

# Contexts, codes and online communications – A case study exploring issues related to using CMCs in a drama education project

## Abstract

Many educators are currently interested in using computer-mediated communications (CMCs) to support learning and creative practice. In my work I have been looking at how we might create drama through using cyberspaces, working with teachers and students in secondary school contexts. In trying to understand issues that have arisen and ways of working with the data I have found a number of frameworks helpful for analysing the online interactions. These frameworks draw from O'Toole's work on contexts negotiated in the creation of drama and other frameworks drawn from Wertsch, Bakhtin and Vygotsky's work on speech utterances, dialogic processes and internalisation of learning. The contexts and factors which must be negotiated in online communications within learning contexts are quite complex and educators may need to provide parameters and protocols to ensure appropriate languages, genres and utterances are utilised. The paper explores some of the types of languages, genres and utterances that emerged from a co-curricula drama project and issues that arose, including the importance of establishing processes for giving and receiving critical feedback. This paper is of relevance to those whose research strategies may involve the use of computer-mediated communications as well as those utilising cyberspaces in educational contexts.

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## Introduction

Many educators are currently interested in using computer-mediated communications (CMCs) to support learning and creative practice in various fields. In my work I have been looking at how we might create drama through using cyberspaces, working with teachers and students in secondary school contexts. Recent projects have been situated within school contexts, with a particular focus on how these processes and spaces might support creativity and learning. The research for this project has been primarily qualitative and constructivist in nature. Data has been collected through case study methodology, utilizing interviews, on-line communications, journals, surveys and observations as the means of data collection. The focus has been on investigating the ways that social knowledge and understanding have been constructed by different subjects or participants and the products. In particular I have drawn on the work of Vygotsky (1978; Vygotsky 1998, 1962) and other 'Vygotskian' theorists (Wertsch 1991; Wertsch and Stone 1985; Bruner, Wood, and Ross 2006/1976; Moran and John-Steiner 2003). Whilst my initial intention was not concerned with exploring the specific nature of CMCs, to understand the nature of the learning that occurred I found that engagement with this field was necessary.

## Project background

This paper will focus on a project whereby I hoped to explore the use of 'cyberdrama' in a school-based project. This project involved nine high school groups in creating a performance work which was staged in a professional performance venue. The development of the work involved professional artists working alongside drama teachers and their students, exploring a common concept or pre-text. School groups included 20 or so students and in most cases two teachers with students being mostly from years 10-11 (15-16 years old). I was responsible for setting up some wiki spaces and forums whereby students and teachers could document their process and develop their drama work. I was situated as a researcher within the process and at times played an active role in moderating some of the online discussions. A range of data was generated from this project. For the purposes of this paper I will look at the online component of this project, but consider these interactions also in light of face-to-face exchanges that also occurred. Analysis and consideration of what happened online has provided me with some useful understandings and frameworks for considering the use of online communications spaces in learning processes.

### Finding a frame for analysing online communications

There is a growing body of work which has emerged around the nature of online communications; this is often called Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs). As I began to look for ways to analyse and understand the online communications aspects for my research I found some work particularly helpful. This tended to relate to some categorization systems people have devised for analysing the kinds of interactions that take place within on-line spaces such as blogs and forums. Adkins and Grant (2007) for example use a perspective called Interaction Order to analyse postings on electronic notice boards to explore the understandings of the backpacker identity. They identify the influence of Goffman (1971) and Sacks (1995; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) work on Conversational Analysis in this kind of work. This includes a close analysis of the production of interaction including the ordering of entries, their relationship to each other and turn-taking conventions.

Schlager, Fusco and Schank (2002) have also coded the communications from an online community and they found that the most frequent categories of discourse were:

- Business focused – Comments related to a meeting agenda topic or other project-related point of discussion.
- Meeting management – Comments and actions related to the scheduling, meeting norms, meeting roles, follow-up, and structure of the meeting, including who is in attendance or absent or whose turn it is to speak.
- Technology related – Comments related to the use of TI or other online technology, including technology complaints and praise, questions, and answers to technology questions.
- Social – Social conversation not related to the specific business at hand, including greeting and exiting pleasantries, jokes, and digressions. (Schlager, Fusco, and Schank 2002: 139)

Whilst I could see the validity of these coding categories for those specific kinds of communities, I felt that these categories did not fit well with the data I was trying to code. I was revisiting some readings about the nature of process drama at the time (including work by O'Toole) and some of Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1978, 1962) and Wertsch (1991; Wertsch and Stone 1985) work on how we internalize learning through dialogic processes. I began to see some meeting points in regard to both bodies of work in relation to issues around communications and contexts. With the dataset of CMCs I was analyzing from the project I could see that a simple coding of interactions in terms of order and type was not enough. What I began to see

was that within the one space a range of different kinds of communications were occurring that were actually drawing on different kinds of contexts. Some of the communications types students were using were perhaps appropriate in their own social CMCs (eg on *MySpace* or *msn*) but when they used these same kinds of speech types in what was essentially a quasi-institutional educational space some of them ended up being quite problematic. In the next section I'll unpack the work I have drawn from to demonstrate how I arrived at a framework for analysing this dataset of CMCs.

### O'Toole's work on contexts

In his book *The Process of Drama* O'Toole (1992) examines the ways that dramatic elements, contexts and processes are utilised to create drama, with a particular focus on process forms of drama that generally occur within in educational contexts. He goes into some depth exploring the ways that different contexts are at play and must be negotiated in any drama process.

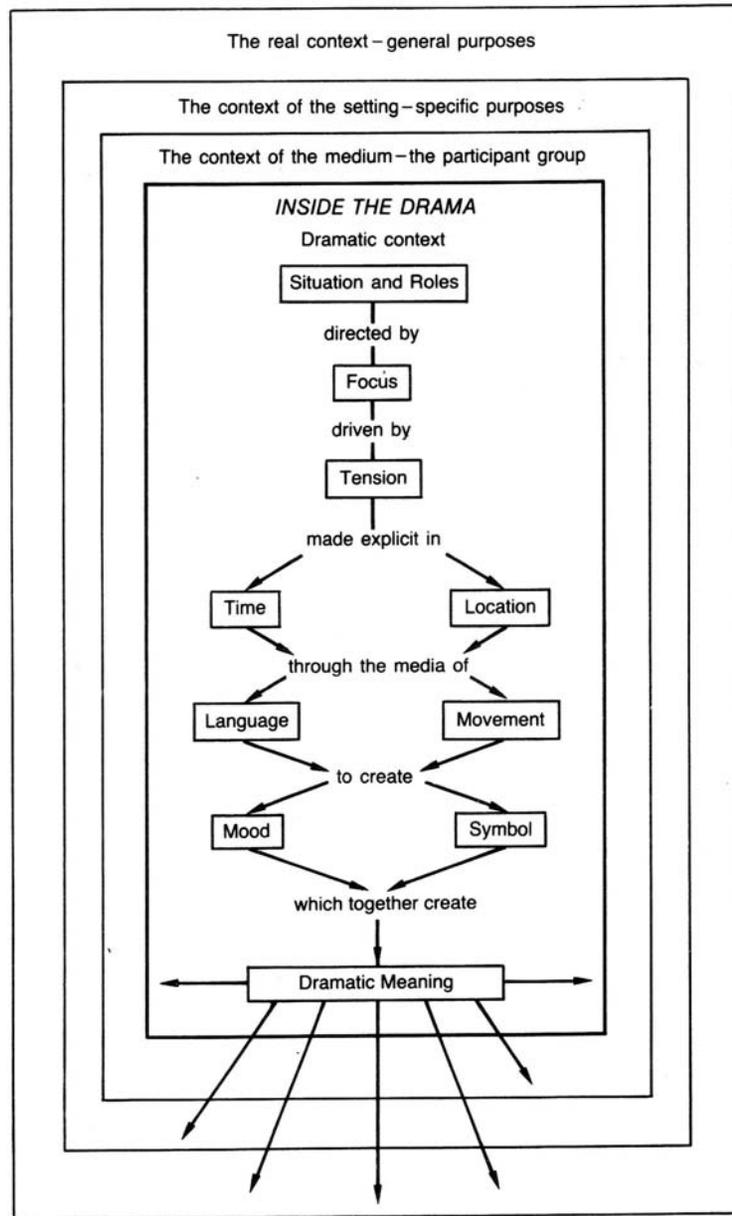


Figure 1 The Elements of Drama (O'Toole 1992, 6)

The four levels of context O'Toole outlined include:

- The real context – this is about what participants bring to the drama, their individual and shared experiences, their backgrounds, beliefs and so on.
- The context of the setting – this is the particular kind of place and space that the drama occurs within. In school, this might be the classroom and aspects of the formal instructional setting.
- The context of the medium – this refers to a coming together of the participant group and their agreement to participate in the medium of drama – this is a specific context in which participants operate within. In the case of cyberdrama however, the medium is also that of the online environment and the creation of a community of practice in the spaces used.
- The dramatic or fictional context – this relates to the world created within the drama. This requires the willing suspension of disbelief by all participants as they build shared situations, often taking on fictional roles that interact with each other in environments created within and for the drama.

The ways these contexts frame the creation of the drama are represented in Figure 1.

In a face-to-face drama process you are generally meeting in the same physical space and you are able to read a range of modes of communication to be able to determine when things are not working and are able to make immediate adjustments and negotiations to the parameters of the contract. The demonstration of inappropriate languages and actions can be monitored, regulated and negotiated in immediate ways. The issue with online environments is that the message is primarily communicated through text form. This means that many of the cues that we would use in face-to-face (FtF) communications are missing (tone of voice, gesture, eye contact, body language), therefore communications through these Computer Mediated Communications (CMCs) can present opportunities but also the potential for difficulties. Any negative interactions posted can also have a kind of permanence that the spoken work generally doesn't have unless it has been recorded. Emails sent in haste, IM conversations, and disagreements on forums can all be saved and permanent records created (Boyd 2007, 2006). This is of more significance when you consider the phenomenon of 'flaming' that has often been noted in the analysis of CMCs (Weinstock 2004) and the recent concerns in the media with cyber-bullying in schools.

It seemed to me therefore that in the negotiation of these multiple contexts within the online space, some of the issues arose because students weren't clear on the 'contract' of what was expected. They were also engaging in using some social languages and kinds of utterances that may have been appropriate in other contexts, but in the case of this quasi-institutional environment made up of participants who were unknown to each other, they weren't. To help understand the different kinds of languages at play I'm drawing on the work of neo-Vygotskian academic James Wertsch, who in turn draws on some of Bakhtin's work on dialogic interactions and speech genres.

### **Wertsch and Bakhtin on speech genres and utterances**

In Wertsch's book *Voices of the Mind* he creates an account of how the individual develops internalized mental processes which draw on interactions with others in social and cultural contexts. Whenever we speak we are drawing on the voices and thinking of others, and we draw on interactions that were originally intermental (externally between people) and which progressively become intramental (internal to ourselves).

Different social languages are used in various settings whereby people regularly code switch and use different languages, genres and utterances. A social language is "a discourse peculiar to a specific stratum of society (professional, age group) within a given social system at a given time" (Holquist & Emerson in Bakhtin 1981: 430).

Social languages or social speech types include such things as "social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities of various circles and of passing fashion" (Bakhtin 1981: 262). These are characterized by the social stratum of speakers and institutional expectations, regulations and consequences.

Bakhtin and Wertsch also identify more specific forms or constructions called 'speech genres'. These are characterized by typical situations of speech communication, forms of utterances and expression. Examples of these include "military commands; everyday genres of greeting, farewell, and congratulations; salon conversations... genres of table conversation; intimate conversations among friends; and everyday narration" (Wertsch 1991: 61).

These genres often have specific routines and are framed in such a way that the participants often know what kind of utterance is called for. The basic unit for analysis in this case is then the 'speech utterance'. "The boundaries of each concrete utterance as a unit of speech communication are determined by a change of speaking subjects, that is a change of speakers" (Bakhtin cited in Wertsch 1991: 106). A key feature here is the recognition of the role of the 'other' – the listener, or audience who is always involved in any utterance (even if not physically there at the time). A range of different utterance patterns are also identified. These include "question and answer, assertion and objection, assertion and agreement, suggestions and acceptance, order and execution" (Wertsch 1991: 107).

In examples that Wertsch draws on he also points out that in school settings there are certain speech genres of formal instruction within which there are clearly defined power differences between the voices of the students and the teacher. Teachers may issue directives and ask questions that they already know the answer to (and which are primarily used as instructional tools). Certain social languages, speech genres and utterances are privileged and deemed appropriate and may seem like the only options possible. When alternatives are tested, they may be negotiated and incorporated, however at other times they may be rejected as inappropriate and there may be 'untoward consequences'.

An important feature of this work is the notion of 'dialogicality' and 'multivoicedness' – Bakhtin asserted that the individual speaking voice arises out of the dialogue with 'other' voices. These may occur in a range of ways, three are outlined here:

- through a kind of ventriloquation of previous experienced utterances and voices (for example if a student is running a drama workshop they may use the kinds of utterances their teachers have previously used with them)
- as a response to internalized dialogic responses (example – a student might think, when I forget to bring my books in the teacher goes mad at me, so I'll start by making an excuse about why I forgot my books)
- as a result of the receivers' dialogic encounter with previous utterances (for example if someone says 'look at me' now it has a different understanding if we have watched the show "Kath and Kim").

If we start to bring together the concept of the different contexts at play in the interactions for the XLD process and consider the kinds of social languages, genres and utterances that were used, we can start to see that there was some complex code-shifting going on. Some speech genres and utterances were used that may have been appropriate in other similar contexts but were deemed inappropriate in this context. There were also issues with power and privileging of certain voices and confusion at times over whose voices should be heard.

The following section attempts to bring together O'Toole's work on the different contexts that drama operates within as well as Wertsch/Bakhtin's concepts of social languages, speech genres and utterances to explore some of the different exchanges that occurred and issues that emerged.

Contexts	Social Languages	Genres such as
The real context - the participant's world, what they bring to the drama	Languages of the social self	Greeting and 'getting to know you'
The context of the setting – schooling context	Language of formal instruction Language of drama learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teacher instruction and regulation</li> <li>demonstration of drama knowledge and critique</li> <li>genre of social inclusion</li> </ul>
The context of the medium –  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The online medium</li> <li>The drama process medium</li> </ul>	Language of online communications Language of drama process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>social conversation and interaction with peers</li> <li>drama process genres of communication (making offers, accepting, extending)</li> <li>critique genre</li> </ul>
The context of the drama – negotiated fictional world	Languages of dramatic roles and form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>dramatic narrative genre and working in role</li> <li>physical theatre form</li> </ul>

Figure 2 Examples of contexts, languages and genres

The following section will analyse some of the different utterances that occurred in light of this framework of context, languages and genres and look at some of the issues that emerged.

### *Examples of different contexts, languages, genres and utterances*

#### **The real context and the language of the social self**

When I looked at the early XLD postings, it was clear that most of them were identity statements as students came online for the first time and gave brief introductions about themselves and where they were from. Some of this could be regarded as 'facework' (Goffman 1967, 1971) with a focus on the establishment of status and identity. Much of this can be seen as an attempt by participants to present aspects of their 'real life' and their world to this new group. In the following example of a typical interchange I'm calling this an example of a 'language of the social self, with the genre being used what we might call a 'getting to know you' genre. It's characterized by statements about the self and often ends with a question or an assertion about the participant's expectations (and positive anticipation of the process). It is also a fairly 'public' form of utterance – the speaker is unsure of the audience, so keeps the detail minimal. The tone is positive with the person posting being open to establishing contacts with the unknown but assumed to be friendly 'other'. In the examples of CMCs that are included throughout I have deliberately retained the spelling and some formatting components of the original communications. These help demonstrate certain features of the genres and utterances used.

HEY!!!

Hey everyone.

My names Amanda and i go to [name of school] ... i am so excited about starting the XLD.. are you all excited.. i can't wait to meet you all.. it will be so much fun!!

(AF Posted Mar 12, 2007)

lol hi im lauren

yes....what the title says ^ heehee...

yeah i cant wait...by the looks of things already it will turn out

fantastic when we get it started  
oh yeah and im from ... :)

(WC Posted Mar 12, 2007)

In this kind of utterance we can already see a shift from the typical language of the educational classroom context, with quite emotive and gushy language used at times, some revelations of personal characteristics, and the use of SMS text style speech.

### **The context of the setting and the language of formal instruction**

Some interesting juxtapositions start to occur when a teacher from one of the schools sets up a new thread. The position adopted is that of authority and the tone used is corrective and judgmental. This kind of speech genre may often be heard in the classroom, however it was certainly a shift of tone from the type of utterances that were occurring elsewhere in discussion threads at the time:

Hello all. We had 5 students turn up today out of the 12 who are in X-LD 3. This disgusts me, particularly when we only meet for 90 minutes per week on a Thursday. If you came and saw me I appreciate the warning, but some of you didn't bother to tell me that a) you couldn't make it this week and why or b) that you aren't coming to X-LD anymore!!! Miss T and I and the 5 students who did make it today have made some excellent progress and have blocked our first two sections and pieces of music of our third of our cluster pretext/piece. It would be even more exciting if we could actually rehearse the piece with everyone at school on the stage!

(SL Posted March 7, 2007)

It was interesting that with utterances such as these, often there was no response from other participants, either from the school concerned or others. It is worth noting that students from the school concerned were probably the least experienced when it came to drama processes (and the least confident) and only one of them ever communicated much in these spaces. When she did post, her comments were mostly in support of others, she rarely posed questions, make assertions or objections.

Students were reminded at times that this online space had been set up for them to discuss the drama and their processes. This therefore was also an extension of the language of formal instruction in that students were being

asked to demonstrate their knowledge of the language of 'drama learning'. Some students tried hard to do this, and it's interesting at times to see students 'ventriloquating' the teacher talking about dramatic terms such as focus and considering the impact of audience. Issues began to emerge though through students making evaluative comments on other school's work:

Hey everyone.

i have a question for anyone from ...?

When Jacob was behind the screen doing his actions and the others came onto the stage and you all started doing the same actions i noticed that all of the attention was drawn away from jacob and the attention was focused on the people on the stage. did u want the attention to move from jacob? or did you want it to stay on him as well as the others. i just felt as though when the others came on there was no attention on jacob because the audience was focusing on everything else that was happening on the stage?

if someone could explain it to make it more clear that would be greatly appreciated. when all of the students went behind the screen and came out two by two that looked really affective.. good work!!

(AF Posted Mar 16, 2007)

At times students realised they were focusing too much on other languages and genres (the social languages) and can be seen once again 'ventriloquating' the teacher as a self corrective strategy.

tis kinda annoying coz its taking ages....woops...arent we supposed to be talking about XLD? my bad =3...

(WC Posted Mar 12, 2007)

### **The context of the medium and the language of online communications**

Many young people spend considerable time daily in communicating with their friends through using CMCs and SMS texting on their phones. There are certain kinds of languages, genres and utterances that they use when talking to their friends that are generally not used in their normal classroom interactions. In some cases because they were interacting with the same friends they interact with in other social spaces and in FtF modes – it seemed that some students carried these kinds of utterances over into the XLD spaces. They were using the context of the online medium and the language of a form of online communications they would often use in an out of school hours context, but this jarred in an online educational context. The following exchange occurred one weekend between participants from the one school group:

I'm off the walls.  
 It is very irresponsible and bad for you to drink a lot of Energy  
 Drinks and not sleep! But I did it anyway ;D  
 Ive had 1320ML of 'Monster'  
 4 Cans of 'V'  
 And 2 bottles of 'Red Eye'  
 My right eyelid is twitching and I had a 'You'll love coles chocolate  
 yoghurt' for breakfast and want more \*Drools\*  
 Even the kid who looks mature needs a day off ^^  
 For the ones that went to bed whilst talking to me on MSN haha I  
 never left! >:] Haha Ash didnt get any of my energy drinks because  
 she doesnt live in ..... ;D  
 Samson.

(IN Posted March 31, 2007)

omgosh sam..  
 ur a weird one >.< lol  
 ugh i want to try the monster thingy now that u told me about it and  
 wat the colours do hehe  
 oh oh i tryed red eye that other day its yum. Lol

(MZ Posted March 31, 2007)

It's interesting to consider what the intent was of the initiator of this thread. They were aware that other school participants and teachers could read this interchange, so was this some kind of status play? One of the teachers (not from that participant's school) felt it was not really the kind of communication we wanted to have on what was supposed to be an educational communications space. I therefore deleted the communication – I didn't say anything overtly to the students concerned and they didn't say anything on the thread about this. In this case my language of formal instruction was demonstrated through silence and eradication! This was a technique I used at other times, especially when other potentially heated exchanges occurred between several participants.

### **The context of the medium, the language of dramatic process and the genre of critique**

The students rarely used the 'official' spaces set up for creating the drama – the actual wiki pages which they could have edited. After the initial introductions, most of their interactions occurred in the discussion boards where they tried to have some kind of discussion about the work they were involved in creating. From early on they did attempt to embrace the

language of the dramatic process and various participants attempted to initiate discussion:

hey girls..i have a great idea for our XLD3 task..i have been inspired..step up and that music we were listening to today in class..for when things turn to machines..

(NT Posted Mar 14, 2007)

ok then.. go nat

(CP Posted Mar 14, 2007)

\*\*ok well..we are considering the whole machines bit because or part of 'WATER STORY' is about destruction..thats how the idea came up...we have some great ideas which expands on our original ideas...now that our improvisation assessment task has finished...great progress today i thought.  
 <3 Nat xoxo

(NT Posted Mar 21, 2007)

Significantly this kind of discussion always occurred 'outside' the drama, with participants talking about drama – in what might be called a genre of critique. The students never worked in any acknowledged 'fictional' roles whereby they could build and extend on the drama roles, neither did they try to create and share intentional drama 'scripts'. What ended up happening was that many of the interactions were quite critical and evaluative with one group in particular critiquing the work of others:

... to be blunt, the improvisation segment had me not only confused but disappointed. Each school has been working hard on their act why didn't you try and rehearse something you could put in the final act?

(IN Posted 29 March 2007)

Assertions such as these were judgemental utterances, which were inflammatory when you consider there was little history or a sense of trust between participants at this stage. Generally in FtF communications you would be unlikely to make this kind of statement quite so emphatically early on in a process. Several other people then joined in the discussions about the

work and possible linking devices, seeking either to defend their position, or agree with this evaluation:

if u make some things a bit more obvious it would help cus the audience wouldn't no that I found it a bit hard 2 understand lolz.

(LL Posted 21 March 2007)

At times some of the participants seem to be ventriloquating teacher type utterances in an attempt to find a way forward, but the response was not always positive. This participant tries to offer some ways forward saying things a teacher quite possibly has also uttered but then ends up being critical of other groups:

... I don't want to be the one to say it but someone has to.. we are all trying to hold on to our ideas .. and we've been working on this for so long but up till now we rely on the teachers to say our bit... it's no use to us saying you don't have anything but you're working on it... we need to see some results .. and skool 3 stop thinking you're the best .

(SL Posted 24 March, 2007)

What followed after this were some utterances about what people 'should' do (outline what's happened, be polite on line, and have a student speak for each group) though students were unable to resolve the issues in the online context. This was partially because in the end they were not in control of the live devising process (teachers were involved in making the final decisions about dramatic form and content). Various participants struggled with the appropriate genre and type of utterances for expressing this:

yea I'm not sure on that 1 and also it was a bit hard 2 understand what was hapnin like the hole dream thing u no lolz.

(LL Posted 20 March 2007)

At this stage many critical or negative comments were posted (from one participant in particular) and the teachers felt that the use of the space was not being particularly productive. Through more lengthy discussions with one of the teachers involved it seemed that the sense of negativity that had appeared in the wiki discussion was a reflection of what might have been felt but much left unsaid in the face to face meeting of the groups. However

through the wiki communications, tensions which may have been downplayed and ignored, had in fact been heightened and exacerbated.

### *Potential of using online spaces to make concerns visible*

After a series of particularly problematic interchanges whereby one girl from the more vocal school was castigated by several of her classmates, the action on the wiki cooled off for a time. I felt that the nature of the interchanges were quite problematic and as educators we were leaving ourselves open to critique by allowing a kind of bullying and exclusion to occur within spaces we had set up for (positive) educational exchanges. The teachers involved met to formulate a strategy for trying to bring their groups together at their next FtF meeting and decided to use some strategies to share feedback using warm and cool feedback. These protocols drew on aspects of the Tune-In Protocol, a protocol used by some teachers to discuss and analyse student work (Australian National Schools Network and Coalition of Essential Schools 2001; Allen and McDonald 1995). At their next FtF meeting participants sat in a circle and were asked to give one warm comment and one cool comment about what they felt about the work and the experience so far. They were encouraged to use "I" statements and try and include drama terminology to identify aspects they felt were effective and those that they felt could be improved.

What emerged from this process was a sense of group cohesion and openness to critique given in 'appropriate' ways. From the concerns expressed by students and teachers in that live setting it was possible to see that the kinds of concerns students had expressed in the wiki discussion were felt by a significant number of the participants.

2M: Like A... said, the water movements are my least favourite thing, perhaps change it, it goes on for ages, it feels like 'when is it going to end'. SJ awesome robotic movement – it's really good, but I'm not sure what it's got to do with water. I didn't understand that (Cluster Rehearsal 21/4/07 Notes, Lines 24-27).

The wiki discussion had therefore been reflecting 'real' concerns about the drama content and process, even if the online genres and utterances may not have been expressed in appropriate ways. In fact these students were able to have a voice and be able to speak in ways that some students in other XLD groups (who didn't use the online spaces) had not been able to.

For the online group, the concerns they had expressed from the start were valid concerns and in the end they felt that they had been able to have input and achieve something they were proud of:

When it came to choosing the story – I don't feel students had choice, but I like the fact that we've now all accepted it and turned it into the pieces we've got. We didn't own the pre-text, but now we've accepted it, kept going and modified it to make it our own (Student 6, Cluster L Rehearsal, 21 April 2007, lines 53-56).

Another key issue is the way that the online space can allow for more democratic power relations (or different ones at least) than perhaps exist in the live classroom setting. For example in the school classroom context it is possible that the teacher can limit and monitor who speaks, when and how often to a large degree. They may determine how much time is provided for each student to have 'utterance' time. In the online context, unless a teacher moderates each posting, the amount of airtime that other participants have and how they position themselves status wise (in relation to the teacher and other participants) may be quite different than in the face to face context. Not too many students would say this to a teacher in the classroom context:

Teachers sometimes fail to accomodate everyone in their talks, I felt your speech was prolonged a tad too much. A lot of points simply linked back to themselves and a mind database of final reasons was sealed with every question. In utmost respect I enjoyed all the teachers input but would have rathered the schools been prepared by someone to present them than just a teacher.

(SL Posted March 29, 2007)

### ***Contracts around contexts, languages and utterances and the dramatic frame***

Teacher discussions at the project's conclusion identified the important role that group orientation and protocols for 'critical feedback' play in any creative process. In using online spaces which were accessed outside of school hours and classrooms, the contexts and factors at play were quite complex and really students had been introduced to a process without a lot of work on establishing protocols for appropriate communications. Just because students may regularly use these 'kinds' of spaces doesn't mean they will automatically know how to communicate with others in 'similar but different' spaces whose purpose is related to the language of formal

instruction and learning. One of the teachers suggested that the use of the online spaces should perhaps have been introduced only after the students had met each other FtF first and some feedback protocols established and practiced.

It would seem that there is also real value in finding ways to use the specific 'dramatic' or fictional frame. Drama offers people the permission to take on roles that may be quite different to their own, to experiment and to explore possible situations that they never would 'in real life' (IRL). The fictional frame offers participants the opportunity to play and explore aspects of their identity and to actually build something – a world, a story, an experience. That was what I had hoped we would be able to do through the XLD online spaces but we never got around to creating 'intentional' drama as such.

The dramatic or fictional frame offers up a kind of freedom by providing participants with the sense that what happens within the drama is 'not real'. Within certain parameters this means that behaviour that would be unacceptable in a 'real life' context may be permissible if it is relevant to the fictional context. As O'Toole says:

For our purposes, the fact that it is 'not-meant' allows extensions of the behaviour unacceptable in real behaviour, and simultaneously provides participants with protection both within the play and from 'real' consequences'. (O'Toole, 1992: 25)

This is not to say that actions or utterances within the drama are a 'free for all'. They are constrained by the contract of the fictional context and the roles that have been negotiated within that. Understandings and consequences that result from the actions and utterances within the drama may have impact on participants in real life as well. However:

This genre therefore imposes demands upon the participants for clarity of signaling and a very clear definition of the roles they are playing, for the drama to be sustained at all. (O'Toole, 1992: 18)

### **Conclusions**

In the brave new world of drama online it seems that the explicit clarifying of context, roles and purposes is as important as ever, if not more so. There are certain kinds of languages, genres and utterances that may be more familiar to students in the use of online spaces but some of these may not be as appropriate in a space set up as an extension of a formalised learning space.

In educational contexts where we are keen for participants to share and critique work it is important that they are provided with skills in the genres of critique and critical feedback. If participants understand the purposes of the communications, they can operate within a contracted set of obligations and expectations that then provide considerable freedom to test out alternatives ideas and behaviours. The context will therefore be created whereby 'intentional' drama might be created, rather than facilitators having to deal with the fall out from the enactment of 'unintentional dramas'. Participants may then be provided with spaces in which to interact with teachers and other students in ways whereby multiple voices are heard in respectful ways and significant learning can take place.

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