Quality Matters: Online Roleplay for Scottish Further Education Staff

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Abstract—This paper examines the use of online roleplay as part of a blended learning programme of professional development for Further Education lecturers at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Sixty six lecturers from four of Scotland’s Further Education colleges, together with four e-moderators, took part in the study, which centered on four single online synchronous workshops of 3 hours’ duration. A roleplay in which college-appropriate roles such as student, lecturer, college manager or support staff were allocated by the e-moderator, and each participant was able to respond anonymously within his or her assigned role.

Follow-up evaluation including online questionnaires and telephone interviews with participants and face-to-face interviews with e-moderators revealed varying degrees to which participants were able to enter into the mindset of their assigned roleplay character. Those who were able to do so reported coming away from the activity with a ‘wider perspective’ of quality issues in Further Education colleges, and felt able to take some of this back into the working environment. Those who did not enter into the roleplay provided a number of reasons for this. The anonymous aspect of the roleplay was felt to facilitate honesty and risk-taking, while at the same time e-moderators reported a minority tendency to use the anonymity to engage in inappropriate responses.

Index Terms—college, Further Education, quality, roleplay.

INTRODUCTION

Further Education (FE) colleges in Scotland operate similarly to Community Colleges in USA, and serve a community of learners in post-compulsory education – largely this means those over the age of 16. Lecturers in FE are required to gain a teaching qualification entitled Teaching Qualification Further Education (TQFE). The University of Aberdeen delivers this programme to colleges throughout Scotland, and the present study was undertaken in the context of this training programme.

Since 1993, FE colleges have been legally independent incorporated bodies, owning their own property and employing their own staff, with the greater part of their funding coming directly from the Scottish Funding Council. It was widely held that this would give colleges greater control over the services they provided, and a greater ability to respond to the needs of their students, business and industry, and local communities. Funding from the Scottish Funding Council is informed by a system of reviews and measures of quality performance indicators. Thus the emphasis on quality is an important one, and quality performance indicators such as student achievement and student retention have become hotly contested areas of debate in the boardroom and in the staffroom. It was with this backdrop that this study was approached.

THE ACTIVITY

The activity was carried out on four separate occasions, each an online synchronous workshop, of three hours’ duration. The online environment used WebCT as the learning platform, and the roleplay took place via a discussion forum. Prior reading of an electronically supplied book passage provided the initial stimulus to the participants.

The online workshop centered on five tasks:

• Task 1: reflections on the passage

The participants, having prepared for the workshop by reading the stimulus passage sent to them electronically, were instructed to:
  o set out one thing you like about the passage, and one thing you dislike.
  o tell us what the extract says about ‘quality’ for you.

Participants posted their comments, non-anonymous at this stage, to the discussion forum. The idea of this was firstly to ensure that the system was working, secondly that all participants were online, thirdly to provide a comfortable beginning to get them sharing their own thoughts and feelings on the quality issue, and fourthly to allow them to begin experiencing the perspectives of others.

• Task 2: participants’ views on quality

Having completed the first task, participants were then allocated to small groups and assigned roles by the e-moderator. That role related to someone who would have an interest in quality issues in a Further Education college. The roles were:
  o College management
  o Lecturer
  o Student
  o Support staff (own choice of category)
All the roles were represented in each small group. At this point all discussion contributions were made anonymous. Participants were instructed to:
- respond to the question: “What is quality in Further Education?”
- The idea was that they should adopt the stance on quality that they might anticipate the assigned role to take, and then debate the quality issue between them.

**Task 3: reflection on own position**

Having debated views on quality within their assigned roles, participants were now instructed to:
- reflect on your opening statement and position, and in your assigned role consider in what way your position may have changed as a result of reading other people’s perspectives.
- post a message with your guess at any reasons for a shift in opinion or attitude.

**Task 4: compare views of other groups**

Each group could then examine the comments made by other groups and compare and contrast the discussions. They were instructed to:
- visit another thread now, and read the ideas posted by others and see if you can draw together some general conclusions about what quality means in FE.

**Task 5: reflections on the workshop**

Finally, participants were given the opportunity to reflect on two aspects of the roleplay activity:
- what have you learnt about quality from today’s workshop?
- what were your experiences of this online workshop? How did you feel about engaging in the online role play? Do you think you could use a similar strategy with your own students?

**THE STUDY**

In other online, anonymous roleplay situations [1] [2] [3] [4], there appears to be a greater depth of discussion than is achievable face-to-face. It also allows for greater interaction between peers to be achieved, creates the opportunity for a diversity of opinion to be revealed, and affords all participants a voice. The design of our online anonymous roleplay study sought to:
- encourage reflection and depth of discussion
- encourage contributions from even introverted participants
- allow better appreciation of other perspectives on quality
- encourage attitudinal change in the wider workplace

The qualitative study investigated the experiences of four groups of learners engaged in online roleplay activity addressing the issue of quality in Further Education. The participants, sixty-six in all, were lecturers representing a range of Scottish FE colleges. Four e-moderators, who each facilitated the activity for a small group of around fifteen participants, also participated. Data were obtained from online comments, online questionnaires, and interviews with participants and e-moderators.

Follow-up evaluation included online questionnaires immediately following the activity, completed by forty-six of the sixty-six participants, semi-structured telephone interviews held with a sample of four participants, and face-to-face interviews with all four e-moderators. The analysis therefore was based on 69.7% of the participants and 100% of the e-moderators.

**QUALITY CONCEPTS**

A review of the literature on quality improvement shows that there has been a progressive move since the 1950’s from concepts of quality control to quality assurance, and to quality improvement [5]. Although performance indicators have an important place in funding models, it should be recognised that what is sought in colleges is more than a behavioral change in response to measures imposed from outside. Rather, it is a change to a quality culture that is sought, whereby dynamic development and continuous quality improvement are self-regulated by college communities.

Participants identified the concept of quality as “something that’s very important to us”, “close to people’s hearts”. One said of the activity, “it wasn’t just an exercise, it meant much more than that”. One participant became frustrated that his colleagues seemed unable to take on board the realities of life in a quality improvement culture, and he perceived them as wanting to turn the clock back, in a rejection of the realities of market forces in education – “you can’t shout at the wind” he declared. This was identified as his biggest insight, that not everyone has embraced attitudes consonant with a quality improvement culture.

The online environment has been seen as a real opportunity to learn about the complexity of organizational policies [6], and this was evident in how participants reported on their learning – “it made you think of quality as something that affects everybody. It is not just about you and your terms and conditions”.

**EFFECTIVENESS OF ROLEPLAY**

Participants generally found the online roleplay to be a useful means of considering quality issues in FE. Such roleplay has been reported as work-related, yet “fun” [7], and this is borne out in the present study.

One major aspect of the roleplay has been the extent to which the playing of designated roles by the participants has led to a degree of identification with that role’s perspective on quality issues. Roleplay promotes active learning and is a powerful method of self-discovery and understanding [8]. One participant explained at length that “it made me realize that we have become entrenched. We are just seeing things from the lecturer’s point of
view. We have to remember the bigger picture… although we discussed it in class, when you do it in class with your colleagues, you inevitably go down the road of ‘we hate the management and we are all great’, but whoever was facilitating the workshop was almost getting us to step aside, think of how other people think, think about how the support staff feel, how the senior management feel”.

Some participants found it difficult to divest themselves of the lecturer perspective, although for most, it was a revelation and an insight to see things from another point of view – “I was thinking about quality from all angles at the end of the day. Right from someone who was a janitor, through to team management, with students and lecturers in the middle. I was thinking about quality from every single angle there, and how it affects each other”. Some participants expressed the “depth of feeling” that people were willing to express.

The roleplay activity on quality issues was designed to allow translation of new perspectives to the professional practice and professional identity of the participants. Some evidence supports this. One e-moderator expressed the opinion that participants took away learning about the importance of the quality issue in FE, irrespective of role, while another expressed the view that “I think in terms of perception some of them said they had changed their view, others said they hadn’t, but I think they couldn’t really fail to be aware that there were different perceptions, and I think that would be the most important thing”. Participants spoke variously of “things we could put into practice in education”, of realizing “we have become entrenched [in my college]”, and similar to the e-moderator view above, an “appreciation that there is an overall view”.

ANONYMITY

The anonymous aspect of the roleplay seems to have affected the quality of contributions. Evidence points to anonymity facilitating an emotionally safer and lower-risk activity [1]. It enabled participants to have a voice, which they may not have had in face-to-face interaction. Evidence from the present study suggests that as some participants got into role, there was a facilitation of honesty, and a loosening of inhibitions, with participants risking comments to be viewed by peers and by e-moderators, without fear of censure. In examining the results of the questionnaires it would appear that the best thing about the role play was the anonymity of it, and the “honest opinion and discussion” and “lack of inhibition” that this allowed. The ability to “see things from other angles and learning from others”, were considered highly valuable (approx 51% mentioned this).

There was also some evidence that on a minority of occasions this loosening of inhibitions enabled participants to engage in inappropriate behavior.

E-MODERATOR PERSPECTIVES

Managing online roleplay requires a particular set of facilitation skills. There may be challenges of a technical nature, and challenges in terms of managing and moderating the participant interaction of the group. All four e-moderators expressed positive emotion about the roleplay exercise, while one felt ‘pressurized’ by the timing of the component parts of the activity, and another felt ‘exhausted’ by the demands of e-moderation.

Right at the very start of the activity, when participants were required to post their responses to the reading of the stimulus passage, e-moderators reported widely differing responses. One group of participants appeared to have been negative about the reading passage, and grudging in their initial participation. In another group there were reported “very profound responses to the passage, both those who liked it and those who didn’t”. The e-moderator was quite moved by “the depth they’d gone into it”.

As the participants entered the anonymous roleplay phase of the activity, it would seem that there were differences within groups as well as differences between groups in terms of the level of engagement with the roleplay. One e-moderator who ran the identical activity with two different groups believed that the groups had different experiences. This may have been due to the dynamics of the groups, with one particularly vocal participant influencing others in the group with his rather negative outlook on the activity. Such negativity precludes real engagement with assigned roles. Reasons for failing to engage with the roleplay included:

- negative attitude and approach to online learning generally.
- due to a participant joining the wrong group, one group was left with no-one in the manager role, and the roleplay failed to elicit the variety of viewpoints necessary to encourage participation.
- in one group, the e-moderator reported a kind of artificial consensus, in which the participants all agreed with each other, and further exploration and reflection was inhibited.
- being in a different role to one’s own as a lecturer was perceived by some as difficult.
- for one or two participants, initial contributions from within their assigned role met with little or no response from others in their group, and this was (understandably) perceived as off-putting and demotivating.

Where engagement did take place, then the activity was judged to be effective, and learning to have taken place. One e-moderator thought that her participants tried hard to respond from their assigned roles, although some roles may have been more challenging than others, and some participants revealed prejudices. Those given a ‘support staff’ role could choose the category of support staff. An e-moderator reported, “the ones in janitor roles tended to think that janitors just sort of sweep up, and I don’t think they really thought about a broader role for a janitor in terms of caring and being a custodian”. One participant who opted to be a librarian was “exceptionally good”. Those in student role were generally very good, while those in management roles played their parts, but
sometimes expressed a discomfort at having to be in that role.

In spite of all these differences, participants on the whole appeared to speak genuinely from their assigned roles, and there was “a very broad debate about what is meant by quality”.

One of the learning objectives of the roleplay was to view quality issues from a wider perspective. One e-moderator expressed disappointment at the close of the roleplay when participants said they hadn’t changed their points of view – “My unspoken agenda for them was that they would change their world view of FE”. However, it became apparent that although they hadn’t changed their opinions, they did see things from other points of view in a way that they had not before – “to my mind this was the success of it, that they had encompassed a broader viewpoint and saw that the lecturer had a valid point of view, the student had a valid point of view, so did the support person, and that they had a better appreciation of those different points of view. That to me was enormously successful”.

While some groups presented no control issues whatsoever, a small minority of participants were according to the e-moderator, “being a bit silly”, going beyond the good humored nature that seemed to characterize the activity for most, into jokes that went too far, or inappropriate comments. These occurrences, now widely recognized in online learning [2], undoubted detracted from the depth of the activity, and challenged the facilitation skills of the e-moderator.

CONCLUSIONS

This study tracked a novel activity designed to promote awareness and understanding of quality issues in Further Education in Scottish colleges. There is some evidence that the online roleplay was successful in doing so.

The adoption of a quality culture is never achievable by external imposition, rather it comes about as a collaborative awareness and identification of areas for change within an organization. Part of this process involves an appreciation firstly that there are perspectives other than one’s own, and secondly what these perspectives are. A degree of empathy is needed to enter the viewpoints of other stakeholders. Lecturers therefore require to appreciate the views of their students, of support staff of various types, and of management, as well as a familiarization with quality measures and performance indicators.

The study was able to provide support for the view that an online roleplay activity of this nature facilitates these processes of awareness of the existence of others’ views, and gives opportunity to enter the views of others and gain a wider, richer perspective and appreciation of the complexity of the subject.

There were challenges for participants in terms of the technology, and engagement with the roleplay, and challenges for e-moderators in terms of appropriate facilitation.

The process of culture change is one of changing hearts and minds, and whilst it is not possible to generalize from this small study, it is hoped that similar learning experiences for FE lecturers can contribute to a positive change in culture at organizational and national levels.

REFERENCES


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