Online role plays and the virtual placement: Aiding reflection in work integrated learning

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This paper presents the framework for an online role play which forms part of the student learning experience in a virtual placement. The virtual placement is complementary to a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Professional Internship concurrently undertaken in a criminal justice agency. Whilst completing the Professional Internship, students conduct an Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) risk assessment of the workplace, in consultation with industry supervisors and academic staff. The outcome of the risk assessment forms the foundation of the role play which involves the student advising, consulting and negotiating with various stakeholders to implement OH&S improvements to the workplace. Laurillard's (2002) "conversational framework" provides the theoretical underpinning for the role play. The online role play will be implemented and evaluated in first semester of 2008 at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Keywords: online role play; e-learning; occupational health and safety; work integrated learning

Introduction

E-learning options have grown in number and now provide educators with a range of choices in learning and teaching design. For instance, options include choosing a fully educational online experience or a partial option combining both online and face to face learning experiences, known as blended learning (Graham 2005). Online role plays are a well established strategy in e-learning and can be used to assist student reflection upon a range of curriculum issues. Online role plays have been widely used in a variety of areas of learning including political science, history and education (Will & McDougall in press). These kinds of role plays can assist in deep learning (Ramsden, 2003) due to the opportunity for students to reflect upon practice issues in a self-paced manner (Douglas 2007a). In our view online role plays can be used to support Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as students have the opportunity, while on placement, to play out a role online and access the skills and experience of their teachers, fellow students and industry partners. WIL provides the opportunity for experiential learning in the workplace and is situation specific. It is a learning mode which enhances student understanding of the structure and pattern of work as well as exposure to selected practitioners who are relevant to the student's career aspirations. However, reflection is a key part of this kind of learning and needs to be incorporated into the design of WIL (Keating 2006). In this paper we argue that online role plays can provide the opportunity for reflection during WIL and additionally, can be used to assist students who are undertaking a variety of different placement situations and contexts to reflect on a common concern in workplaces, such as Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) issues.

A project at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, led by one of the authors of this paper, incorporates the development of online role plays in the design of an innovative approach to multi-sector education. Students at RMIT University enrolled in the higher education sector will have the opportunity to complete a Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) Certificate IV level qualification in OH&S while studying courses in their degree program, including engaging in WIL. This approach of embedding TAFE level qualifications in degree programs is possible due to co-operation between the two sectors in the university and the use of online role plays to assist student reflection regarding key competencies whilst on industry placement. To assist in this project we explore Laurillard's (2002) theoretical approach to e-learning and her "conversational framework" as a method of designing online role plays (Douglas 2007a; 2007b) for a module in OH&S. Online role plays were chosen in preference to face to face role plays for two reasons. In WIL students can be located in workplaces throughout the city and suburbs of Melbourne and in some cases in placements that are outside the metropolitan area. Thus the opportunity to meet face to face with the students is constrained to a number of specified meetings. Online contact provides the potential for staff and students to have contact during the whole period of the placement (Maidment 2006). The choice of online role plays provides the opportunity for the contact to be interactive and importantly, allows students to enter into a dialogue with staff that is reflective (Laurillard 2002).

Additionally, the work place setting can provide authentic case studies for students to engage with (Bennett, Harper and Hedberg, 2002; Douglas and Ogilvie forthcoming) and allow students to demonstrate selected competencies that contribute to the attainment of the OH&S qualification. At this time we have not implemented the design and thus cannot provide student evaluation of the project. Instead, we outline our approach and in particular provide detail of the design incorporating Laurillard's "conversational framework." Firstly, we discuss some of the benefits and drawbacks of online role plays for students.

Selected benefits and drawbacks of online role plays

Online role plays provide an interactive choice in e-learning (Wills & Ip 2002). Bell (2001) suggests that role plays are a form of learning that is capable of assisting with powerful behavioural and attitudinal changes. This view is endorsed by a range of educators (McGill & Beaty, 1995; Turner, 1992; Eitington, 1989; Craig, 1987; Shaw et al., 1980). Software to support online role plays is available on the internet (see generally Fablusi, 2007) or lecturers may utilise university systems, such as the Blackboard Management System. One of the benefits that online role plays may have in comparison to face to face role plays is the opportunity for asynchronous communication which may allow learners time for consideration, investigation and reflection before making a response (Wills & McDougall in press; Douglas 2007a; 2007b). Participants are usually presented with a scenario that requires they make various contributions, either via email or threaded discussion, in order to bring resolution to the event. Resolution may take many forms such as the solution of a problem, agreement or exploration of an issue or the creation of something (Wills and McDougall in press). Anonymity is a second benefit of online role plays which Collins and Berge (1995) suggest can increase equity. Anonymity can also alleviate the emotional stress of face to face role plays (Bell, 2001). Some authors however, have raised concerns about anonymity as it may provide the opportunity for anti-social behaviour (Chester and Gwynne, 1998), reduction in social presence (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997); and that it may be hazardous to the development of a community of learners (Pence, 1996).

E-learning, when utilising a thoughtful design, can promote reflective dialogue and an understanding of theory (Laurillard 2002). Arguably, this kind of learning is also of assistance in gaining vocational competencies and online learning and teaching choices are being increasingly utilised in vocational education (Robertson 2007). This opportunity for reflection is not generally available in face to face role plays where the pressures of the unfolding role play mean that there is little time to consult the relevant literature (Douglas 2007a; Douglas 2007b). At present, online role plays are not widely used as an assessment option in university teaching (Byrnes & Ellis 2006). This may be explained by the large investment of time required to design these role plays and the general lack of portability in the designs due to the generally discipline specific nature of the role plays (Wills and McDougall in press). One limitation regarding online role plays is the lack of visual nuances which can be observed and experienced in face to face role plays. Walters (2003) suggests that gestures as well as words speak volumes about our emotions, stresses, and innermost thoughts. This limitation may be partially overcome by the use of symbols to connote emotions (Douglas 2007a & 2007b). Additionally, problems with online role plays include the time that it takes students to post, slowing down the role play. To address this problem role plays can include set time lines (Douglas 2007b). On occasion, technical difficulties can affect the playing out of the scenario in the online role play. In the project discussed in this paper technical issues associated with online activities will be minimised through the use of Blackboard software that has undergone extensive testing at RMIT. The authors have been using the software for a number of years and the current version provides a reliable delivery platform.

OH&S in the justice sector: The online role play and virtual placement

OH&S is an important issue for all workplaces from the perspective of both the employer and employee. Achieving safe workplaces in the justice sector has added complexity where interaction with clients, often in highly emotional and stressful circumstances, can sometimes lead to injury. Clients, who are potentially violent, may also be under the influence of illicit drugs, alcohol or both. Employees working in areas such as police, corrections, customs, courts and juvenile justice are exposed to hazards not often experienced in the mainstream workforce. The human cost of poor OH&S practices can be high and impacts on a myriad of stakeholders at different levels and to differing degrees (Mayhew and Peterson, 1999).

Students of the Bachelor of Arts (Criminal Justice Administration) (BA CJA) at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia undertake a fifty-day professional internship (or WIL) in a diverse range of justice sector organisations including police and corrections where the potential for harm is present. Recently, an

internally funded project "Preparing Students for Safe Work Practices" was developed to embed the competencies associated with the Certificate IV in OH&S into existing core courses of the degree to ensure that students were better able to deal with OH&S concerns. This award will be gained through recognition of prior learning (RPL) and will be advantageous to students in applying for positions with the justice field and other work places. The development of a virtual placement was conceived as a useful conduit to supporting the learning associated with the OH&S competencies. An integral part of the virtual placement is the engagement of students in an online role play which focuses on the communication of OH&S information, data and advice to influence management decision making and action. The online role play will require students to negotiate enhancements to the workplace which will improve safety of officers operating in hazardous circumstances. The approach of this design utilises a "blended theory" in that students engage in face-to-face learning through WIL and online learning in the same subject (Graham, 2005). Notably, this design is not context specific and has been used in other learning designs, such as for the mediation industry (Douglas 2007a; 2007b; Douglas & Ogilvie forthcoming).

Students, through the unit OH&S Consultation Process, must consult with management regarding workplace occupational health and safety. We have designed an online role play that meets the embedded TAFE competencies of this unit and at the same time deals with interpersonal issues that arise in workplace placements. The online role play also allows students to connect with other students and their teacher during the placement. It provides the opportunity for the students to adapt the role play to mirror the issues that have arisen for them during the placement (Douglas & Ogilvie forthcoming) whilst still dealing with the core competencies of the occupational health and safety unit. The competencies of the unit include:

- Contribute to procedures as individuals or as part of a group to raise OHS issues or request information and data;
- Contribute to procedures for communicating OHS information and data;
- Communicate OHS information and data and advice effectively to influence management decision making and action;
- Contribute to maintaining arrangements.

The role play provides a conduit for students to explore the complex issues of communications and negotiation. The role play affords teachers and industry stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback to students, during the role play as well as during the de-briefing, which will assist in the acquisition and enhancement of the required competencies.

Whilst on their professional internship, students will be asked to undertake an OH&S risk assessment of the workplace. This task will be co-ordinated through the field tutor and will be based on learning acquired through core courses in the BA CJA. The student will be asked to consult with the OH&S representative of the work place, where one exists. The student then will research relevant OH&S legislation, policy and good practice requirements for OH&S and submit a written report to both the host organisation and to RMIT for assessment. The student will then participate in an online role play as part of the complementary virtual placement. In the role play scenario, students must play a role in the negotiation of changes to OH&S practices within the workplace. Changes may include examples actually identified by the students during the OH&S risk assessment or may be determined by the field tutor or the lecturer. Negotiation is between a variety of roles including the manager of the relevant workplace, a union representative, a Work Safe inspector, an OH&S officer and other key players added as the negotiation unfolds. Selected roles may be filled by an industry representative, RMIT staff member or other students. In the role play at least some of the recommended OH&S changes are expensive and therefore management is hesitant to commit to the expenditure. Success is judged primarily on the communication and negotiation skills demonstrated by the student in conjunction with the overall outcome of those negotiations.

This role play is undertaken in week six of the professional internship and lasts for two weeks. Asynchronous interaction takes place through threaded discussion in Blackboard. Whilst there is no pre-determined outcome of the role play, it is hoped that agreement can be reached on the implementation of some or all of the workplace enhancements identified during the workplace assessment undertaken during the student professional internship. In the role play students learn through making assessments of the situation and then making choices regarding appropriate interventions. Student discussion regarding these choices and student journal writing aids reflection regarding interventions. Laurillard articulates a four-part framework to create a dialogue with students to aid reflection. This framework includes Discursive, Adaptive, Interactive and Reflective elements (2002, pp. 83-84) and each element has been used in our role play.

Design for the OH&S role play

The design we have utilised includes discussion boards as well as role plays played out via email or threads. There is the opportunity for the teacher to coach via e-mail and reflection upon the role play is incorporated through e-mailed journal entries. The design fits Laurillard's framework in the following manner:

Discursive

Participants are given the opportunity to study a number of readings which include organisational policy documents accessed during the professional internship as well as Work Cover, Work Safe and other OH&S literature available online. Students are then asked to post to a discussion board around the topic of OH&S within the justice workplace. Participants and the teacher interact through a description of concepts. To focus discussion of the relevant concepts, several questions can be posed on the discussion board. These may include questions about employer liability, employee obligations, union engagement, negotiating change and improving work practices. As participants post to the discussion board, the teacher can adjust the reflections to deal with student input.

Adaptive

The task environment is then set up in light of the task goal of learning regarding occupational health and safety issues. As students progress through the initial scenario, compounding events may be introduced. In the role play students may be making little progress in the negotiation of changes to the workplace. This may be as a result of the financial limitations the employer perceives as a constraining issue. A new event such as a workplace accident or even death may be introduced which will change the dynamics of the roles and the bargaining position of the OH&S representative. The scenario is adapted to highlight issues that were identified from the discussion board as requiring further reflection and description. If participants do not understand a particular aspect of the topic, the role play scenario can be altered to emphasise this issue. The facts common to all participants, together with the objectives of the learning task, are posted to the discussion board. Role details, particular to each role player, are e-mailed to that student alone.

Interactive

Participants act in the task environment to achieve the task goal through the playing out of the online role play. The dynamic of the online role play changes with the actions of the participants. The subtleties of negotiation and the recognition of external factors which influence outcomes are explored through the interaction of the threaded discussions. Students present proposals from within their respective role and counter offers are generated until the resolution of the OH&S assessment. The negotiation is primarily between the employer and the OH&S representative. What role players do in the online role play gives intrinsic feedback and the reaction of management, and choice of negotiation techniques, provides this feedback. Participants' responses to strategies mean that there is meaningful change as a result of the students' actions.

Reflective

Participants are asked to e-mail the teacher with journal entries demonstrating reflection upon the online role play. In the journals they link experience with the description of experience. The journal entries allow students and teacher to participate in a dialogue concerning intrinsic feedback. This might be in threaded discussion or in a de-briefing session conducted in the work place of the professional internship. As indicated, the pace of the learning process is up to the student and they are therefore better able to reflect upon the learning experience.

Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined a learning design for online role plays that can be used in tandem with the experiential learning available in WIL. Further, we have outlined the specific context of the use of this design to assist in teaching TAFE level competencies embedded in Higher Education degree courses. We have highlighted the benefits of using such a design in the WIL context and this approach will be evaluated with RMIT students in 2008. Our aim in this paper has been to share our design plans in order to contribute to the development of literature in this area and to provide educators with an example that they may wish to adapt to their own learning and teaching context, thereby increasing the choice of e-learning options available.

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