# Re-purposing an online role play activity: Exploring the institutional and pedagogical challenges

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Migrating a proven learning design from one online teaching milieu to another is not always a simple process. Complications can arise on various fronts. From a pedagogical perspective, for instance, one of the main challenges is associated with the task of realigning the activity to adequately reflect the new curriculum context, delivery mode, target audience, learning process and anticipated outcomes. Similarly, institutional barriers such as intellectual property and the available online infrastructure and technical supports can also limit, and at times inhibit, reuse. Drawing on personal experience, this short paper discusses the challenges associated with re-purposing an online learning design across program, disciplinary and institutional contexts. Using a role play activity as the case study, this paper aims to stimulate discussion about the complexities and practicalities associated with the reuse of a proven learning design. Initially the original and re-purposed learning designs are outlined. Then, the pedagogical and institutional shifts that were required are discussed and a framework for analysing the dimensions of reuse is proposed.

Keywords: learning design, reusability, role play, pedagogical and institutional challenges

## Higher education and reuse of learning designs

Unlike other educational providers, the higher education sector is not renowned for a strong culture of collaboration in terms of teaching and learning. Pre-packaged teaching resources and learning activities are often viewed with scepticism and the sentiment 'not invented here' is the common catch cry of dissent (Conole & Oliver, 2002). However, this culture is starting to shift, in part, as a result of the increasing use of the online environment for teaching and learning in both face-to-face and distance contexts. From a pedagogical perspective one explanation for this is the 'visibility' of the teaching and learning process afforded by the online environment. That is, in spite of its password-protected nature, the online learning environment presents a more public teaching space than that afforded by a classroom setting. What is taught and how it is taught becomes visible, and the teaching and learning processes are more open to scrutiny and critique. Further, academics making the move to an online environment often seek advice from educational specialists. The collegial nature of this type of interaction opens up yet another space for discussing teaching and learning, providing opportunities for re-evaluating and re-thinking past practices and/or approaches that may no longer be appropriate. With these factors in mind, coupled with the actual investments (staff time and resources) of developing an effective online learning experience, the ability to reuse learning activities and resources is gaining more currency and appeal in higher education.

It is hardly surprising then, particularly with the ever increasing financial and resource constraints currently faced by higher education institutions, that the benefits of being able to share and disseminate good teaching practice is now a key priority. Over the last few years, in fact, a number of different projects have been initiated to promote understanding about impediments to and strategies for propagating good practice within a higher education context. One such initiative was a project entitled 'Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their Role in Flexible Learning' (see Learning Designs website). An outcome of this project, which explored the design of activities using ICTs, was the documentation of a number of exemplary learning designs; the online role play described in this paper is one of the chosen exemplars. Using the definition adopted by this project team the term 'learning design' is taken to mean the different ways in which learning experiences can be structured, including the sequencing of activities and interactions. It comprises three key elements: the content or resources learners interact with, the tasks or activities learners are required to perform, and the support mechanisms provided to assist learners to engage with the tasks and resources (Learning Designs website; Oliver, 1999).

This short paper begins by outlining the original role play activity. Understanding the structure and emphasis of the learning design is important as it helps to reveal some of the complexities associated with re-purposing this activity for use in another teaching and learning context. Having outlined the contextual shifts involved the broader implications of learning design reuse are briefly discussed.

## The roundtable activity: The original learning design

The roundtable discussion (RTD) activity was originally developed for use in an undergraduate unit of study in the Departments of Physical and Human Geography at Macquarie University. It was designed using a role play approach and students were required to research a particular scenario, develop and question stakeholder positions, and take part in a roundtable meeting. This was an appropriate approach as role play is a recognised technique for situating learning about complex problems and social interactions (van Ments, 1989), particularly those that that defy 'recipe book' problem solving approaches. Key aspects of the role play activity were the application of evidence to real world issues, the appreciation of a range of stakeholder positions, and developing understanding that complex and contested situations can be resolved in practice (Brierley et al., 2002a; 2002b).

### Activity structure

The activity was structured over a four (4) week timeframe. Week one was comprised of a face-to-face briefing session about the activity and the associated assessment requirements. Each student was allocated one of the sixteen stakeholder roles to play and instructed to research the general topic area using online and library resources. In week two, the students prepared and submitted their stakeholder position paper into the online classroom space. During the next week each student reviewed the other position papers and posted up at least one question on the discussion board to each stakeholder. Students used these questions to appraise, and sometimes modify, their original position paper. Week four was a face-to-face session where students participated in a role-play activity followed by debriefing. The activity also had a formal assessment component. Students were awarded marks for participation (based on their position paper and questions to other stakeholders) and a written paper (based on their understanding of the content and process of the roundtable discussion activity itself).

The activity used a blended delivery approach, incorporating face-to-face tutorials as well as online tasks and resources. The online component of the activity was supported by a purpose built teaching and learning interface embedded within the centrally supported learning management system (LMS). From a student perspective the interface formed an important learning space for the activity: it provided a visual representation of the roundtable meeting and a mechanism for uploading and reviewing stakeholder position papers. From a teaching perspective the administrative interface was user friendly and the process of allocating students to groups and specific roles was uncomplicated. The simplicity of this interface has been one of the critical factors in the sustainability of this learning design.

## Re-purposing the learning design

The original RTD learning design has appeal across many teaching contexts, particularly those that aim to develop understanding about a diversity of viewpoints in relation to a complex issue, and skills in working effectively with other stakeholders to negotiate an outcome. From a health science perspective the RTD activity has application in that it provides students an opportunity to explore the multidisciplinary team approach in the management of complex health conditions. With this in mind, permission was sought to redevelop the original design for use in the Graduate Studies in Pain Management Program, an online coursework program offered through the University of Sydney.

While the originator of the learning design did not object to the reuse of the learning design the transfer of the activity across institutions was not a simple process of 'plug in and play'. Rather, a number of issues had to be addressed. One was related to realigning the design to reflect the new curriculum context and learning outcomes, delivery mode and target audience: a process which Fill et al. (2006) refer to as 'pedagogic repurposing'. Another was related to barriers associated with cross-institutional transfer of the purpose built online components of the activity, specifically the student and administrative interfaces. Key stumbling blocks were negotiations about the intellectual property of the purpose built aspects of the design, differences between the LMS supported by each institution and access to programming and technical support.

**The re-purposed activity: Similarities and differences in the learning design**

The re-purposed learning design activity was similar to the original RTD in a number of ways. Firstly, the activity used a role play approach built around a 'real life' scenario. The authentic nature of the task provided students with an opportunity to explore and question different stakeholder positions, discuss the management of a complex issue, and develop skills in negotiating an appropriate outcome. Secondly, the basic structure and sequence of the activity paralleled the original design. Students were allocated stakeholder roles and asked to develop position statements for the role play activity that followed. There was also an assessment component attached to the activity (online participation and written assignment).

Nevertheless, migrating the learning design across program, disciplinary and institutional contexts necessitated a number of changes to the learning design. First, the focus of the role play shifted from the management of an environmental issue to the management of a complex health condition. This led to changes in the scenario, number of role players, and assessment task. Changes in the delivery and facilitation of the activity were also required as the original learning design, which was incorporated into an undergraduate course, embraced a blended delivery approach. In contrast, the re-purposed design was to be embedded into an online postgraduate program that had been licensed to two other universities overseas. These differences demanded specific modifications such as an extended timeframe for the activity, targeted online supports and resources, and facilitator briefing and debriefing guides.
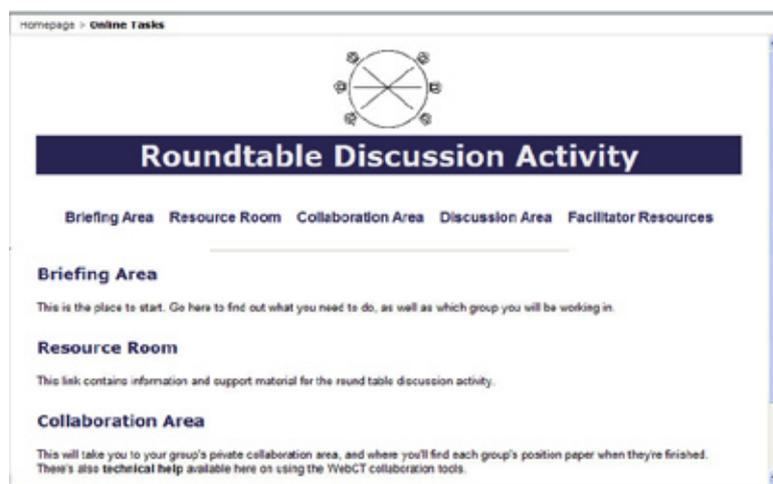


**Figure 1: Re-purposed interface**

The online component of the activity was an important feature of both learning designs. Initial plans in terms of re-purposing the learning design were to reuse the purpose built activity interface. However, as already noted, institutional barriers prevented this from actually occurring. Consequently, the re-purposed activity was built using the available tools within the centrally supported LMS. While this was not the most ideal solution, practically it was the only way forward. Using available tools the new activity interface was designed with the specific attributes of the original design in mind. One of these attributes was the visual representation of a roundtable, which helped to create a learning space for the RTD activity (see Figure 1). Another was the simplicity of the interface, from both teacher and student perspectives.

## Role play learning design: Dimensions of reuse

As this case study illustrated the re-purposing of a learning design to another disciplinary and institutional environment is not always a simple process. Even with similar aims and outcomes the effective reuse of a proven learning design often demands the realignment of the activity to reflect the pedagogical and institutional context. With this in mind, a set of continua is proposed as an initial model for opening up discussion about the issues associated with the reuse of learning designs. This model, which adapts the ideas developed by Taylor et al. (1996), uses a slide rule analogy for measuring complexity of reuse (see Figure 2). It is based around four inter-related dimensions: the delivery approach, activity design, technology use and ease of adaptation.
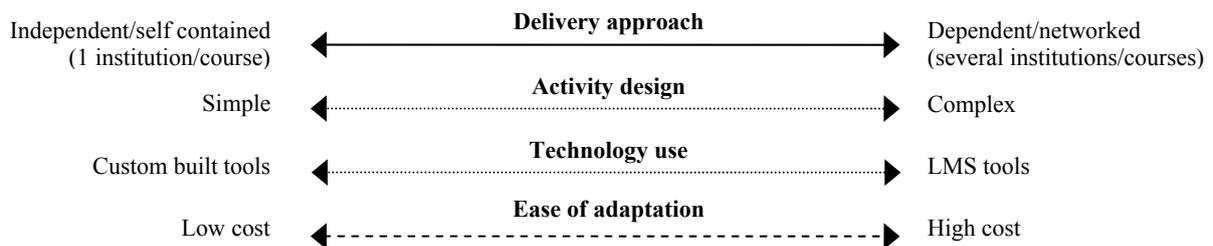
**Figure 2: Dimensions of reuse**

Clearly, there are still many issues that need addressing to enable greater uptake and reuse of learning designs. One way forward is to generate more discussion about the practicalities of reuse, using case studies such as the one presented in this paper (see also Fill et al., 2006), particularly as one of the main challenges remains how to shape the learning design to 'fit' the actual teaching context and its available infrastructure supports.

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