

In someone else's shoes

Role-playing as a teaching tool can be extraordinarily effective and a new initiative is exploring its possibilities in an online environment, says **Beverley Head**.

Mothers the world over recommend walking a mile in someone else's shoes as the ultimate learning experience for their offspring. Project EnRoLe, an inter-university initiative, allows students a similar opportunity via role-playing. They take the steps, decisions and activities of an individual in a particular situation.

Professor Sandra Willis, director of the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources at the University of Wollongong, is leading the project which also aims to create a community of academics who use online role-play as part of their teaching repertoire. The project, which has \$200,000 in funding from the Carrick Institute, will also include a repository of shared and reusable designs for online role-playing. It is being created with the aim of doubling the number of people able to construct online role play environments in Australia within two years.

A wiki allowing researchers in the field to share information is also under construction to help facilitate knowledge transfer.

The universities involved in the Carrick project are Wollongong, UNSW, Sydney, Macquarie and UTS.

Each member of the team is responsible for exploring the role-play community in their own university.

"We have found in universities that to get communities of practice online is very hard," says

Willis. "You have to start on the local level with face-to-face consultation, then move to state level before you can start an online forum alongside a national repository (of role plays) that will be big enough to be useful."

Five online role plays have already been documented on the EnRoLe website and Willis hopes there will be 100 by the end of next year.

It comes as no surprise that Willis is a firm believer in the educational – as well as enjoyable – qualities of online role-playing, arguing it could be one of the most powerful learning tools available.

To prove her point she cites a simulation developed by Dr Andrew Vincent from the Centre for Middle East and North African Studies at Macquarie University as evidence.

"That has been going for 20 years and is one of the only sustained role plays in Australia," says Willis.

Earlier this year Dr Sally Totman, a lecturer in Middle Eastern studies at Deakin University, and a former colleague of Vincent's, developed an online interface for a Middle East politics simulation which she is now using with undergraduates and researchers. Totman says online role-plays give participants a heightened sense of reality and also help build collaborative skills.

"The game starts with a scenario set two weeks into the future. Participants play in character for about three weeks and then we hold a teleconference which lasts for about three hours," Totman says.

Being online allows the role-plays to be simultaneously run in different locations and next semester Deakin will conduct a role-play with UNSW.

Describing Vincent's learning design as the "grandfather of Australian role-playing systems" Willis says most of the 40 role-plays she has documented since the 1990s all have at least some connection with the Vincent original.

It is the complexity of the subject matter which can be tackled by role-playing which is its greatest strength, but Willis says they also prove valuable in developing generic skills such as collaboration, mediation and presentation.

"This is not transmission education where students are lectured at."

Sandra Willis



Despite the power of the tool, Willis believes many role-play designers feel isolated and unrewarded for their effort and an important element of Project EnRoLe is to create a support network for them. In the future she also wants to add peer review to the services provided to the EnRoLe community to "give more recognition for teaching and learning design".

"The other part of this is to introduce new people and scaffold them into the field – provide them with the ability to lurk on someone else's role-play in order to learn how it works."

Typically, an online role-play lasts three to eight weeks, with most participant time invested in research prior to taking part online. The underlying technology can be quite basic, with most role-plays relying on emails and discussion forums.

"Sometimes they get into chat rooms, but generally teachers use asynchronous technologies," says Willis. "While richer multimedia environments featuring audio and video are important for simulations they are probably less important for role-playing educational applications."

While most role-playing tools could be based on the majority of university learning management systems, Willis acknowledges a lack of university standardisation could lead to challenges in terms of sharing role playing tools across universities.

For information on developing role-plays and simulations for educational purposes go to: www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/index.html

Get a second life

Could the online artificial environment Second Life provide a venue for future education targeted role-plays? Technically there is no reason why not, but Willis says as yet there is no compelling argument for making Second Life a role playing venue.

Totman agrees, saying there are no plans to take the Middle East role-play into a virtual environment such as Second Life. "While role-play is becoming richer and deeper, it's not like Second Life where you can live vicariously through your character," she says.

In the US, however, Second Life has already attracted attention from the higher education sector. California-based technology forecaster Paul Safo says more than 17 international universities currently teach courses in the virtual world created by Linden Labs.