

Play and its Role in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

From within the context of a creative writing programme, this paper develops the idea of ‘playing’ as an approach to learning and creativity. It raises questions, however, about how playing might take place in a defined online environment. It argues that as well as a tool for learning, play can have an impact on social and motivational development. The suggestion is made that issues raised have transfer to other domains.

Key words

Learning, play, creativity, engagement, collaboration, motivation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflection on ongoing development work that is being carried out for online creative writing courses within the department of Continuing Education at Lancaster University. This development primarily involves the design of an online ‘workshop’ to allow participants to ‘play’ with ideas. However, the experience of involvement in an experiment in the use of avatars* within these same courses has supplemented thinking about the role of playing in this area. [*An avatar as developed here is a virtual, moveable figure as representation of oneself online. A comparison might be a character in a computer game. See <http://www.virtualmindsets.com>]. This paper will briefly set the scene, outline our rationale for the workshop development and its underlying assumptions and then explore some of the possible implications regarding the role of playing in online course development.

SETTING THE SCENE

Three web based Creative Writing modules are part of our department’s provision of credit bearing courses for adult learners. They each make use of the Lotus Notes database for regular communication. Face-to-face workshops are offered every four months. Each module operates a ‘flexible start’, which allows new students to join on the first of any month, provided there are places available. Modules are of four to six months duration. The more advanced module has a deliberately smaller membership, which has been more or less stable for over a year.

The approach that underpins our Creative Writing courses is not didactic, but to work with students’ contributions. The structure of the modules provides four opportunities to submit writing over their duration, and there is an expectation that comment will be made on *at least* four others’ pieces of writing *per month*. The role of the tutor is to support this process, to comment on work herself and to give additional ‘input’ regarding aspects of writing as she identifies a need, or is requested to do so. There is a workbook and audiotape that accompany the less advanced module, which gives new writers an idea of the range of issues that are considered in creative writing, and encourages them to write.

The Lotus Notes database provides a good forum for text based asynchronous discussion and reflection, for the submission of writing and its critique. It provides a record of ideas and of the links between them for subsequent perusal, and the opportunity to re-work pieces after discussion. It allows the student to look in on others’ deliberations and articulated reflections, it provides for vicarious learning. There is the opportunity for students to construct their own meaning and their own understanding.

WHAT WE WANTED

The ethos of our courses is based on the assumption that as a starting point to being a creative writer you just have to write, and continue to write. Johnson-Laird (1983) notes that 'all learning depends on unconscious processes, but the dependence is most marked in learning *how* to do things'. He asserts that to support this process what is needed is practice: 'in learning to speak, for instance, children pick up grammatical constraints and the meanings of words by listening to other people's utterances..... By speaking, they learn to speak'.

While we take this approach that practice is key, we also recognise that this is not a simple process. The aspects of creativity to which all students aspire can be elusive. While our courses worked well in terms of enabling students to critique and reflect on their own and others' writing, it was apparent that we did not provide the means to promote their creativity.

We can learn writing techniques but to learn or to be taught creativity appears to be a contradiction in terms – however, this was not an area we felt inclined to leave alone.

On the issue of promoting creativity, there is an extended debate and there are a number of approaches to its study. For our purposes I have chosen to focus on those two approaches which Sternberg and Lubart (in Sternberg, 1999) call cognitive and pragmatic and I shall only touch the tip of this iceberg here to illustrate what we were after in developing the online workshop.

Perkins in 'Creativity and the quest for mechanism' (in Sternberg and Smith, 1988) concluded from studies carried out that creative individuals make use of the same cognitive processes as everyone else but that they use them in a more efficient and flexible way towards goals which are ambitious and often quite risky. He identified that creative individuals search for problems, have a tendency to think in negations and opposites and have a tolerance of ambiguity. Feldman (in Sternberg, 1999) talks of creativity being about the reorganisation of knowledge and understanding. Gardner (1993) notes Gruber's comments that creative individuals 'are extremely reflective about their activities, their use of time and the quality of their products'.

In creative writing, blocks to creativity are typically seen as lack of awareness and reflection, lack of confidence, fear, embarrassment and displacement (distracting oneself with other activity and thought). Goldberg (1986) connects some of these blocks to creativity as being thrown up by part of a person's 'internal censor'. She writes that 'it is important to separate the creator and the editor or internal censor when you practice writing, so that the creator has free space'.

The ideas of Claxton, (1997), echo Goldberg's in a way that has wide implications for learning. Claxton makes the case that 'thinking gets in the way of learning'. Articulated understanding and explanation is valued in learning, but Claxton argues that there is evidence which suggests that the ability to articulate what is going on is 'negatively related to competence'. He suggests that this is most apparent in situations which are 'novel, complicated and to some extent counterintuitive or where the relevant patterns you need to discover are different from what 'common sense'.. .might predict'. While this appears to be moving contrary to some of the ideas supported in theories of collaborative learning (e.g. Ploetzner, Dillenbourg, Preier and Traum (in Dillenbourg, 1999) which take the approach that there is learning to be had by explaining to oneself and others, Claxton's approach indicates that it is rather a matter of applying the 'right tool for the job'. There are many cases when the right tool for the job is articulation and explanation, but there are other cases where the right tool for the job is to learn intuitively or play about. To allow 'playing about', attempts at articulation and understanding should not take place too soon, and ambiguity and losing sight of what is taking place needs to be tolerated. Claxton (1997) writes:

"When self-esteem is at stake, delicate unconscious forms of information seem to be disabled or dismissed... when we are less 'on our best behaviour', the glimmerings of knowledge from the undermind are more available to guide perception and action"

Interestingly, Perkins in his quest for mechanism in creativity, (In Sternberg and Smith,1988) notes that brainstorming (as developed by Osborn in 1953) addresses these areas and Broden (in Sternberg, 1999) likewise notes that brainstorming can encourage creativity, by one person triggering a new formulation of a related idea.

From these ideas about creativity and learning we might draw out the guidelines for the qualities we sought for our 'free space': it should encourage risk taking, it should encourage making unusual connections, leaving conclusions open and it should emphasise 'doing', rather than understanding and reflection. We needed a forum that would allow students to play about with ideas, throw around words inconsequentially. 'Play' has a number of definitions and connotations, most all are appropriate here – even the association of 'behaving carelessly' is appropriate if we consider that to behave *carefully* is likely to involve an internal censor.

Our existing online environment pulled in an opposing direction to these ideas about 'free space' we needed to create something

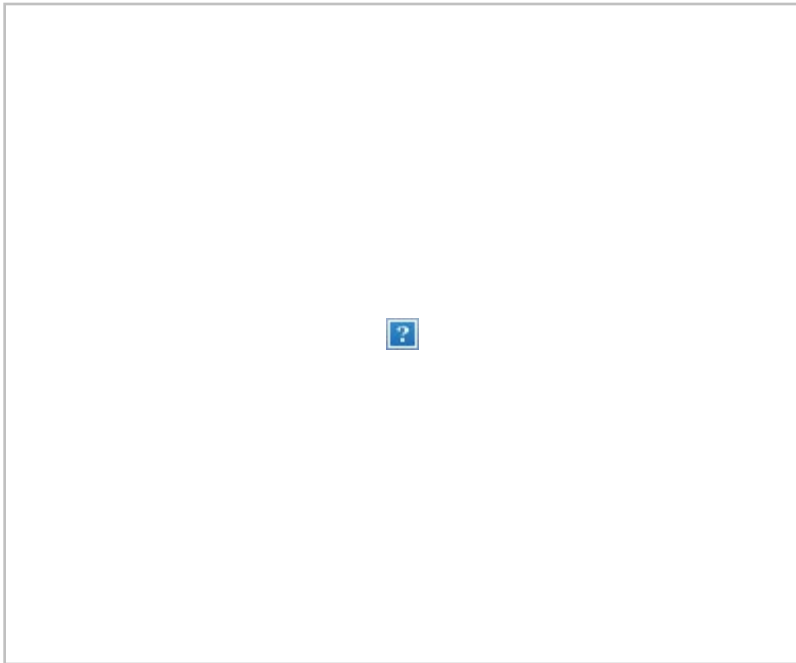
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'FREE SPACE' WORKSHOP DEVELOPMENT

We wanted our workshop to enable students to experiment, to play with ideas, to see the world from another angle. How far was this going to be possible within an online environment, characterised by its logical links and sequences?

Our 'free space' workshop was constructed in Lotus Notes. We used the imagery of a group of students with a pack of 'post-it' notes which they pasted up on a board in response to a central stimulus. See Figure 1.

Figure 1



The stimulus is intended to be a trigger to activity and includes instruction on what students are expected to carry out.

All responses are open at once (and are necessarily limited in size to fit within the screen) and the layout around the stimulus is dynamic, to accommodate the number and size of responses / stimulus. All participants choose a colour when they first start using the workshops and this is their colour for all their workshop activities. This colour provides the background for their response, thus providing immediate visual impact on the screen and distinguishing participants' contributions.

Each response can be a stimulus for a second 'level', and each response on the second level a stimulus for a third level and so on.

It will be evident that the workshop still has the capacity to be used for sequential, logical connections – this seems inevitable given the medium. But had we altered our design significantly to make the environment less of a control on interactions than the discussion board?

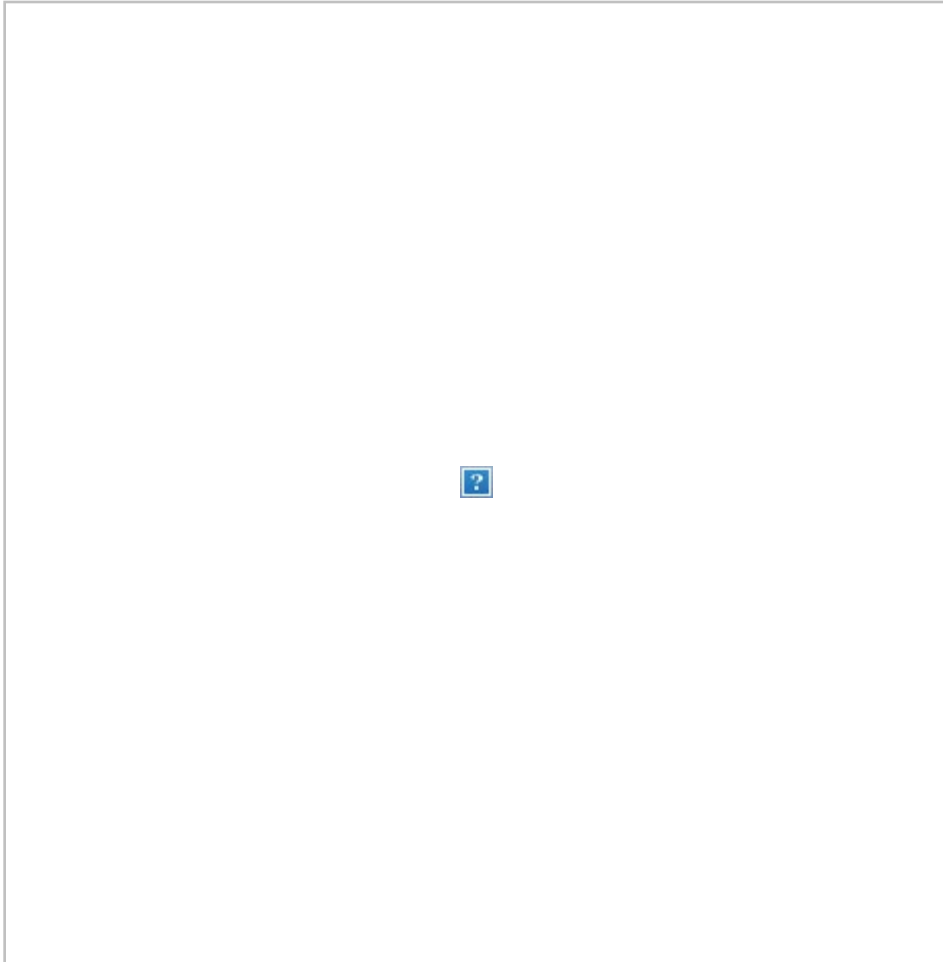
THE EXPERIENCE

Figure 2 shows an example of the asynchronous workshop being used to play with similes. It is part of a series of prompts to create similes and students complete the sentence started as the stimulus.

Each response may be influenced by existing responses but it is linked only to the stimulus.

Figure 3 shows an example of the asynchronous workshop being used to play the game of 'consequences'. Each response is intended to follow sequentially (though some students didn't quite get the hang of it!) and ultimately to provide a stimulus for a parallel / alternative story.

The workshops can operate independently from issues and agenda within the module, or they can be used to directly deal with topics under discussion. The intention always being to play with ideas, to stretch thinking a little further than the students might normally go.





While there are design and development issues that we have addressed and more still that we need to address, there are some interesting aspects that we already have to consider.

The open design of the workshop certainly provides a more accessible and visually appealing space. It is debatable, though, whether our design actually provides that ‘free space’ we are after. Our impression is that there is natural variety in the degree to which different users self-monitor, the degree to which they ‘let go’, and that individuals take varying length of time in feeling comfortable to do so.

Our diverse groups of adult students do favour asynchronous communication and this until now has been the focus for our development. The asynchronous aspect, though, pulls in a different direction from the spontaneity of brainstorming and we are aware that the workshop does not allow for all those aspects for which we set out to provide. Our next step is to develop a model more suited to synchronous activity. One challenge then will be to achieve consistently viable numbers to operate. It will be interesting to compare activity and responses between the synchronous and asynchronous workshops – the hypothesis being that more editing / censoring is likely to take place in the asynchronous workshops.

For some, the workshops to date have evidently captured their enthusiasm and there is has been periodic dialogue about aspects of what has been going on. Others do not appear comfortable 'playing' (at least in this context). Students choose the degree to which they participate and we informally use this as a measure of how useful they find the workshops. We are still at the stage of experimenting with different types of activities within the workshop framework, but lack of complexity in instruction seems key in engaging participation.

AVATARS GIVE AN ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

A coincidental involvement in an ongoing experiment by a researcher outside our Department, exploring the use of avatars and the effect on online group development, added to the ideas about 'playing around'. We involved our advanced Creative Writing group and undertook to be involved in four online meetings – as avatars in the 'Rose Community'. Each participant chose their avatar from options ranging from a variety of animals to humans. They named and decorated their house (their personal space, to which can be added furniture, pictures, wallpaper, even files as if books on the shelves) and gave the group their password, thus ensuring that meetings were private to the group. (The 'Rose Community' is accessed by the 'Rose' web browser and seems mostly to be used for the purposes of online 'chat'. Visitors can go into others' 'houses', unless passwords restrict it.)

Most of the time was spent just in the experience of the avatar world (or being locked out by technical difficulties), but some work on writing poetry as a group was carried out successfully – on one occasion led by one of the students (in the guise of a basset hound called 'Grey Nomad'!).

The association of avatars with play and leisure was there from the outset (most thought immediately of computer games) but the experience of gathering around in a group in various animal and human guises, all inexpert, yet coaching each other in dance moves, back-flips and even in the art of sitting down - as well as writing poetry - was playing around in a way totally new to us all. It is worth noting that some of the group rated this activity highly and wish to continue. It prompted considerable reflection about sense of self and 'reality', both within the group and between individuals subsequently via email. One student commented that in addition to the fun, the 'point of view' from which she wrote had been shifted. Her 'point of view' was usually that of a 'demur and quiet female'. As an avatar, she had taken the guise of a noisy, outspoken woman, who had danced on the table. This writing 'from a different view of the world' was exactly what we had been trying to develop in our idea of 'free space'.

That avatars engage their users in different ways than text appears self-evident and this is an exciting area to explore. The capacity for non-verbal communication - albeit largely deliberate and self-conscious, appears to give avatars an added advantage when it comes to playing. The aspect of synchronicity was significant in sparking interactions and this is an aspect we have yet to explore in our workshop. Yet even so, the process by which we communicate using text involves manipulating symbolic information in a way that is different from using visual cues and the prompts for play appear less spontaneous

As with our online workshop, there were some who did not feel comfortable using this environment – one student reflected that playing was not his 'style', others undoubtedly found the technical frustrations too much.

Student responses prompt us to conclude that what is 'free space' for one student is not necessarily 'free space' for another. Not all students engage in the same way in text based playing, not all in visual playing. We need to consider the provision of a variety of types of 'free spaces' if we are to meet all students' needs – and indeed to allow that some students just do not want to play at all.

It is difficult to judge the degree to which workshops have affected students' writing. As Johnson-Laird (1983) writes:

"any attempt at introspection in order to become conscious of something what is normally unconscious is unlikely to succeed. Not only is the information inaccessible ... but... the result is that the intrinsic nature of the process is distorted".

THE COLLABORATIVE CONNECTION

While it may be difficult to clearly define the link between playing and learning or its role in creativity, the increased interaction between students that comes about with playing is evident. Without doubt, the interactions afforded by playing give a new perspective on participants. The activities throw up a view of participants that might otherwise remain out of sight: their degree of self-consciousness, their sense of humour, their quirkiness. There is a sense of getting to know each other by sharing an activity, regardless of the outcome of the activity. There is a greater sense of knowing the students and of their less 'formal' side – that less "on our best behaviour" referred to by Claxton (1997). The effect of this on motivation and 'freeing up' of communication in other

areas of students' work should not be underestimated.

Littleton and Hakkinen (in Dillenbourg, 1999) make the distinction between collaborative and cooperative learning:

"...collaborative activity requires more than the effective division of labour that constitutes cooperative work. Collaboration necessitates that participants are engaged in a coordinated effort to solve a problem or perform a task together".

While the outcome of playing activities intended at an unconscious level are inherently intangible, the process of collaboration between students engaged in the workshops can be distinguished from the *cooperative* work that characterises the rest of their course, (where they give feedback on each others' writing). We would argue that there is intrinsic value in this collaborative process in terms of motivation towards the course and developing a sense of belonging to the group. It should not be forgotten, however, that those who do not involve themselves in the 'playing', for whatever reason, might equally experience a sense of exclusion.

IN CONCLUSION

There is quite a balancing act to be made between individual and group needs, between socialising and learning needs, and we would be mistaken to see playing as an end in itself for networked learning. Goodyear, (in Steeples and Jones, 2002) cautions:

"Too heavy a preoccupation with the vivacity of a networked learning community may result in plenty of talk but all too little learning".

We need a sense of going somewhere – but we argue that the experience of getting there should take account of more than our overt cognitive needs.

This paper has been focused on creative writing, and its content may be seen as inconclusive and necessarily speculative. Yet, it can be argued that the issues that have been brought up here have echoes in other domains, not least in those where there is aspiration to creativity. There appears a clear argument for the case for a 'free space', but what this amounts to and whether it can be achieved online remains in question.

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