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Abstract

Advocates suggest that anonymity allows all learners to have an equal voice in a learning environment, and that it encourages participation. This paper explores tutors' and learners' experiences of an anonymous, synchronous role play activity conducted using online discussion forums. A qualitative study was undertaken to investigate the experiences of five groups of learners and four tutors. Data were obtained from an online questionnaire and interviews with students and tutors.

The findings reveal a huge diversity in responses to the activity. Learners' emotions before the activity ranged from 'confident' to 'panic'. Afterwards many stated that 'anonymity' was the best thing about the activity, suggesting that it 'loosened inhibitions' and allowed 'unfettered expression of thought'. At the same time, some respondents admitted trying to guess the identity of participants, and played their roles with varying degrees of conviction and engagement. Some participants may even have refrained from playing any part in the activity, hiding behind their anonymity. For tutors issues of control were significant and issues of facilitation were raised, although inappropriate behaviour was rare.

This study has revealed the diversity of learners' responses to online role play, and the generally positive attitude towards anonymity. It also highlights the potential for anonymity to contribute to inequality in participation and raises the question of whether genuine anonymity can be useful or achievable. Key findings with significance for future implementation of similar role play activities are presented here.

0055 'Unfettered expression of thought'? Experiences of anonymous online role play

Introduction

There are many reported advantages of anonymity for online learners, including equality of opportunity, increased choice, high participation rates, enhanced disclosure, and the removal of gender and cultural expectations (Chester and Gwynne, 1998; Freeman and Capper, 1999). Sullivan's (2002) study of female American college students illustrates these benefits and identified anonymity as the most important aspect of learners' online experience—equalising advantage, increasing openness and honesty, developing trust, and removing stereotyping, bias and fear.

Role play is regarded by some as an enjoyable, engaging and effective learning activity, which in the online environment is emotionally safer and lower risk than a face to face equivalent (Freeman and Capper, 1999; Bell, 2001). Vincent and Shepherd (1998) provide an early example with a team simulation using email to address issues of Middle East politics. Other applications in areas as diverse as business, learning and natural resource development have also been effective (e.g. Freeman and Capper, 1999; Bell, 2001 and McLaughlan et al., 2001) with benefits including the increased awareness of different perspectives and the development of soft skills (McLaughlan and Kirkpatrick, 2005). Project EnRoLE, (www.uow.edu.au/cedir/enrole/index.html), set up to assist dissemination of information about role play in university teaching, provides a comprehensive set of resources and references.

There are, however, challenges associated with combining anonymity and role play. Freeman and Capper (1999) observed 'playfulness' in a group of anonymous postgraduate learners, and there is the potential for this to slip into anti-social behaviour and even harassment. Chester and Gwynne (1998) and Freeman and Bamford (2004) report 'theft' of identities and subsequent use to flame or 'denigrate' other students. In addition, role play itself can induce feelings of fear, anxiety and guilt amongst participants and tutors and disengagement with roles can be an issue (Bell, 2001; Freeman and Capper, 1999).

Bell (2001) called for further work to investigate levels of involvement and role engagement in online role play, and the effects of asynchronicity and anonymity. Most work on online role play to date has reported on asynchronous activities and often highlights the benefit of time for reflection before responding to messages posted by others (Wills and McDougall, 2008). This paper contributes to the exploration of anonymity through consideration of a synchronous online role play which requires quicker responses, replicates more closely a face to face equivalent and overcomes the problem of the time taken for students to post (Douglas, 2007). The issue of equality of opportunity, raised by many as an advantage of anonymity, is explored, and questions are raised about the authenticity of anonymity in online activities.

The online role play activity

A synchronous online workshop was designed as part of the Teaching Qualification Further Education (TQFE) programme for in-service lecturers

in Scottish Colleges (an SCQF level 9 qualification). The aim of the two and a half hour workshop was to explore issues of quality in Further Education through two main activities: discussion of a reading and a role play activity. Both activities were facilitated using a WebCT discussion forum. For the discussion of the reading respondents posted messages in response to questions posed by the tutor. This activity was not anonymous and allowed the tutor to ensure that everyone was present in the online space and able to contribute. At the start of the role play activity, learners were split into groups of 4–6 and each individual allocated a role (student, tutor/lecturer, manager or support staff). The groups were provided with a discussion thread in which to consider the question 'What is quality in Further Education?' Individuals were asked to provide a perspective on the question from their allocated role. At this stage the forum was 'switched' to anonymous, so that the author of any posting could not be identified. Towards the end of the workshop the tutor set up new discussion threads to promote exchange of ideas between groups and reflection on the content and process of learning. The activity was not formally assessed but subsequent face to face discussions provided valuable informal formative assessment opportunities.

Following successful piloting of the workshop in the previous academic session, in 2007/8 four tutors facilitated similar online workshops for sixty-six learners in five groups. Each group consisted of up to twenty lecturers from one or more colleges.

A mixed methods study was conducted to allow description and exploration of learners' experiences of the online role play. Forty five participants provided usable responses to an online questionnaire immediately after the workshop (response rate = 68%). Sixty two percent of respondents rated themselves as regular users of WebCT prior to the workshop, whilst another eleven percent had used it for a previous TQFE online workshop. Sixty nine percent of respondents rated themselves 'fairly confident' computer users, four percent were 'very occasional' users and another four percent 'completely at home online'. These findings suggest that almost three quarters of the group surveyed could be regarded as competent computer users.

Five of the students who responded to the questionnaire also participated in a telephone interview. The sample of interviewees selected provided a cross-section of colleges (e.g. rural/urban), and IT experience (novice to expert). The four tutors facilitating the online workshops were also interviewed. Analysis of data was informed by a grounded theory approach which allowed findings to emerge from the data rather than being influenced by any preconceptions. Interview data were transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis using a constant comparison approach.

Qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires were then combined to provide evidence of:

- feelings at the start of the role play;
- experiences of the role play;
- help and support requirements;
- the most significant learning from the activity; and
- comments and suggestions.

This paper draws principally on data from learners' and tutors' experiences of the role play and focuses specifically on the issue of anonymity. The research raised other issues of interest, for example the effectiveness of the role play in promoting learning about quality issues, and these aspects have been reported elsewhere (Gordon et al. 2009).

Experiences of the role play

Overall the findings reveal a diversity of experiences and responses to the activity. Learners' emotions before the activity ranged from 'confident' to 'panic'. Afterwards the most commonly mentioned feature of the role play was the anonymity. Some learners suggested that anonymity had 'loosened inhibitions' and allowed 'unfettered expression of thought'. Others were less convinced of the role of anonymity in the success or otherwise of the activity, whilst some appeared to hide behind the anonymity provided and refrain from contributing. Several respondents noted that they had tried to guess the identity of participants, and there is evidence of roles being played with varying degrees of conviction. Some tutors confessed to being anxious about the activity, and although in most cases this was a very successful activity (from both tutors' and learners' perspectives), it raised issues about inappropriate behaviour, level of commitment and the value of anonymity in learning. These issues are illustrated and explored further below. Throughout the abbreviation QR is used for 'questionnaire respondent', I for 'interviewee', and T for 'tutor'.

Benefits of anonymity

Anonymity was identified by forty percent of questionnaire respondents as one of the 'best things' about the role play activity. Respondents considered that anonymity helped them play their roles:

"[anonymity] seemed to help me get more 'into' the role' (QR3)

"People feel free to take on roles due to anonymity" (QR12)

Anonymity allowed a sense of freedom and lack of inhibition which clearly had an impact on some learners:

"[the best thing about the online role play activity was] feeling safe and free enough to be honest" (QR16)

"the anonymity [...] was a clever idea that allowed for the unfettered expression of thought" (QR23)

The opportunity to speak freely without fear of identification led to increased participation and the opportunity to consider a wide range of perspectives:

"I think people said more than they would normally because it couldn't be traced back to the individual" (Q13)

"[the best thing about the online role play activity was] stating a point of view and reading others' points of views without knowing who they were. It led to a very open discussion" (Q44)

One of the tutors also felt that anonymity had been beneficial in terms of participation:

"I think the anonymity that students had allowed them to participate better than they would in a face to face situation" (T2)

The lack of sound contributed further to the anonymity "because no-one can hear your voice" (I3). For one the anonymity only worked because "we knew each other" (I1), whilst another seemed more ambivalent about the role of anonymity:

"I don't think [anonymity] mattered very much, but it probably helped. It was probably better to be anonymous" (I5)

Playing roles

This activity required learners to take on specific roles, and success depended in part on how well they did this. Whilst anonymity may have been important in providing an atmosphere in which roles could be played in

safety, there were inevitably mixed reactions to the effectiveness of learner engagement with the role play. In particular the nature of the role (student, tutor/lecturer, manager, support staff) that participants adopted appears to be significant, with a lecturer/tutor role easiest to play:

"Role play was ok because I was a tutor, so I was already in role, so it didn't feel terribly strange" (I2)

"people did manage to get into their role [...] because of the topic which was close to people's hearts. We know a lot about it, and felt quite strongly about it, and I think that's the reason why it was so effective" (I1)

"some people got right into their role – that of manager" (I5)

For some individuals playing their role was a challenge:

"I found it very difficult [to get into role], because my role was a support worker" (I2)

Difficulties with playing roles may have resulted in certain roles dominating whilst others were missing in some groups:

"I would say that the lecturer and student input was much greater than the others and it was the same in the other group [...] not everyone became involved [...] there were roles missing" (I4)

One tutor noted different styles of engagement, ranging from full involvement: "some people take it very seriously" (T2), to a more surface approach. Another incident revealed how a prompt from the tutor was necessary to get an individual into their role:

"One member of the group who I had given a student role [...] spoke as if he was a lecturer [...] so I posted a message to him saying "what's the perspective of a student? [...]" but he didn't pick that up and he didn't move in it at all" (T4).

A student also noted similar difficulties in playing their roles:

"People weren't really divesting themselves of the lecturer role. Almost subconsciously people were still operating from the lecturer role" (I2)

A lack of involvement and role playing by some learners was an important issue which impacted on the experience. In one group the management role was absent despite a student being allocated this role. The tutor commented "there were one or two I'm sure didn't participate. I know it's anonymous, but I have this feeling that they did not participate at all" (T1). A possible explanation was provided by the tutor:

"when they started the anonymous part, something went wrong with one of the groups because we ended up with having two managers in the one group. I think what had happened was that one person who should have been in one group had gone into the second group [...] so the manager was missing in one group, which is an important point, because if you wanted to get a varying view, you needed the management view. So the first group didn't work at all." (T1)

In response to this situation the tutor posted a message to group one to say that that management weren't saying anything. Someone from group two noticed, and volunteered to help out in group one. The tutor continues:

"That showed that they had been looking at [the] other [group's] postings, which they weren't supposed to be doing. And in group two someone recognised the bloke who was playing the manager, and mentioned him, so everybody know who it was [...] That spoiled it. The anonymity didn't really work in that group" (T1)

Another tutor anticipated individuals not playing their part and tried to pre-empt any problems by careful allocation of roles—"if there were six in a group instead of four there was more chance to get people involved and it did not matter if roles doubled up but it coped with some of the problems of people not participating" (T2).

One strategy for dealing with quiet or non-contentious groups, which was possible due to the anonymity of the activity, was for the tutor to step in and post a message in one of the allocated roles. However, some tutors were hesitant about doing this:

"At one point I saw group one, they weren't participating, and I thought I'd put in a few contentious things to start getting people to argue. In the end I decided not to [...] I decided that I would take no part in putting the comments in, so that if something did come back later I could say, "it wasn't me – don't take this out on me." (T1)

Very occasionally tutors 'seeded' the discussions with messages, particularly in an attempt to get things started, perhaps in response to their own anxieties about the activity:

"I get very nervous, after I have put them into the roles, when nothing happens. Some will be typing away furiously. Others may be thinking and others may be confused. [...]. Perhaps I should be keeping track of who is who and who is saying what" (T2)

Bell (2001) found almost two weeks elapsed before participants made contributions to her asynchronous role play activity, so it may be that there is an initial reluctance to start a role play discussion amongst learners, perhaps related to issues of fear and anxiety (Freeman and Capper, 1999).

The same tutor who expressed anxiety above, later commented on the evidence of her group playing their roles effectively:

"I [...] was surprised that when the managers start speaking you get 'management speak' and students' misspell (whether deliberately or not). They seem to adopt the roles quite effectively and they all seemed to participate" (T2)

Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour

Aside from not playing the allocated role at all, issues of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour arose. In some groups all went well:

"Everyone behaved themselves. There were times when it got a little bit heated. Because we knew each other we were able to do that with each other and not take it too far [...] people did not get upset because they realised it was a role play, and they were having a bit of fun" (I1)

T3 commented on initial problems with people knowing which role they were playing and exchanges of emails for confirmation of these, but then the actual role play went well:

"I think people forgot who the other people were, they got into role and simply responded to people [...] in their individual roles. [...] it all seemed to be happening according to plan." (T3)

The value of knowing your peers in a group has already been identified, and the same respondent noted this factor as a possible reason for appropriate behaviour:

"[...] humour helps within the group, and knowing each other helped. If we hadn't known each other, then possibly it could have got out of hand" (I1)

As with any role play, some participants played up their roles:

"It was a laugh, some of my peers took their roles to extremes" (Q39)

"I think some people got a little bit carried away at times as you tend to do in a role play knowing that there's not going to be any consequence from this" (I3)

In some groups, issues became a little 'sillier' or more heated:

"they were just giving a few words in an answer and then replying to one another. So there wasn't the depth in it. And I thought we might lose it altogether at one point. However [...] it all came back together and people started giving proper answers and it ended really well" (T4)

"There were a couple of off-the-cuff comments, there was one use of bad language [...] I took it very much as tongue in cheek." (I2)

It appears that some of the problems encountered resulted from a misunderstanding over instructions (for example some students clearly thought they could choose their own role), whilst others had difficulty posting messages in the correct thread, or following instructions to engage only with their small sub-group. Some learners took time to compose responses in a word processor before posting these for the group, whilst it was acknowledged by tutors that more confident IT users appeared to be 'fitting around' reading and contributing shorter, less thoughtful messages in a variety of forums.

Significant inappropriate behaviour of the type reported by Chester and Gwynne (1998) was not experienced during this online role play, although what is regarded as inappropriate by one tutor or group of learners may be different from that which perturbs others. Perhaps more significant from the tutors' perspective were the difficulties in monitoring an anonymous activity, particularly in terms of identifying non-contributors and those who have misunderstood instructions or need support. As Chester and Gwynne (1998) note 'silence is not easily interpreted', and there is the added complication that silent participants cannot be easily identified in an anonymous activity. It may be useful for tutors' to be aware of participants' identity, although this in turn may impact on learners' feelings of freedom. Awareness of identities by tutors would, however, allow the provision of quick and appropriate support to encourage engagement and open up opportunities for learners facing difficulties. McLaughlin and Kirkpatrick (2004) suggest that data on participant logins collected by software can be used to detect inactivity, but this may not be practicable in a synchronous activity when a moderator is simultaneously trying to monitor discussions.

Despite some of the challenges mentioned, overall the workshop was generally regarded as effective, particularly in the way that it allowed different perspectives on the issue of quality to be appreciated:

"There wasn't very much silliness in this group, although there was more political stuff, sort of getting things off their chest about their organisation, sort of tricky things going on there, but in general absolutely super [...] they raved about it, they thought it was a really powerful experience, they'd learnt a lot, so that was very positive" (T4)

Uncovering identities

Another management issue was the authenticity of the anonymity. Although Freeman and Capper (1999) suggest that one of the advantages of online role play is that it can offer anonymity, despite tutors' best efforts it is clear that learners were often keen to know with whom they communicating:

"I spent a lot of time looking and reading what others had said and trying to imagine who had said what [...] I think we all did a bit of that, trying to guess who had taken on what role" (I3)

Some learners even developed strategies for uncovering the identity of their peers (for example, one learner informally told their tutor that they had printed out the list of roles provided in the forums before this was deleted). The tutor recognised that "students are quite crafty that is why I try to take off the group list before they catch on to who is doing what [...] we need to make sure that it is really anonymous" (T2)

The issue of genuine anonymity was also raised by another tutor:

"Although they were anonymous I was afraid that they might trace it to somebody and therefore be aware of who had been speaking. I think they might have got a bit over-excited about being anonymous and actually felt it was genuine anonymity whereas I suppose I don't think there is any such thing at the end of the day" (T4)

One tutor had devised a method to ensure that participants could not guess the identity of other participants. She allocated everyone a number before the workshop then on the day showed them which role each number represented. “My reason for doing that was that I didn’t want them to be able to identify anybody and I thought that the chances of them remembering someone else’s number was pretty slim. In fact the chances of them remembering their own number was pretty slim too. We did have phone calls on the morning because they had forgotten their number.” (T3)

Tutors also commented on their feelings and experiences of managing an anonymous online activity. The lack of non-verbal feedback to reassure them that learners are OK was one issue which induced anxiety:

“I think if there is any sort of joking around in the [face to face] classroom I am pretty skilful at managing that. I would definitely have a laugh over whatever it was, but I might say something just to turn the conversation or to move it in a different direction and it wasn’t possible to do that online. That’s maybe why I felt a bit nervous about it” (T4)

Where anonymity was compromised this also had an impact on the activity. In one group three students were working together in the same room, and when they were ‘thrown out of that room’ had to work together from one PC:

“They then posted one message with student 1,2,3 and their names attached, so it was not anonymous. [...] It did affect the role play. I had to post a message to tell them not to put their names on and to delete the message already posted. It spoilt the beginning [...] I thought [the role play activity] was collapsing around my ears. But it did get better.” (T2)

The software itself also created problems. Two tutors commented that they would have liked to return to using real names at the end of the workshop or be able to “turn on and off the anonymous when we wanted to” (T3), but the software used prohibits this. In order to keep track of individuals ‘behind the scenes’ monitoring of student input was undertaken by several tutors. T3, for example, had a “sheet with all the different tasks and I was ticking them off — I ticked them off when they were in, I ticked them off when they responded to the reading. Once we went anonymous of course I couldn’t do that” (T3).

Whilst being regarded by learners as an important and engaging aspect of online role play, ‘anonymity’ should perhaps be regarded as a relative concept. Given the use of technologies which will allow the tracing of participants, there is always the possibility that those disrupting online role play activities could be brought to task, for example by tracking harassing message senders through IP addresses (Freeman and Capper, 1999).

In addition, our findings suggest that learners themselves are often keen to ‘crack’ the anonymity and will search for clues and develop strategies to uncover the identity of their peers in a role play activity. Whilst this may be a situation influenced by the fact that the groups involved in the role play knew each other in person, this is an important issue. Anonymity has been suggested as a having the potential to reduce social presence (Bell, 2001; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997), that is to reduce the degree to which other people are real. The fact that all participants were online at the same time may have increased social presence and led to a desire to find out who peers were. Bayne (2005) has also suggested that even in an anonymous online context “we cannot simply throw off the ways in which who or what we can be online is informed by our existence as subjects with bodies.”

Conclusions: does anonymous online role play permit the ‘unfettered expression of thought’?

Despite the widespread promotion of the advantages of online role play as

a way of providing a more level playing field than face to face role play, in particular through the advantage of anonymity, this study has raised some interesting issues which provide an alternative perspective. Clearly from such a case study generalisation to any larger sample of learners or tutors is not possible, however, some of the key findings may be of interest or help to others designing or facilitating online learning:

- tutors and learners have anxieties about online role play
- technology issues influence the ability of learners to participate fully
- barriers to role engagement go beyond the cultural and language difficulties identified by other researchers (e.g. Bell, 2001) and may also be related to confidence with IT and the ease of identification with the role allocated
- the reliance on written contributions promotes reflection and encourages some learners to produce thoughtful written contributions, whilst others will take a more surface approach
- moderation and monitoring by tutors is challenging, for example it is difficult to identify those who are silent and the reasons for their silence, and therefore difficult to offer appropriate support.

As a result the experiences of learners in online role play appear to be diverse and difficult to characterise. Whilst some may experience the activity as an opportunity to provide open and honest comment on the scenario from the perspective of their allocated role, others may be prevented from engaging in the same way by issues of confidence, identification with their role, and technical difficulties.

The issue of anonymity has been explored in particular detail as this was raised by participants as one of the best features of the role play. Anonymity provides a number of benefits for learners, including the opportunity for openness and equity in an activity, however, it is clear that not all learners will share this experience. Some will find engaging with roles difficult and may not contribute as a result. The use of anonymity also raises issues for tutors, not just in the management of appropriate engagement, but also in monitoring contributions and providing appropriate support for learners. In addition it is clear that anonymity is in this context a relative concept, with no absolute guarantee of 'invisibility' possible.

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