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Reshaping dominant stories:  
a poststructuralist approach to online role play

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Online role play is an increasingly popular teaching/learning technique in higher education (Wills & McDougall 2009) but there has been little research into ways a poststructuralist approach may be supported in this format. This paper describes two very different means of incorporating a poststructuralist approach into role plays in higher education to problematise dominant assumptions in the language and content of the subject matter. The first method was a series of interventions in a face-to-face role play in which medical students practised consultations with adolescent school students. The consultations were interrupted repeatedly with activities designed to interrogate assumptions and the school students acted as coaches to improve the medical students’ technique. Although this role play was performed face-to-face, some of its activities may be redeveloped to suit an online role-playing format. The second method was a feature of an online role play involving Middle-East politics and journalism students, in which daily online newspapers provided a reflecting and distorting mirror to the political events simulated by the politics students. Indications of ways in which the two methods produced changes in understanding were gathered using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods: questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, participant observation and analysis of online discussions and artefacts.

Keywords: online role play, role play, poststructuralist drama techniques

Introduction

The generic learning design of online role play as described in the Australian Universities Teaching Committee's 'Learning designs' collection (Wills & Ip 2002) is based on the 'naturalistic' role play tradition developed for face-to-face interaction: students are asked to play their roles as realistically as possible in order to help them suspend disbelief in the scenario and develop empathy for the various points of view represented. O'Toole and Lepp (2000:28) claim that while role play in the naturalistic genre is used widely in training and education contexts, this is often with the aim of behaviouristic transmission of skills or information. They argue that this approach downplays its particular strength in supporting a social, dialogic way of learning in which players learn with and from each other. However, practitioners in the drama-in-education field including O'Neill (1995:78-79), Neelands and Goode (2000:109) and Cahill (2008:229) have noted that even when an open-ended role play design and democratic facilitation style are used, students have a tendency when using purely naturalistic modes of role play to produce a superficial, stereotyped portrayal of characters and events. These practitioners advocate using a range of dramatic activities to interrupt conventional story-building processes to highlight representations that merely replicate dominant cultural views, to interrogate the means by which these views are produced, and to help students review dominant storylines and reshape them to present alternative possibilities. Cahill (2008), who provides a detailed explication of the poststructuralist theories behind these activities, argues that deconstructive techniques she has used in her own practice can
enable the students' enquiry to 'reach beyond the technical to the transformative' (Cahill 2008:283).

I studied the two very different means of achieving these sorts of outcomes described in this paper during 2009 as elements of case studies in my PhD research project, the aim of which is to explore various aspects of the role of stories in online role play, including their role in helping students engage with the subject matter and create meanings from events. While the sequence of activities in the face-to-face role play was designed carefully to apply poststructuralist theories in the drama classroom, the other was a feature of an online role play that I found almost incidentally supported the kind of enquiry into the nature of language, discourse and representations of 'reality' that can be identified as a poststructuralist approach – to my knowledge it had not been recognised as such until I proposed the idea. Before I describe these methods and my findings, it is necessary to define two of the key terms I will use.

**Online role play**
The broad format named 'online role play' that is used in an increasing number of Australian universities (Wills & McDougall 2009) can be seen as a fairly simple translation of face-to-face naturalistic role play to an online discussion platform. The format is described in Wills and Ip (2002) as 'provid[ing] a scenario and a set of roles that students adopt in order to solve a problem, create something, explore an issue etc.' They argue that these role plays fall into the category of 'multi-agenda/social-system/social-process simulations' in Gredler's (1992) taxomomy of simulations and games, in which 'participants assume roles in a hypothesized social group and experience the complexity of establishing and implementing particular goals within the fabric established by the system'. Thus, the epistemological strand into which these role plays have been placed is that of experiential learning. Wills and McDougall (2009:2) argue online role play adds two important features to the face-to-face format: asynchronicity and anonymity. Aside from these characteristics, there is room for diversity in the format: for example, the online interface that frames the role play interaction may use a graphic metaphor to represent the virtual world, but this is not always the case; and there may be some face-to-face elements.

**A poststructuralist approach**
There is no one poststructuralist approach, and the act of defining a 'poststructuralist' approach is itself problematic and contradictory. The term 'poststructuralism' encompasses a range of theoretical positions that are frequently taken to have been developed in and from the work of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, among others, in the late 20th century. The varying poststructuralist positions share the 'founding insight' that language does not reflect any fixed reality: that there are no intrinsic meanings in either the natural world or social reality, but different languages lend meanings in particular ways that are influenced by the practices, definitions, traditions and stories (the 'discourses') that operate in a group. Poststructuralists also share the view that the author's intended meaning is secondary to the meaning the 'reader' perceives. Constructions of meanings are influenced by the reader's conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, and his or her sense of himself or herself. This has wide implications – ultimately, even concepts of knowledge and personal identity can be understood as also being constructed and shaped through language, discourse and subjectivity (Weedon 1987).

Derrida (1976) introduced a way of analysing or 'deconstructing' texts to question the ways in which language and discourses moderate the way in which we understand the world. He
argues that meaning is frequently generated through definitions that are based on comparison or opposition. Thus, people understand the meaning of 'nature' (in the nature/culture debate) in part by referring to its opposite, the word 'culture'. This creation of binary categories can help clarify thinking and conversation, but it has a polarising effect on our view of the world, and can limit our sense of what is possible. Poststructuralists' practice of deconstructing texts is based on the argument that if we are not aware of the ways in which language can affect the way we think, we may be left with the misunderstanding that words represent reality, rather than that they impose a particular way of understanding reality, and as a result many alternative ways of interpreting things are hidden from view.

A poststructuralist approach to working with texts of any type involves holding accepted meanings up for scrutiny by making explicit the mechanisms by which they are constructed socially. It includes exploring ways in which people's acceptance of these meanings can shape their sense of themselves through a process of subjectification.

Cahill (2008:276-77) argues that in order to make transparent the constructed nature of interpretation and the processes by which dominant cultural meanings, norms and assumptions influence not only the ways in which a person makes sense of the world, but their sense of their own position, role and possibilities, an intervention involving both recognising and interrupting these processes is necessary.

Methodology and methods

In line with the poststructuralist view that meanings do not exist independently but are constructed through language and discourses, I have assumed a social constructivist view of learning (Schwandt 1998:220-21) and used a narrative enquiry research methodology (Elliott 2005). This methodology has enabled me to explore contextual detail that may have impacted on my findings, including examining my own impact on my data and analysis as the research designer and participant-observer. I have used quantitative methods to find indications of trends in students' responses to the role plays, and qualitative methods to explore these trends and other factors in greater depth (Elliott 2005:171-77). Guided by the methodological framework and ethics, I sought to capture participants' responses in their own words wherever possible, critically evaluate each piece of evidence in relation to all others that may have been relevant, and create a trail of evidence for my interpretations.

In each case study I invited all of the students who took part in the role plays to participate in my research. The number of students who contributed data through each of my methods is summarised in the tables below. In each case I took the role of a low-key participant-observer and took notes on the role play as it developed, and I wrote these up with reflections in my journal between 10 minutes and 24 hours afterwards. In the online role play I had access to the non-restricted areas of the website and collected the postings of the groups whose members had all consented to taking part in my research. At the end of each role play I distributed a voluntary, anonymous questionnaire made up of Likert-scale and open questions. In both cases I held voluntary focus groups in the week following the role play, which I audio-recorded and transcribed. I also interviewed teachers and several randomly selected consenting student participants from both case studies either face-to-face, by telephone or by email. As the main context for my research project was higher education, in the first case study I did not survey or interview the school students. I have used pseudonyms for all participants throughout my reporting. These methods were approved by the Deakin University
Table 1: Data collection methods and participants: Case study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Consenting participants /students in cohort</th>
<th>Questionnaire respondents</th>
<th>Focus group participants</th>
<th>Email interview participants</th>
<th>Teacher/ facilitator interview participants</th>
<th>Role play designer interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical students</td>
<td>15/24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School students</td>
<td>5/19 (with both student and parental consent)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Data collection methods and participants: Case study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Consenting participants /students in cohort</th>
<th>Groups observed (via online postings)</th>
<th>Questionnaire respondents</th>
<th>Focus group participants</th>
<th>Interview participants (email, telephone or face-to-face)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle East Politics (undergraduates)</td>
<td>43/66</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11 students, 1 lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East Politics (Masters-level)</td>
<td>3/26</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism (undergraduates)</td>
<td>2/27</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>48/119</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Case study 1: poststructuralist techniques used in a face-to-face drama

In the first case study, simulated patient consultations between medical students and secondary school drama students were repeatedly interrupted by non-naturalistic dramatic activities. These were designed to stimulate critical thinking about the medical students' consulting techniques and language, the assumptions these slightly older students were making about young people, and how they could achieve a more authentic communication with adolescent patients. I chose to study the workshop because I wished to explore possible means of incorporating a poststructuralist approach into online role plays. While this workshop was performed face-to-face, it was designed explicitly to use poststructuralist drama techniques to encourage participants to question and re-frame certain categories that limited possibilities for personal agency and growth (Cahill 2008). I believe that some of...
These techniques may be redeveloped for online performance, for example through use of synchronous audio/messaging software such as Elluminate Live! Also, the workshop design had a strong theoretical base (Cahill 2008), and it had been used many times: the workshop had been embedded in the curriculum of a university medical school and several secondary schools' Years 9-10 drama classes since 2003 (Wales, Cahill & Sanci 2004:12).

The medical students were the main focus of my study, as my PhD research project is centred in the higher education context. The learning aims set for these students were to develop their ability to elicit sensitive information from adolescent patients by learning and practising useful words, phrases and question types; and to develop a broader understanding of – and respect for – young people's culture, issues, attitudes and abilities.

The workshop was situated in the school students' drama room and jointly facilitated by the school drama teacher and a medical lecturer. It involved the medical students playing the role of doctors trying to elicit information about the psycho-social welfare of an adolescent character called 'Jo', who was played as either a boy or a girl by the school students. The students played out the consultation in pairs or threes in naturalistic role-playing form, but this was only one of the ways in which these students learnt with and from each other. The role plays were allowed to run in segments of only minutes before being interrupted with other activities:

- For several minutes, the school students provided individualised feedback and advice to their medical student partners on their questioning technique and language. This placed the adolescents in the position of knowledgeable expert and coach. This activity was designed to demonstrate that young people were already 'capable of sharing responsibility for learning and wellbeing with their fellow community members' (Cahill 2008:205), and thus to challenge less positive assumptions the medical students may have had about them.

- Several 'fishbowl' advice-giving activities (similar to 'forum theatre', described by Boal (1985)) were performed. In these, volunteers played out a particular scene in the centre and the onlookers provided suggestions on how the doctor role should ideally be played, using the third-person voice. Cahill (2008:230) argues that use of the 'expert' third-person view in this activity should help participants to adopt a reflective, critical stance and a broader, more strategic problem-solving perspective.

- Several 'hidden thoughts' activities (similar to 'thought tracking' described by Neelands and Goode (2000:91)) were played. In these, extra players stood behind the volunteer characters already in the centre and stated the thoughts each of the characters were likely to be thinking but would be unable to voice in the situation. These were designed to help students articulate the multiple and conflicting desires, fears, assumptions and norms that commonly impact on the kinds of things the role-playing characters are able to say and do in the kind of scenario depicted, and thus bring these forces and their sources into open and frank discussion (Cahill 2008:157-8, 205, 233).

- A role-swapping activity was used, in which the medical students experienced the adolescent patient's perspective while the school students questioned them. This was designed to demonstrate that 'the position survives the candidate' (Cahill 2008:226), and thus highlight the patterns in the positions and storylines at play.

**Indications of students' learning**

The school and medical students' performance in the workshop was not assessed formally as a discrete item. To identify what they learnt from the workshop I relied on their self-assessment in their responses to questions I posed in the questionnaire, focus group and email interviews,
and on their lecturer's opinion as expressed in her interview. According to all data sources, all of the student respondents and their lecturer believed the students had achieved the learning aim of developing their ability to elicit sensitive information by learning and practising useful words, phrases and question types. The indications were also positive but less clear for the concomitant, deeper learning aim of developing a broader understanding of – and respect for – young people's culture, issues, attitudes and abilities.

The quantitative data indicated that most students thought the workshop had challenged their assumptions about young people, but the qualitative data revealed mixed responses to this question. While the majority of questionnaire respondents (55%) agreed that 'As a result of taking part in the [workshop] I feel my assumptions about young people had been challenged', 18% were neutral and 27% disagreed. The qualitative data from email interviews and the focus group included plain statements from some students that they thought their assumptions had not been challenged (Sarah, Jilly: email interviews; Jessie: focus group). However, others indicated that their categorisation of young people had broadened or the workshop had helped them to see young people as individual human beings with varied characteristics, rather than as a stereotype (Aaron, Simone: focus group; Paul: email interview). For example:

I was quite surprised at how I guess out of touch I was with adolescent individuals … I went to a boys' school for high school, and we wore uniforms, and so it was quite different being in a co-ed school with free dress … I was amazed by the maturity, at least sort of socially and in terms of life experience, I feel that their maturity I would have thought was far ahead of what I would have expected … I think there would be 15-16 year olds who weren't at all like that but you've got to acknowledge that there's probably a large population that are very advanced in their maturity and experiences, and just to be aware that they're out there (Aaron: focus group).

A further questionnaire question asking students to indicate which techniques had helped them learn revealed that students gave the most positive responses to 'role playing 1:1', and 'individual feedback from my young person'. For each of the non-naturalistic activities specifically designed to highlight and critique dominant assumptions, a clear majority either agreed or strongly agreed that the technique had helped them learn, but the proportion of responses at the positive end of the Likert scale was slightly lower, and in each case one or two disagreed that the technique had helped them to learn at all.

However, when I asked the medical lecturer for her opinion on whether the students had had their assumptions about young people challenged, and if so what might have contributed to this, she said she did 'not necessarily agree' that the students who gave neutral or negative responses to these questions provided an accurate indication of what the students had learnt. She said in her experience as a medical educator and as a doctor she had found that people commonly were unaware of exactly which learning experiences made a difference in changing their ingrained behaviours and attitudes. However, she said several ex-students had told her some years after their participation in earlier workshops that it had been a particularly memorable learning experience, and she suspected it was not just the skill development outcomes that caused the experience to resonate but something deeper (lecturer interview). When I asked one of the role play designers for her interpretation of these findings, she said they reflected her own surveys of past workshops and concluded that students frequently lacked the 'literacy' to identify which teaching/learning strategies made a difference to their thinking. Some researchers in the field of higher education generally (Coates 2006:30-31) and in educational drama (Morgan & Saxton 1987:198-9) also argue that many important, deeper
learning outcomes can be subtle, difficult to articulate, and contingent on contextual and personal factors; and may take time to develop as the experience continues to resonate at the back of students' minds. Whether students in this workshop learnt to evaluate and re-frame certain categories to the extent that they developed a broader, more nuanced, and more compassionate perspective, such as described by Cahill (2008:193, 232), is in this 'important but hard to identify' category.

Case study 2: online newspapers to report on simulated events

The role play I chose for my second case study was a text-based online role play used to teach Middle-East politics and journalism students in three Australian universities. It was very different to the workshop described above – virtually the only points of similarity were that they involved university students and role playing, and there were poststructuralist elements. While poststructuralist elements were central to the first workshop, which was designed specifically to test assumptions and help students revise dominant storylines, these sorts of outcomes were not listed among the learning aims of the second role play. However, their presence indicates that it is possible to design into the online role playing format a feature that can support a poststructuralist approach, and it is possible that this could be leveraged to greater effect in future role plays.

The case study 2 role play has been used repeatedly in Australian and international universities since 1990 and has provided a template for many of the online role plays now in use in Australia (Wills & McDougall 2009). In the role play, politics students playing in groups of two or three took on roles of political, religious and social leaders in the Middle East and responded to events in a fictitious scenario. The activity ran for 13 days, 24 hours a day, with groups communicating in text with each other and the journalism students via a simulated email feature in the role play website. The students were assessed on the quality and quantity of their contributions and their marks made up 40-50% of their subject grade, depending on which subject they were studying. The journalism students worked in three groups to produce three different daily online newspapers reporting on the 'events' simulated by the politics students. These were Al Jazeera, the New York Times and The Guardian.

The online newspapers served several purposes. They enabled the politics students to see how all of the events in the initial scenario were developing each day – without the newspapers, their view of the simulated world would have been restricted to their own role group's email interactions. This not only added interest, it provided ideas for ways in which their character might become involved in other stories that were developing (lecturer 1 interview, questionnaire comment). Also, when the journalists sent the politics characters questions in order to generate stories for their newspapers, there were numerous instances where this stimulated them to become involved and start creating strategies to promote their character's interests. Students were encouraged to look for visibility in the online newspapers as confirmation of the quality of their strategies and the importance of their character (Simulation information), and the feature fostered a sense of competition among the students (lecturer 1 interview). Several students remarked that the coverage their character's strategies received in the online newspapers produced emotional responses ranging from elation to frustration and almost despair (Thierry, Jen, Ciaran: focus group).
Indications of students' learning

The role play was designed and used with the aim of helping students learn the facts of Middle Eastern politics, the complexities of political negotiation and decision making, and a range of generic skills (Vincent & Shepherd 1998:2; lecturer 1 interview). Neither the designers of the role play nor the lecturers who facilitated it mentioned a specific aim of helping students gain a poststructuralist perspective on political discourse and news media, and to my knowledge this learning outcome was not explored at length in debriefing activities. However, my findings indicate that an enhanced awareness of the ways in which news media constructed a spurious representation of reality that was frequently stereotyped and advantaged some while disadvantaging others was a further learning outcome for many of the students who contributed data to my research. This change in understanding can be traced to the impact of the online newspapers that reported on the daily simulation events. Unfortunately, I have no quantitative data on these outcomes as I had not anticipated them when I created the questionnaire, but indications in the qualitative data that students gained these kinds of insights include the following:

- Three politics students said they learned skills in managing media to further their characters' political interests as a result of their interactions with journalists in the role play (Briony: conversation; Thierry, Jen: focus group). These included developing friendly personal relationships with journalists, wording press releases in such a way as to increase their chances of being used, and timing events to allow for media deadlines.
- Two politics students commented that the frequently contrasting treatments the three simulated national dailies gave to the information and opinions they provided indicated that each particular newspaper's view of what constituted newsworthiness, and even 'truth', might differ remarkably (Cassie, Jeremy: conversations).
- Two students complained there had been inaccurate reporting or a failure to check 'facts' in some important articles, and this had impacted on their ability to respond to the role play events (Kerry, Cassie: conversations).
- Two remarked that stories with which they had been involved had been given a greater or lesser prominence in the newspapers than they thought had been warranted (Jen: focus group, Liz: conversation).
- Both journalism and politics students provided examples of instances in which the actions and representations of the media influenced the 'reality' of the role play world (Thierry, Jen: focus group; Cassie, Thierry: conversations). These included publishing unconfirmed inflammatory remarks that jeopardised fledgling peace processes between rival factions of Palestinian political group Hamas, and being instrumental in producing an alliance between Egypt and Libya.
- The following quote illustrates how one student's view of the world and the concept of 'truth' as represented by news media changed as a result of the experience:

  I find myself sympathising with Middle Eastern countries now when stuff comes out in the news. Because one of the things that I really picked up in the sim was we would make a press release and it would be reported three different ways according to the newspaper ... I think that's fairly realistic because essentially it's the same set of facts but the stories are completely different ... so as I read stuff now I think 'Oh, there's probably a bit more going on than what's reported'. I don't necessarily believe what's on the news, take it at their word (Jeremy: conversation).
Conclusion

It is hard to draw a generalised conclusion on the impact of the two very different means of supporting students' ability to problematise dominant assumptions in the language and content of the subject matter that were used in these two case studies. In the first case study there was some ambivalence among students about whether their assumptions about young people had been tested, and about how effective the non-naturalistic activities had been in producing changes in their thinking. Although this may be explained by attitudinal changes taking time to develop and sometimes being difficult to articulate, these findings are nonetheless disconcerting. In the second case study, while there were indications that some students gained greater understanding of how and why the concept of 'truth' was manipulated through political discourse and news media, and how it felt to be misrepresented or discounted, these outcomes were not overtly recognised in either learning aims or debriefing activities and may have remained inchoate for many students.

Nevertheless, the two case studies do indicate that a poststructuralist approach can be supported in both face-to-face and online role plays. It would not be a large step for future online role plays to include a distorting mirror device similar to that of the online newspapers in the second case study, and leverage its effects by introducing activities to encourage students to reflect on how and why the alternative versions of 'reality' are produced, the effects of these representations on society and the possibilities that exist for resistance and change. It is also conceivable that non-naturalistic activities along the lines of those used in the first case study may be redeveloped in an online format. It may not be possible to reproduce important aspects of this workshop including the school-based setting, the affective elements and the immediacy of the physical interactions between the two groups of students, but on the other hand the mediation of technology in communications can produce beneficial effects for role playing, such as reducing self-consciousness and giving participants time to think before responding, potentially introducing greater scope for exploring different identities (Turkle 1995). Action research to explore designs such as these, and to observe their effects over a longer term, is a logical next step.

References


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