Chapter 4

Asynchronous Online Role-Plays Using a Blended Learning Design
Integrating Theory and Practice

Belinda Johnson
RMIT University, Australia

Kathy Douglas
RMIT University, Australia

ABSTRACT

The use of online role-plays has grown in university education as an increasing number of teachers in a variety of discipline areas utilise role-play simulations in the online environment. The focus of this chapter is on design options for asynchronous online role-plays that may assist students to integrate theory and practice and develop skills in reflexive practice. The design options discussed in this chapter adopt a “blended” learning approach where online learning is used to complement face-to-face learning. Five models of online role-plays are discussed and various learning and teaching strategies canvassed to assist those teaching in the human services area to adopt and adapt these design options to meet their curriculum objectives.


INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to describe and discuss e-learning approaches in the area of online role-plays to provide teachers in the human services area with a range of choices in designing online activities that promote reflexive practice. Online role-plays...
Asynchronous Online Role-Plays Using a Blended Learning Design

can contribute to the development of reflexive practice skills for those working or preparing to work in the human services field. These role-plays can allow “active learning” (Ramsden, 2003) opportunities where role-players can integrate theory and practice in an online environment. Reflexive practice skills are integral to working in human services (Taylor & White, 2000) and are commonly taught in social work and similar human services programs. Reflexive practice occurs when a student or practitioner not only evaluates practice experiences as a way of developing better skills and practice, but also by questioning the theory behind these actions and in light of this experience develops a more contextually relevant approach (Fook, 2002; Taylor & White, 2000). In our discussion the learning and teaching focus is on design elements in online, asynchronous – that is, not in real time – role-plays.

The e-learning theory and design options discussed in this chapter have been trialled in the discipline area of mediation where students engage with theory and practice dealing with the third party facilitation of conflict (Douglas, 2007a; Douglas, 2007b). The online role-plays that have been trialled have largely mirrored face-to-face role-plays traditionally conducted in the university classroom. Our design asks students to integrate theory, through the required reading and online discussion of selected articles, with practice, that is the interventions played out in the online role-play. The online environment provides students with more leisure to consult relevant theory prior to acting in a role-play (Wills & McDougall, 2008) and thus arguably allows students to make more considered choices regarding an appropriate intervention than is available in a face-to-face role-play (Douglas, 2007a). The online role-play options discussed in this chapter differ somewhat from more open-ended problem solving simulations (see for example McLaughlan & Kirkpatrick, 2008) as they are focussed on the development of professional interactions with service users through such processes as interviewing, counselling or facilitation.

This chapter has four main objectives. First, as background the usefulness of online role-plays in integrating theory and practice is considered. A particular focus is on the way that the online environment can slow down interaction and enable students to engage in more critical thought and reflection, offering opportunities for learning about reflexive practice skills. Second, we consider e-learning theory and practice to assist in designing online role-plays and in particular consider a design that blends online role-plays with face-to-face role-plays. The development of role-play simulations as an interactive option in e-learning is also discussed and the work of Diana Laurillard (2002) is canvassed to provide a theoretical framework for the e-learning design models discussed in this chapter. Third, five design models are presented each with a different approach to online asynchronous role-plays with the benefits and limitations of each of these models discussed. This is followed by the identification of some learning and teaching strategies that may be adopted in developing online role-play activities. Through these e-learning design models and strategies we hope to enable other teachers to design their own customised online role-play activity that develops interactive practice skills and a reflexive capacity. Finally, a case study of the use of such a model in teaching the discipline area of mediation as one example of the use of this blended design is presented.

ROLE-PLAYS AND REFLEXIVE PRACTICE

Role-plays in teaching human services professions are used to develop a range of interpersonal skills such as in interviewing, counselling and facilitation. Role-plays provide students with authentic learning experiences (Herrington & Herrington, 2006) whereby the scenarios they are role-playing mirror those they may face in their future professional roles. Scenarios can be drawn from prac-