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Article abstract

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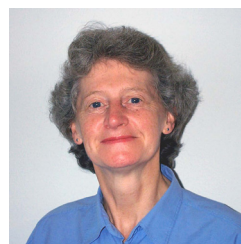
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# Role Engagement and Anonymity in Synchronous Online Role Play

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## Abstract

Role play activities provide opportunities for learners to adopt unfamiliar roles, engage in interactions with others, and get involved in realistic tasks. They are often recommended to foster the development of soft skills and a wider perspective of the world. Such activities are widely used as an online teaching approach, with examples ranging from the simple use of email to the employment of virtual worlds and Web 2.0 technologies.

This paper provides a case study of a role play activity which employs real-time anonymous discussion forums and aims to improve our understanding of effective role play and the impact of anonymity. This role play has been effective in educating learners about different perspectives on the issue of Quality in Further Education. The context and implementation of the role play are outlined, and the learners' interactions and experiences are explored using an investigative analysis of discussion transcripts and semi-structured interviews with participants. The findings suggest that role engagement and anonymity are important components for success in synchronous online role play. Evidence is presented that provides an insight into the factors which encourage role engagement, including prior experiences and contributions from peers. The impact of anonymity is also explored since many participants did not regard the study environment as real and attempted to identify their peers.

**Keywords**: Online role play; anonymity; role engagement; Web 2.0; virtual world

## Introduction

Bell (2001) describes role play as a "teaching method that provides an imaginary context in which issues and behaviours may be explored by participants who take on a specific role or character" (p. 256). Aiming to assist in the dissemination of online role play as a teaching

method, the Australian Project EnROLE has conducted significant work to describe and encourage the reuse of role play activities (Wills et al., 2009; Wills & McDougall, 2009). Drawing on this project, Russell and Shepherd (2010) described online role play as an authentic task in an authentic context, which requires learners to step into someone else's shoes and which is facilitated through in-role human interaction. Bell (2001) and Russell and Shepherd (2010) point to three key elements which exist in an online role play: (1) an authentic task in a context which permits exploration of issues or behaviours, (2) the need for participants to engage with their role, and (3) the need for interaction between roles.

There are many examples of online role plays implemented using a range of technologies, from email (Vincent & Shepherd, 1998) to virtual worlds (Gao, Noh & Koehler, 2009), and they can be found in diverse disciplines including business, education, and natural resource development (e.g., Freeman & Capper, 1999; Bell, 2001; McLaughlan, Kirkpatrick, Hirsch, & Maier, 2001). Technology provides opportunities to replicate authentic contexts for learning, including learning through role play, and practices with technology can create new contexts for learning (Thorpe, 2009). Jordan (2009), for example, described an online role play which allowed participants to practice the application of skills that they were likely to use in their professional lives. In this case, blogs and wikis were used to facilitate communication between remote participants, who worked together to resolve a fictional contractual dispute between parties on a construction project. More immersive environments for role play scenarios can be created using technologies such as virtual worlds. Gao, Noh, and Koehler (2010) conducted role play activities in Second Life, alongside equivalent face-to-face activities, to allow undergraduates taking an educational psychology course to explore issues of motivation. Their findings suggest that participants found the Second Life role play more interesting and less formal than the face-to-face role play and also that students took "conversational turns" more frequently in Second Life but had shorter exchanges than in the face-to-face activity. This indicates that the immersive environment created a different context for the activity.

It can be argued that the impact of different technologies on role play activities is not fully understood.  For example, Russell and Shepherd (2010) suggested that it is not yet clear whether the use of immersive environments, such as Second Life, help or hinder student engagement with learning from a role. Complex immersive environments may not be necessary at all for effective role play. Based on their studies of computer games, Reeves and Ness (1996, cited in Westera, 2009) suggested that experiences which draw on limited representational and technological "efforts" can provoke true interpersonal responses, which are clearly important in an effective role play. Westera (2009) concluded that credibility is more important than realism or authenticity and suggests that "even fictitious, non-existing, non-authentic realities may provide valuable learning experiences" (p. 4). Riddle (2009) has reassessed online role play through theoretical frameworks, such as performative self-constitution and actor-network theory, and suggested that these frameworks raise issues of identity and role engagement which may "relieve us of the burden of proving that a learning environment is actually authentic" (p. 71). Given that during a role play the performances and interactions of participants help to shape the context, enabling participants

to play their roles effectively may, therefore, be more important than providing a realistic environment.

All role plays have the potential to provoke anxiety and apprehension for some participants. However, online role play may provide an experience which is emotionally safer and less risky than a face-to-face equivalent (Freeman & Capper, 1999; Bell, 2001). In particular, participants in an online role play can remain anonymous, which may increase equality of opportunity, support honesty, and disclosure, offer increased choice, encourage high participation rates, and remove gender and cultural expectations (Chester & Gwynne, 1998; Freeman & Capper, 1999; Sullivan, 2002). In earlier research, we (Cornelius, Gordon, & Harris, 2009) reported that participants in a synchronous, anonymous role play had a generally positive attitude toward anonymity but that there was also the potential for anonymity to contribute to inequality in participation. Other authors have observed playfulness in anonymous participants (Freeman & Capper, 1999), and theft of identities and flaming (hostile or insulting interactions) have also been reported (Chester & Gwynne, 1998; Freeman & Bamford, 2004). These findings, and the work of Bell (2001), which called for further research to explore how anonymity affects involvement in online role play, suggest that the question of whether genuine anonymity can be useful or achievable deserves further consideration.

The Quality in Further Education role play, which provides the case study for this paper, is outlined below, together with research undertaken to investigate learners' actions and experiences of this activity. This role play used discussion forums in real-time as the technological setting and allowed participants to be anonymous. The findings presented explore the issues of role engagement and the impact of anonymity. This study builds on previous research into earlier implementations of the same role play, which highlighted the diversity of learners' experiences (Cornelius, Gordon, & Harris, 2009; Harris, Cornelius, & Gordon, 2009), and aims to improve our understanding of effective online role play.

## The Quality in Further Education Role Play

Online role play has been included as part of the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) at the University of Aberdeen since 2006 to help participants explore issues of quality in Further Education and understand a range of perspectives on these issues. The TQFE is a flexible, work-based program delivered in a variety of formats, including online distance learning. For the participants who were the subjects of this study, the program was a blended learning experience, incorporating occasional face-to-face workshops, collaborative group investigations, and distance learning supported by web-based activities and resources. Participants were all lecturers from Scottish Further Education Colleges who have some prior experience with online learning and have previously engaged in asynchronous online discussions. The Quality in Further Education role play is what is known as a *round table* activity, in which professional stakeholders meet in an online forum which represents a face-to-face meeting (Russell & Shepherd, 2010), although in the TQFE role play this

meeting takes place synchronously rather than asynchronously, as Russell and Shepherd suggest. Participants are all at a distance for this activity, with some working from home and others from their workplace. In-role exchanges take place anonymously in real time using WebCT discussion forums over a period of approximately 90 minutes. The scenario is introduced as follows.

> The scenario is that you been invited to join a working group to consider issues of quality in your college. You are about to have your first meeting, and at this meeting you need to consider what quality is and what it means in your college.
>
> You will be given one of the following roles.
>
> • **Student** – an elected representative from the students' association;
>
> • **Tutor** – an elected representative from the teaching staff in the college;
>
> • **Support staff** – a janitor, librarian, learning support advisor, member of cleaning staff, or any other support role, and an elected representative of the support staff;
>
> • **Manager** – a member of the senior management team with an interest in quality.

Roles are normally assigned through an attachment to a message posted by the tutor in the discussion forum. In the attachment learners' computer ID numbers are used rather than their names to try to preserve anonymity (this attachment is deleted as soon as the activity is underway as another measure to maintain anonymity). Small groups (normally four to six participants) then move to separate discussion threads or meeting rooms. Participants start by posting a statement on what quality means from their perspective and then are asked to discuss and explore issues raised through the exchange of messages. The activity concludes with reflections on whether participants have changed their minds about their original position and the opportunity to compare their group's discussion to others taking place at the same time. This helps to draw out differences and similarities, key messages about quality, and other learning. Until they post their final reflections, participants remain anonymous.

We have conducted this activity successfully since 2006, and in 2007–08 we began to explore issues of anonymity, effectiveness, and knowledge exchange (with results reported in Cornelius, Gordon & Harris, 2009; Gordon, Cornelius, & Harris, 2009; and Harris, Cornelius, & Gordon. 2009). In 2009–10 we conducted further research to explore in more depth some of the issues raised. For the research reported in this paper we adopted an investigative qualitative approach and drew on role play transcripts from WebCT and semi-structured telephone interviews with a selection of participants. Fifty-three participants (represent-

ing 10 separate groups who undertook the role play) gave permission for their anonymous WebCT messages to be analyzed, and 16 volunteers took part in semi-structured telephone interviews. We preserved the anonymity of respondents throughout the research, and any references to individual colleagues or colleges were removed from transcripts. As well as being researchers, we are also tutors for the program and care was taken to ensure that interviews were not conducted by a participant's own tutor. Interviews explored learners' experiences of the role play, including the issues of role engagement, anonymity, behind-the-scenes communication, knowledge transfer, and learning outcomes. Data were summarized to provide background information about respondents then coded by the three researchers using a constant comparative approach to identify emerging themes.

We also coded the WebCT and interview transcripts. In previous work (Cornelius, Gordon, & Harris, 2009), 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. In the research reported here, we used the themes which had emerged from earlier work to generate specific questions to inform the coding of data. A number of questions were used to analyze the WebCT transcripts:

Were there any critical moment or events?

Is there any evidence of changes in perception of quality taking place?

Is there any evidence of real "role engagement" (e.g., speaking in student voice)?

Is there any evidence of interpellation (e.g., actions of others helping individuals get into role)?

Is there any evidence of problems affecting role engagement?

Is there any evidence of affect/emotional engagement?

Are there any instances of humour in the discussions?

Are there any instances of obvious knowledge transfer?

This paper merges data from the transcripts and interviews. It focuses on findings which relate to issues of role engagement and anonymity. The effectiveness of the activity is also considered. Other issues we explored during the research, particularly knowledge transfer through role play, will be reported elsewhere. This is a case study of a single role play and thus findings may not be generalizable to other online role plays. In addition, participation in the research was voluntary, and as a result the views of all learners who have undertaken the role play are not represented. However, the findings provide insight into the experiences of participants and may have relevance to other designers of role plays.

## Role Engagement

Working in-role is an important element of any role play and is significant in shaping the context for the activity. Being in-role and online provides freedom of expression, reduces the anxieties that would be associated with giving a face-to-face physical performance, and encourages risk-taking that can include actions such as trying out novel methods or solutions (Bender, 2005; Jordan, 2009). Anonymity heightens all of these opportunities, offering even more benefits, but also provides challenges for role play participants and facilitators. For example, they may be required to manage inappropriate contributions or provide support to individuals (Cornelius, Gordon, & Harris, 2009).

In the Quality in Further Education role play, some participants commented on how well roles had been performed.

> "[other people played their roles] brilliantly … everyone took their roles really seriously … it almost felt that you were speaking to the actual people." (Interviewee)

> "I think that everyone really engaged in it and seemed to try hard to take responsibility for the role they had been given and to make a contribution." (Interviewee)

Three factors appear to have helped role engagement: familiarity with the role being played, direct questions being asked of individuals, and exchanges with others.

The lecturer and student roles were the most familiar to participants. Participants playing student roles cited their own experiences as learners and current engagement with students as important influences on how they played their roles. One interviewee also noted that playing the role of a manager was easy because, according to her, it "was in my nature," which again highlighted familiarity as a factor in positive role engagement. The option to choose from a range of support roles (for example, janitor, librarian, or receptionist) also helped to promote engagement as it gave students the opportunity to select a familiar role.

> "The janitor is the one I could most identify with, out of the support roles. If I'd chosen any of the others … I'd have felt quite uncomfortable, because I don't know what they do." (Interviewee)

When the role allocated was not so familiar or engaging, it had a negative impact on engagement:

> "I was disappointed in the role that I was given. I was not as enthusiastic as I might have been. It was important, but not meaty enough." (Interviewee – Cleaner)

Familiarity also allowed participants to adopt an appropriate voice to help them perform

their role, and evidence of these voices is available from the discussion transcripts. For example, managers frequently adopted a confident, formal voice and sometimes referred to themselves in the third person, students used informal language and grammar, and lecturers at times adopted a teaching and learning vocabulary. Support staff voiced their opinions in a range of styles, but there was evidence of "thinking into their role," which influenced the contributions they made. In interviews, several respondents acknowledged that they had consciously attempted to adopt an appropriate voice, as the following examples from WebCT transcripts show.

> "Good morning …. It is clearly important as management that we ensure that standards are maintained." (Manager)

> "I see my role as setting, promoting, and monitoring quality and ensuring that my staff have the right resources to achieve those standards in the right way, at the right time, at the right cost." (Manager)

> "… surely their [*sic*] should be differentiation." (Lecturer)

> "now where's my iPhone so I can check Twitter and Facebook and MySpace and Bebo statuses. This is, well, boring!!! Ha-ha." (Student)

> "I just did this course to keep my mum off my back. Lecturers are just like parents and teachers, all rules and stuff—I don't see the point." (Student)

> "I am off for a smoke to think about my thoughts, will be back in 5 to let you know." (Janitor)

Riddle (2009) explored issues of performance and identity in an online role play in which learners played the roles of journalists and political advisers in the final stages of an election campaign. He acknowledges Althuseer (1977), who used the term interpellation to describe the process "by which individuals are recruited and transformed into subjects" (as cited in Riddle, 2009, p. 65). In a role play, the actions of others may help individuals to interpellate themselves as the subject. For example, a question posed by a student to a manager might encourage them (or recruit them) to get into their manager role and offer an appropriate in-role response (i.e., transform them into this role).

There is evidence of interpellation from the Quality in Further Education role play transcripts. The need to respond to direct questions from other roles is one example. For instance, a tutor posted, "I would like to ask a manager how they believe that they can measure the quality of their lecturer through their training." This is an example of the type of question which helped others get into their roles and respond in an appropriate voice. Direct questions had a clear impact on this interviewee: "I was fending off everybody … the

questions or the responses that were coming back ... you think 'well no, I'm going to defend my college.'" (Manager)

Further evidence of interpellation comes from a subtle playing out of real-life power dynamics. This was particularly evident from those in support roles.

> "I was only really speaking to the librarian. The lecturer or the principal never came into that line of conversation. I didn't have a real place in the conversations." (Interviewee – Janitor)

> "I couldn't join in the conversation as a professional. A domestic would not join in the conversation.... I played my role as a domestic ... I put in comments about students and being taught respect ... but the others were concentrating on classroom management. I couldn't add anything from my role's perspective in the conversation but I would have liked to contribute." (Interviewee – Cleaner)

Finally, lengthy exchanges between participants also encouraged role engagement. One example was an exchange over five messages discussing the issue of meetings that involved a manager and lecturer in which both participants remained effectively in role. Individual and collaborative visualizations of real or imagined events also appear to have encouraged role engagement and sometimes prompted longer exchanges. For example, one librarian referred to "our book sale last year," and an exchange of messages in another group was prompted by the suggestion that chairs were needed elsewhere in the college and could be removed from the library.

In addition to the actions of others enhancing role engagement, the real-time element of the activity had an impact on the effective adoption of roles for some participants.

> "The responses of others in real-time helped, as they made me respond as if I was a janitor." (Interviewee)

It was suggested earlier that the ready-made realism that can be found in virtual worlds may detract from students' active involvement in performing their roles (Linser & Ip, 2005) and that providing an appropriate setting for role engagement may be more important (Riddle, 2009). For the Quality in Further Education role play, it does appear that role engagement was not hindered by the lack of realism in the setting and that participants did adopt strategies including direct questions and the visualisation of scenarios to help facilitate in-role interaction.

Issues also emerged which had a negative effect on role engagement. Disengagement with roles can be an issue in online role play (Bell, 2001; Freeman & Capper, 1999), and a lack

of engagement by some members of a group affected other participants, reducing their opportunity (and possibly motivation) to contribute.

Bell (2001) suggested that group size may impact on engagement (recommending a minimum group size of eight for an asynchronous role play); however, no evidence of such impact has emerged from the Quality in Further Education role play. Other issues such as technical and navigational difficulties affected a minority of participants. There was evidence of a lack of role playing when individuals became confused about their role or allocated meeting room or faced other technical difficulties. Such instances support Thorpe's (2009) assertion that technology can undermine as well as support learning in technology-mediated contexts, which may have little in common with a face-to-face context.

A few respondents commented on the pace of the activity. Some felt it was too slow, but there were also those for whom it went too fast. In the latter category were those who characterized themselves as having poor typing skills and slower reading speeds, for whom just keeping up with the role play was a challenge. Bell (2001) identified students from non-English speaking backgrounds as participants who may face particular difficulties; however, in this study all interviewees were native English speakers.

Russell and Shepherd (2010) suggest that one of the criteria that can be used to assess the usefulness of a space for online role play is the level of immersion or authenticity it provides. The environment should allow "activity in role without external distractions" (Russell & Shepherd, 2010, p. 9). Riddle (2009) identified backstage communications among role play participants, which is an example of an "external distraction," and these often took them out of role. For example, they used a different, perhaps less formal voice in email exchanges than in discussion forum messages. Clearly such communication affects the realism of the role play and disrupts role engagement. Since the Quality in Further Education role play was a synchronous activity, there was probably insufficient time for much backstage collaboration to develop; indeed, as previously mentioned, some participants found it difficult to keep up with the pace. However, in a few instances participants were working at computers in the same room and some interaction did occur:

> "There was someone in the same workroom, but in a different [role play] group. She was laughing at what she was reading, and I was laughing at what I was reading. But we weren't communicating with each other at all." (Interviewee)

The references to laughter indicate a sense of emotional engagement and shared experience but don't suggest collaboration on the activity. Other participants clearly required peace and quiet to work independently on the role play: "I was in a room on my own, I just needed to focus." (Interviewee)

Finally, when they were asked about the realism of the scenario, respondents frequently returned to the issue of role engagement, rather than any issues associated with technology

or the credible reproduction of a realistic environment: "I really felt that I was responding to the people I was supposed to be as opposed to lecturers playing particular roles … so yes, I think it was quite realistic" (Interviewee) and "If everyone is engaged it makes it more real" (Interviewee).

These views again back Riddle's (2009) claims that in-role interaction in a credible setting is a key element for effective online role play, allowing educators to be relieved of the burden of providing authentic learning environments. What appears to be important for an online role play is the provision of an appropriate scenario which allows learners to "self-constitute their roles and interpellate others" (Riddle 2009, p. 71). Thus, issues of role engagement may be more significant than the authenticity of the context or the task.

## Anonymity

Our previous work (Cornelius, Gordon, & Harris, 2009) and this study have revealed that participants did not consider the anonymity provided for the Quality in Further Education role play to be real, but being anonymous does have an impact on their engagement and experience. Sullivan's (2002) study of female college students identified anonymity as an important aspect of learners' online experience. Although focusing on online experiences in general rather than role play in particular, this American study suggested that anonymity could offer equality of advantage, increased openness and honesty, lack of stereotyping, bias, or judgment based on appearances, the ability to share things that participants would not have felt comfortable sharing face-to-face, the removal of fears, and help in the development of trust. Among the participants in the current research, anonymity also contributed to their ability to speak freely in role.

> "I didn't care who the other member of the team was that I was responding to because I was just responding to them as a job title and not as a person within our group." (Interviewee)

> "I thought 'well [anonymity's] quite good, because it means you can say whatever you want to say' and even if you messed it up it wouldn't matter…. I was kind of glad that maybe people didn't know who you were because maybe they would judge you on what your opinion was or how you were answering." (Interviewee)

However, others expressed the view that it made little difference to their engagement: "I think I would have given my comments even if it was face-to-face … but [anonymity] made it interesting" (Interviewee).

Generally, anonymity was a feature which engaged participants and added interest to the activity. It was viewed as a challenge by some participants, who admitted to spending time trying to identify their group members. The "voice" of participants sometimes gave away their identity, and once uncovered this may have had an impact on how the other partici-

pants responded to them.

> "I worked out who some people were based on their comments. The manager I instantly worked out even though they were supposed to be in role." (Interviewee)

> "It was interesting … trying to work out who everybody is … if it's someone you know well you're trying to be humourous with them, and if it's someone you don't know so well, you're probably being a bit more formal." (Interviewee)

Other participants were happy to preserve the anonymity.

> "I was quite happy not to know who they were; I was quite enjoying communicating on that level." (Interviewee)

> "People wanted to find out who was who. I did not actually try to find out who they were." (Interviewee)

It is probably impossible to offer genuine anonymity in an online role play activity such as this, and indeed this may be undesirable from the facilitator's perspective, given the difficulties that may result if inappropriate behaviour occurs, such as the playfulness and more serious antisocial behaviour reported by Freeman and Capper (1999), Chester and Gwyne (1998), and Freeman and Bamford (2004). It is also an issue if support is needed by those who have remained silent through the role play, for example, but who cannot be identified due to their anonymity.

However, methods to improve the preservation of anonymity can be considered. For example, roles could be allocated to individuals by email, and then the discussion can be set up in a separate technological environment where participants must log in with a role ID rather than a personal ID (Russell, 2009). However, technical and organizational constraints may make such measures challenging. Russell and Shepherd (2010) note that efforts to ensure anonymity may be "hampered by institutional systems where student online access is locked into automated enrolment administration" (p. 8). In addition, if participants already know each other there is always the possibility that they will communicate "behind the scenes" to sabotage such creative strategies or indeed be able to identify a participant from the manner of their responses. Despite the technological tools on offer, it is likely that anonymity cannot be guaranteed and the best that can be done is to make it difficult for participants to find out who their group members are because for some participants not knowing who is in their group appears to encourage engagement with the role play.

## Effectiveness

Even if role engagement is good and anonymity is preserved, the Quality in Further Education role play cannot be regarded as effective unless learning occurred as a result of participation. The objectives of the activity were to allow participants to experience different perspectives in relation to quality in further education and to be challenged to revisit their own thinking and attitudes about those issues. There is evidence from posts to the final reflective task and from the interviews that the activity did allow an appreciation of different perspectives and a better understanding of different roles to develop.

> "Having been given the support role [I now realize] how little I understood about the role before I started." (Interviewee)

The activity also prompted contemplation about personal attitudes toward quality and related issues.

> "I hadn't thought about some issues that you often lose sight of when you are just trying to get on with your own job." (Interviewee)

> "It suddenly became very clear to me that I expected the earth ... I am actually quite embarrassed thinking about it." (WebCT transcript)

An appreciation of the bigger picture of quality also emerged, including a better understanding of the subjectivity, complexity, and scale of the issue of quality, and of the need for everyone to be involved.

> "I think the biggest thing I have learned about quality is that it is in everything we do." (WebCT transcript)

> "I am more aware that we all work together ... and each contributes to a quality learning service." (WebCT transcript)

Interviews also revealed that learning about the process of conducting an online role play was significant, in some instances leading participants to implement similar activities with their own students. Although anonymity was welcomed as a feature of the role play, there was some reticence shown by participants to employ this strategy with their own learners.

> "The anonymity is something to think about because in some cases this may be advantageous but in others a disaster." (Interviewee)

For some participants, however, barriers to engagement and reflection may have impacted

on learning, and these included the pace of the activity due to its synchronous nature.

> "I enjoyed today's online experience, but I do need a proper rest … my brain is literally boiling. It was extremely fast for me but I did my best to reply on time." (WebCT transcript)

Finally, a small minority of respondents expressed a need to return to the discussions at a later time to finish reading of all their messages.

As some of the evidence for effectiveness is based on self-reporting by participants, whether real learning occurred is still an open question. Further analysis is underway to explore this issue.

## Conclusions

We have drawn on findings from the study of a single synchronous online role play to suggest that it is possible to design and facilitate an effective online role play activity in which learners can engage with their roles. The process is helped by the use of familiar roles, opportunities for real-time discussion, and anonymity. Learners may further enhance their own performance and the engagement of others with their roles through the use of an appropriate voice, direct questions, and visualizations. Anonymity can help engender the feeling that participants are replying to the roles rather than to their peers and thus improve the freedom to speak in-role and the credibility of the setting. Barriers to role engagement include technical issues, unfamiliarity with the tools being used, lack of engagement from others in a group, and the rapid pace of a real-time activity.

Setting up and facilitating an anonymous role play experience requires the careful design of an appropriate context and effective strategies to preserve anonymity. For the Quality in Further Education role play, the anonymity was undone by many participants, and it may be worthwhile to consider improvements to the strategy used. The method of role allocation and background information provided about the roles may have also had an impact on engagement. In this case study, roles were distributed by the tutor, and it is clear that some participants were disappointed with their allocation. Whether learners would be more motivated to engage fully in their roles and interact with other participants if given a free choice, or if provided with additional briefing information, requires further investigation.

Based on our exploration of our distance learners' experiences of the Quality in Further Education role play, we agree with Riddle (2009) and suggest that the key feature of an online role play is that it should provide an opportunity for performance of roles and for in-role interaction rather than an authentic, realistic, or credible learning environment. While recognizing that our study is based on a single, time-limited case study, and that a novelty effect could have influenced learners' experiences, we feel our findings show that online role play can offer a setting for distance learners where roles can be performed effectively

and in which in-role interaction can take place. Further work to allow comparison with learners' experiences in other anonymous online role play settings would be useful to help validate these findings. In particular it would be interesting to explore distance learners' experiences in anonymous immersive environments such as those provided by virtual worlds.

## Acknowledgements

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