulation was a good way to “walk in another persons’ shoes” and it was a very effective learning tool.

- The role play was a fantastic way to learn, especially with the opportunity to consider in a follow-up essay. This brought theory and practice together.
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 as regular access to the Net.

Clearer explanation needed for simulation procedure – i.e. that everyone knows about the incident and how to start off. Final essay confusing.

It was refreshing to be taught about leadership and advocacy through the simulation process for in the BECS course there are far too many essay assessments so it was good too be involved in something a bit foreign.