

E-role play for inquiry into transnational education

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Introduction

This paper was inspired by the need to evaluate and make recommendations regarding the future directions of Swinburne University's Transnational Education program. This paper postulates that a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, using online role play, would produce more meaningful and productive results.

The cultural awakening brought about by this process of assuming and acting out roles based on life in Australia may encourage more students to give further consideration to the possibility of completing their degrees in Australia.

The authors propose to use an established and reliable approach to qualitative data analysis. Crotty's (1996) 5 step phenomenology is a suitable methodology, favoured by the authors for this particular research. Other phenomenological methodologies (Husserl (1977/1925), and Vallack (2005), are not appropriate in this case. Whereas Crotty's theoretical framework is informed by constructivism, and allows the researchers to work external to the inquiry, the latter two methodologies demand a degree of subjectivity, which is not feasible for this research.

What is transnational education (TNE)?

UNESCO offers this definition of transnational education:

<p>All forms of Higher Education, or sets of studies or educational services, including distance education in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. They may belong to the state in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national system (UNESCO-CEPES).</p>	
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What is TNE at Swinburne University?

Essentially it is a twinning program with universities in China, Vietnam and potentially other Asian and SE Asian countries.

Why 2+2 or 3+2

International students frequently have difficulty with the English language in their first year/s when they come to study in Australia.

The general idea behind 2+2 is that they will do the first year of our program in their own country over 2 years, with additional English language study included. English language skills are necessary when they arrive in Australia to complete the second and third years of a Swinburne degree.

What has happened so far?

At Swinburne University, appropriate courses for the 2+2 /program have been selected in Business, Engineering, IT and Design. Teams have been recruited to transform their current units into the format required for TNE. An information and support pack has been developed and supplied to participating areas.

New programs in Business, ICT, Engineering and Design will commence in China and Vietnam in 2008.

As the first two (first year of degree equivalent) years of the initial programs are soon to conclude we still have no accurate way of gauging how many students will come to Melbourne to complete the second and third years of the degree.

The challenges of transnational education

The Australian (27.6.07) newspaper reported the alarming decline in the number of offshore programs offered by Australian Universities. The report speculates that the main reasons for the failure to sustain offshore courses could be reduced to issues of local competition, quality control and a disappointing financial return for participating universities. It is the last two factors that appear to be most pertinent: According to Jenny Lang, international pro-vice chancellor at the University of New South Wales:

We want to be able to provide not only an education but a student experience of the highest quality.... We don't believe we can always guarantee that when we don't have full control over facilities and the learning environment of students: (*The Australian*, 27.6.07)

And

Professor David Goodman, deputy vice-chancellor and international vice-president at the University of Technology Sydney, said: "people thought they could make money out of it and they can't" (*The Australian*, 27.6.07)

This paper, supporting the conference poster, proposes that in order to understand what is really going on, from the students' perspectives, e-role play data would be useful.

New insights demand new methods

The Theoretical Framework

- **EPISTEMOLOGY:** Constructionism
- **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE:** Phenomenology
- **METHODOLOGY:** Existential phenomenology
- **METHODS:**

Using current international student volunteers, who play characters other than themselves, collect data relating to attitudes towards completing courses in Australia. Interview data and chat data is then qualitatively analysed by the researchers. Crotty's (1996) model of phenomenology is appropriate for this research.

Collected in a context of empowering, anonymous, online game-play, such data has the potential to tell the researchers the things that the students may be too polite to express directly in a survey or questionnaire. Like the "open question" method of qualitative researchers, it does not anticipate responses from the co-researchers. The students are free to tell of hopes and expectations that may otherwise have not come to the attention of the survey-oriented researchers, who ask the same questions, over again, in the same format. This fresh and spontaneous, "pretend" dialogue is ripe for psychoanalysis, through Crotty's hermeneutical, theme-gathering methods.

Such role-play is not just about creating fictitious fancy. Actors who improvise dialogue know that they must draw on their own realities to give substance to the dialogue. Just as the actor tells *his* own story through role-play, the TNE research subject may reveal a wealth of vital information about *his* TNE perceptions, in the guise of an online character.

McKee (1998) supports the claim that role-play has potential to reveal life-world truths:

Just as a personality structure can be disclosed through psychoanalysis, the shape of the scene's inner life can be uncovered through a similar inquiry (McKee, 1998, p. 252)

And

Actors are not marionettes to mime gestures and mouth words. They're artists who create with material from subtext, not the text. An actor brings the character to life from the inside out, from unspoken, even unconscious thoughts and feelings, out to a surface of behaviour. The actor will say and do whatever the scene requires, but they will find their sources for creation in the inner life (McKee, 1998, p. 253).

Through the data collected from e-role play, this paper contends that the researchers may glimpse insight into the attitudes and thought patterns that may threaten the sustainability of transnational education programs.

Performance text and qualitative analysis

Online role-play is becoming a popular pedagogical tool just now. For example, Melbourne University recently showcased a sample of how e-role play can be used to engage students in historical research. As they research past events, the students play out characters and scenarios that are designed by the teacher. Similarly, transnational education students, who respond in character to given scenarios, take part in setting down data on which to build instructional theatre. Norman Denzin (1997) is a leading academic in the increasingly acknowledged and practised, *Performance Text* methodology. He explains that it takes various names:

Performance text is a genre within ethnography, what Paget calls *ethnoperformance* (1993, p.42), Mienczakowski (1994) labels *ethnodrama*, and Turner and Turner (1982) term *performance and reflexive anthropology*, the rendering 'of ethnography in a kind of instructional theatre (Denzin in Tierney & Lincoln, 1997, p.179).

Launching the methodological application through e-role-play

The performance text is the single, most powerful way for ethnography to recover, yet interrogate the meanings of lived experience, (Denzin, 1997a, p.182).

The e-role play proposed in this instance is based around character information that the players make up themselves. As the characters are very much like themselves, students can draw on their own experiences to create the drama.

The scenario for this research

It is three years into the future. A group of students have arrived at Swinburne Hawthorn Campus to complete their degrees.

1. Each participant will create a character. A subtext (background information about the character/ reasons behind what they say or do on the surface) for the character will be established before playing. Each player creates a virtual character – name; physical/ emotional/ social characteristics; hobbies; hopes, dreams, disappointments...
2. These points are at first known only by the persons playing the roles. They may come out in the conversation as the role play progresses.
3. An Australian, inner-suburban context for the role play is established through the following interactive. Players *virtually* roam the streets around the university to explore part-time job options to support their student candidature:
<http://www.swinburne.edu.au/ads/showcase/careersNetworking.htm#>
4. Next, the researchers assume characters and play alongside the co-researchers. Initially this may be set up as a chat session (but Swinburne *Academic Development & Support Unit* is currently assessing the feasibility of creating a new interactive game, designed for this research). Researchers may prompt the drama, when appropriate or when dialogue begins to lapse.
5. Characters tell stories about why they came to Australia, the obstacles they needed to overcome, and their future aspirations. As much as possible, this will be an open, student-lead virtual drama.
6. The researchers examine the transcriptions for essential meaning. Themes are drawn from dialogue, and the drama is scanned for metaphor and image. This is an important and rigorous step in the methodology. Psychoanalytic analysis is used to gather research results.

In conclusion

Phenomenology and e-role play offer intuitive and innovative means by which to surpass the limitations of survey and questionnaire methods of evaluation. The unguided nature of the dialogue works like the open-question approach used by qualitative methodologists. The role play frees the subjects to reveal values and attitudes from behind the mask of the character.

Further research

A final step in this inquiry could involve an actual reconstruction of the drama and its presentation to an audience. This vital step would allow the research subjects to comment on the script that is played back to them, thus offering a triangulation of data results.

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