Words within worlds:
theorising simulation, role play and genre
in university assessment

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This paper explores the use of innovative forms of assessment involving 'simulation' or role play, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. While most university assessment tasks ask students to respond as learners within their discipline, a growing number of assessment tasks across many disciplines construe the situation differently, ascribing particular identities to the writer (often professional, or 'non-academic') and prescribing specific contexts to the task which may also be non-academic. Hence, the 'genre' in which the student is assessed is also altered. Current literature on authentic assessment (Luongo Orlando, 2003), context-based learning (Williams, 2008) and situated learning (Gee, 2004) suggests that such simulated assessment contributes to the development of students' applicable knowledge and communication strategies in both academic and professional contexts. The research on which this paper reports is based on a corpus of assessment tasks from a range of disciplines that the authors are compiling which involve simulation in some form. The paper presents specific examples from the corpus which strike the authors as being particularly innovative and imaginative in their design. In discussing these examples, the paper seeks to lay out schematically some of the situational variables that enter into the design of such tasks, including authorial role, audience, mode, genre and knowledge base. The authors argue that the value of such assessment is ultimately a 'meta-communicative' one: for students to be able to explore in some principled and critical way how the disciplinary expertise they are acquiring in their studies might be shaped and adapted for a range of contexts and circumstances.

Keywords: genre; identity; innovation; simulation
Theme: innovative assessment: opportunities and challenges

Introduction

Most assessment tasks set in university courses ask students to 'be themselves': that is, they are usually required to write or speak primarily in their role as 'a student studying discipline X', however uncertain their grasp of this identity may be. There is a tendency for assumptions and

expectations about the identity that the student should adopt (such as writing like an 'expert') to be made. Such 'standard' assessments can also be open to plagiarism or, equally worrying, disengagement or disinterest. An innovative response to these problems is assessments that are explicit about the role or identity students should assume in their work, as well as the nature of the particular communicative situation in which they are asked to operate (Freedman & Adam, 1996). A range of terms are used to describe such tasks, including 'simulation', 'role play' and 'context-based assessment', but their essential feature is that they explicitly ascribe an identity to the student other than that of 'student' or 'learner'.

Traditionally, such tasks have emerged out of the more vocationally-oriented disciplines. In medicine and allied health degrees, for example, considerable work is devoted in the latter part of the course to 'clinical' training, where students are called on to take on the role of the professional practitioner (Smit & Van Der Molen, 1996). In law, the moot court requiring students to take on the role of apprentice lawyers has become part of the standard assessment regime (Williams, 2008). Equally, in business degrees assessment tasks are often structured around the conferring of specific professional roles: the management consultant, the in-house accountant and so on. In addition to these deliberately vocationally-oriented tasks, there are examples of assessments that bring in a range of other possible non-vocational identities and roles for students: for example, the student as engaged citizen, as community activist, even, in some cases, as an identifiable historical or contemporary figure.

Description of research

In our work as academic literacy professionals at two Australian universities, we have begun to compile a corpus of assessment tasks of this type; that is, organised around the ascribing of specific role identities for students, and associated with a range of non-academic genres. In this paper we will present a sample of tasks from the corpus, which are innovative with respect to genre and simulated authorial role. These tasks are analysed according to a methodology based on genre and discourse theory (Bazerman, 1988; Freedman & Medway, 1996) and on principles of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003).The examples we examine will be used as a basis to discuss a number of issues arising from the use of such assessments:

- What makes for the design of an effective simulated task?

- What pedagogies do the prescribing of such tasks entail?

- How might the non-academic contexts drawn upon in these assessment activities be best related to students' work within the broader academic curriculum?

- What purposes, other than preparation for professional practice, might such assessments serve?

- What are the limitations and challenges associated with such assessments, including the contention that they may serve to disrupt the conventional knowledge base of a discipline?

In addressing such questions, we attempt to lay out schematically some of the situational variables in the design of such tasks, including authorial role, audience, mode, genre and

knowledge base. We will also discuss these assessments in relation to the current literature on authentic assessment (Luongo-Orlando, 2003) and situated learning theory, which highlights in particular issues regarding the construction and performance of identity in different contexts, and the role of simulation in learning (see Gee, 2004).

Conclusions

We argue that the main purpose of using such tasks in academic courses of study is not to have students gain some elementary mastery of the types of genres and discourses they will encounter in their social and professional lives beyond the academy. Rather, we see the value as more of a 'meta-communicative' one (Bazerman, 1988; Barnett, 2004) – that is, for students to be able to explore in some principled and critical way how the disciplinary expertise they are acquiring in their studies might be shaped and adapted for a range of contexts and circumstances.

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