Drama online

Jennifer Nicholls and Robyn Philip
Macquarie University

Drama, because of its practical requirements, would seem to be one of the last courses to benefit from the incorporation of online learning technologies. Yet, by embedding web based conferencing in the curriculum, and utilising the graphic and communication capabilities of the web, there is an exciting opportunity to enrich the learning environment in drama. Predictably, such innovations have an impact on the pedagogy. In this paper the authors (unit coordinator and educational developer) report on evaluations conducted over two years in *Elements of Drama*, a first year university unit. We particularly refer to the impact of the introduction of a compulsory, online collaborative assignment and the change this made to the teaching and learning outcomes. We discuss the changing pattern of delivery of this unit which now affords both on campus and distance students more opportunities for interaction and communication. We evaluate the effectiveness of the online assignment and discuss the factors that contributed to its success.

Introduction

It is one of the exciting challenges of the new millennium to find better ways to meet the needs of students and improve their learning outcomes. One way this can be done is by providing more flexible approaches to the curriculum, i.e. by using the new communication technologies; by delivering unit content in ways which give students and staff more choices about where, when and how they engage in learning and teaching; and through a pedagogy that encourages a more student centred approach. The expectations and needs of students and employers now make it very difficult to ignore the new technologies, even though traditional teaching methodologies and content delivery mechanisms may have worked satisfactorily in the past. In particular, creative and performing arts students in the workplace will be expected to have the skills and knowledge to use the Internet to create art, to retrieve and store information, to publicise and exhibit their work, and to administer arts organisations.

The adoption and incorporation of web based communication tools into *Elements of Drama* has had the (not unexpected) effect of encouraging the teaching team to re-examine their goals as teachers and their desired outcomes for students. For instance, where and how do students best learn about drama? In the classroom? In rehearsal? In the foyer after a theatrical performance? In an Internet bulletin board? As Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.41) remind us: 'Some of the knowledge teachers have, like the notion that classrooms are the appropriate place for education to go on in, has its roots in habit, ritual, precedent, custom, opinion or mere impressions'. The team has concluded that substantial education can take place online and that web based technology does have a place in introductory drama. At the same time its use does not diminish the importance of practical workshops and face to face interactions. It can in fact be used to enhance them.

Current practice and research

Our literature review revealed a growing body of knowledge about the use of online learning and assessment online, but there is still little on its integration into the study of drama at the tertiary level. However, case studies in other disciplines report on issues surrounding web based conferencing which are relevant to our research. For example, Bullen (l998) discusses critical thinking online; Falk (1999), and Foley and Schuck (1998) debate the pedagogical assets and constraints of web based conferencing and its potential to augment face to face classroom teaching; Mason and Weller (2000) document factors contributing to student satisfaction with online learning; and Rimmershaw (1999) deliberates on factors influencing collaborative online cultures. Furthermore, Bernard et al (2000), Jonassen et al, (1995), Paloff and Pratt (1999), and Van Dusen (1997) provide models for building strongly collaborative and pedagogically sound virtual learning environments. Also, this paper is based on documentation of our previous research in Nicholls and Philip (1999), alongside the findings of Stein and Annemieke (1999) and McMahon et al (1999) in regard to students changing patterns of computer use and improved self efficacy.

As assessment online was a central concern of our study we drew on the work of Crooks (1988), Laurillard (1993), Morgan and O'Reilly (l999), Nightingale et al (1996), and Kendle and Northcote (2000). These authors emphasise the centrality of assessment as a major factor in realising learning outcomes. We believe this is equally true for online and face to face environments.

As the literature failed to provide evidence of practice elsewhere specifically in drama, we conducted a limited search of websites and surveyed twelve universities across Australia by telephone in order to

gain an understanding of the use of online technology in drama courses at the first year level. We asked about the use of the Web as a means of flexible delivery for drama, and provision for distance education students. Only six institutions used the Internet to distribute unit information (unit home pages), and only two offered drama or theatre units to distance students. None of the universities contacted made use of online communication as an *integral* part of their units. At least three of the universities expressed an interest in using the Internet in their teaching. A check of 21 university websites nationally at the time of writing indicated that the status quo had not changed.

Preliminary investigations of drama courses offered online in the UK reveal very little use of the Web beyond basic unit information. There appears to be an emerging use of web based technology to support individual theatre units in the USA, e.g. Arizona State University in Texas. From this it appears that the use of the Web and online assessment tasks may still be limited in drama courses worldwide. The use in our unit of a compulsory, structured bulletin board discussion to critique a theatre production is probably not yet replicated elsewhere.

Background to the curriculum innovation

Elements of Drama, offered at Macquarie University, Sydney, is a single semester, introductory unit that explores the theatrical origins of performance, closely examining notions of ritual, dramatic structure, characterisation and elements of production. It is offered both internally and by distance mode.

In l998 the University introduced a Bachelor of Creative Arts degree (BCA). Taking a multidisciplinary approach, students complete a major study in the arts in addition to compulsory units in business and marketing. *Elements of Drama* is a core unit within both the Drama and the Visual and Performing Arts majors. BCA students are expected to be conversant with new technologies as they apply to the arts: to develop management liaison and technology skills suitable for employment in the arts, and arts related organisations; and to combine practical skills with the ability to research in and think critically about the arts.

The University provided a development grant to create and improve the flexible delivery of 17 units for the BCA. As a result a website for use by all students in *Elements of Drama* was established, using a WebCT template. By providing drama students with online resources and communication facilities it was hoped to increase drama and BCA students' exposure to web based technology and to provide better communication for distance students, thereby enriching their learning experience.

Online assessment

Introduction of the website [http://online.mq.edu.au/pub/ECHL111/] gave the authors an opportunity to reflect on the unit itself as currently presented, and in particular to adjust the assessment regime. It is well documented that assessment has a central role in defining what is important for students within a course of study (eg Crooks, 1988; Laurillard, 1993; Nightingale et al, 1996; Thorpe, 1998; Toohey, 1999; Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999; Kendle & Northcote, 2000). It was therefore critical that any new assessment task was valid and reliable, that it challenged students, broadened their knowledge base and developed their skills in accordance with the learning outcomes of the unit.
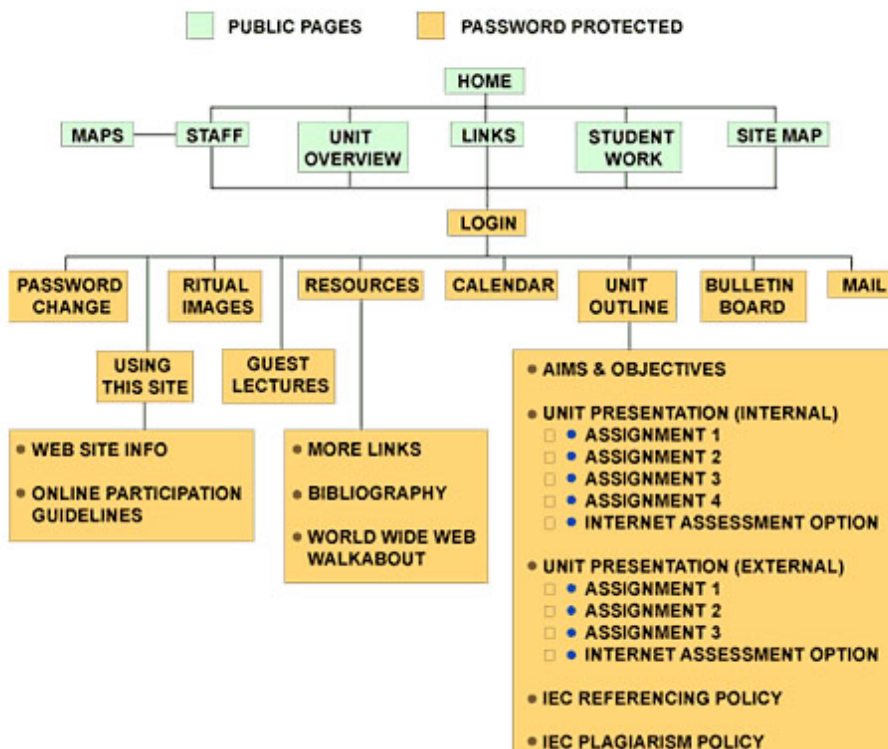

Figure 1: Site map

When considering the options for online learning the team was interested in creating an opportunity for ongoing dialogue amongst the on campus and distance students. We were also concerned that although on campus students worked closely together in practical workshops they had limited opportunity to discuss theoretical topics within a tutorial framework. With the introduction of the website students had access to communication tools and additional resources which we hoped would address these problems. In the publicly accessible section of the website there was general unit information and examples of students' practical creative work displayed as stills and QuickTime movies. Included in the website was the full unit outline, a calendar, bulletin board and private mail facilities, hyperlinked resources, selected still images of rituals which related to the assignments, and QuickTime and RealAudio sound files of guest lecturers with accompanying images. Figure 1 shows the structure of the website.

One of the four assessment tasks for the unit was the review of a professional theatre production (worth 15%). In the pilot offering (1999) students were given the option of writing a 1000 word theatre review or contributing 4 x 100 word responses to a threaded bulletin board discussion over a two-week period. Students were expected to read, reflect, respond and build on the postings of others. They were required to begin two new threads (ideas) and respond to the postings of others. This made for a highly structured, group learning task. Figure 2 demonstrates the beginning of the threading process for students reviewing the production, 'Ship of Fools'.

While the task was not initially conceived as collaborative, we were well aware of the benefits of 'shared knowledge making' online (Jonassen et al, 1995; Bonk et al 1996; Rimmershaw, 1999; Tam, 2000; Mason & Weller, 2000; Bernard et al, 2000; Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb 2000). The richness of the collaborative process only became evident to us as we monitored students' responses. Bernard et al (2000) say that at a minimum collaborative learning should include (a) a shared learning task, (b) combined expertise, knowledge and skills which improve the quality of the learning process, and (c) the building of or consolidation of a learning community (p.263). Using these criteria, the task set for our drama students was demonstrably a collaborative one. Furthermore, it was an authentic task, it actively engaged the students in the construction of knowledge via a process of contextualised and shared meaning making, allowing students to test and evaluate their own hypotheses: clearly a rewarding constructivist environment (Jonassen et al, 1995).

All students were graded individually. Students were assessed on their ability to identify and critique the various theatrical elements of the production in addition to their skill in successfully building and reflecting

Figure 2: Threaded discussion example

on the comments of others. This requirement to engage at the theoretical level with the postings of others ensured that students were not simply pasting isolated comments or a pastiche of others' contributions. Teaching staff had an important role in supporting and guiding students in this process via the main forum area and in face to face classes. However it should be noted that staff monitored but did not contribute to the students' private forums.

Following evaluation of the pilot offering, the Internet assignment was made compulsory for all students in 2000. Data collected indicated that all students would be able to regularly access the website in order to complete the task. The exceptions were six distance students who made a case for alternative assessment, citing difficulties in travelling to the city to

view a theatre production. These students were set a traditional essay as an alternative.

The remaining students signed up for one of four theatre productions. They were divided into private forum groups of ten students for the online task. All students had access to general comments in the main WebCT forum area, but to only one private forum group for the online assessment. Some groups contained both on campus and distance students. In 2000, students were given a longer eight-week period in which to submit 5 x 100 word comments to the discussion.

Methodology

The authors undertook the curriculum development within an Action Research Cycle (Kember & Kelly, 1993). Using a triangular process we carried out an evaluation of the effectiveness of the integration of the new technology into the curriculum, in particular students responses to the online assessment task. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected over two years by the following means:

- anonymous questionnaires containing open and closed questions administered to all students in the unit;
- focus groups with on campus students;
- focus group with distance students (1999) and individual interviews (2000);
- individual interviews with teaching staff;
- mid-year questionnaire for distance students (2000 only);
- qualitative analysis of bulletin board interactions;
- quantitative data from the WebCT logs of student activity at the website;
- a telephone survey of 12 Australian universities offering first year drama courses to ascertain the use of online technology (1999);
- a preliminary search of university drama web sites in the UK and USA.

The focus groups and interviews were recorded on audiocassette, transcribed and analysed for issues raised. The mid-year questionnaire was administered to distance students as a formative evaluation mechanism to ascertain their preparedness for the compulsory online assignment.

Results and discussion

The majority of students completing the survey were female and recent school leavers (Table 1). In stage one of the project (1999) the online assignment was optional and of the 133 students enrolled in the unit 22 elected to do the bulletin board task. In stage two (2000) the online assignment was compulsory for all 160 students (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 1

Age (survey group)	18 -20	21 - 30	31 - 40	41+	No answer
1999 (n=96)	76%	23%	1%	0%	0%
2000 (n=99)	75%	16%	7%	1%	1%

Table 2

Year	Enrolled at end of semester	Total enrolment		Gender		Completed survey
		On-campus	Distance	Female	Male	
1999	133	91%(121)	9%(12)	90%(120)	10%(13)	72% (96)
2000	160	81% (129)	19%(31)	88%(141)	12%(19)	62% (99)

Table 3

Year	Logged onto the web site	Completed online assignment		Completed alternative assignment	
		On campus	Distance	On campus	Distance
1999(n=133)	68%(90)	17%(22)	0%(0)	74%(99)	9%(12)
2000(n=160)	96%(153)	81%(129)	16%(25)	0%(0)	4%(6)

Our data provided an abundance of rich material for analysis and discussion. For the purposes of this paper we have concentrated on the changing teaching and learning outcomes, assessment online, integration of the technology, and student and staff perspectives of online learning.

Student perspectives and learning outcomes

Prior to the introduction of online components to the unit, on campus and distance students had traditionally been viewed as entirely separate cohorts. Delivery of content to both groups was by different means. There was variation in assessment tasks, and no interaction between the groups. In analysing the new assessment task the authors noted that the online exchange of ideas between on campus and distance students occurred seamlessly. Students were not necessarily aware of the enrolment status of

individuals online. This interaction between the two cohorts, we believe, may have broadened student perspectives, and brought a richer dialogue to the online assessment task. Further analysis in future years will be required to confirm this.

The increased opportunities for students to discuss theoretical components with their peers beyond the practical workshops introduced considerable change to the unit. Traditionally, unit material was presented in lectures and practical workshops for on campus students, and via a print study guide and book of readings for distance students. Theoretical exploration of the content was limited to workshops and individual reflection as the timetable did not provide room for formal tutorial sessions. By replacing the individual essay (theatre review) with a structured and assessable bulletin board task, students were able to engage in a critical and contextualised dialogue with others. This additional opportunity for shared dialogue meant that unit objectives were more effectively achieved.

Table 4

	Year	Yes	No	Not sure	No ans
Did you find the online assessment option to be an effective form of assessment?	1999 (n=22)	64%	0%	5%	32%
	2000(n=160)	51%	11%	29%	9%
Did you read and reflect on the comments of others before posting your own responses?	1999	68%	0%	9%	23%
	2000	71%	5%	14%	10%
Did reading the comments of others provide you with more material on which to base your own response.	1999	41%	5%	32%	23%
	2000	47%	17%	26%	9%
Would you have preferred to submit a formal written essay rather than contributing to a bulletin board as an assessment task?	2000	16%	63%	12%	9%

Table 4 shows that more than 50% of students who completed the assignment thought it was effective. The following comments are indicative:

> Access to other students' answers broadened my views and helped me to think more laterally.

> You spent short amounts of time reflecting and learning from others' views, better than an essay, you get immediate feedback and more insight...

> As a first assessment for the course, this option allowed you to discuss dramatic elements, but without restriction (and ensuing terror) of a formal essay.

Students who completed the online assignment were asked to select the statement that best described their attitude following the task. Students' positive responses to the task and the reported increase in their computing and Internet skills (Table 5) must be substantially attributable to this unit.

Table 5

	1999	2000
1. I now feel quite comfortable with the Internet and contributing to a bulletin board discussion.	14%	32%
2. I now feel quite comfortable with the Internet and contributing to a bulletin board discussion *and* I would be very interested in completing similar assessment tasks in other online units.	27%	42%
3. I realise I have to acquire more skills in computer technology if I am to make further use of online materials and tasks.	41%	8%
4. Having tried the online assessment option in ECHL111 I would now be *unlikely* to participate in similar online options in another unit at Macquarie.	0%	6%
No answer	18%	11%

Notably the computer literacy skills that these students are developing are within the context of a practical *and* arts based unit not normally associated with online learning. Data from the focus groups, interviews and questionnaires indicated a growing awareness amongst students that they cannot ignore the new communications technology. The majority of students in both years said that the technology had a place in a practical subject like drama (89% and 81%, see Table 6).

Table 6

Do you think this technology (web site and online discussion group) has a place in a practical subject like drama?	Year	Yes	No	No comment
	1999(n=96)	89% (85)	9%(9)	2%(2)
	2000(n=99)	81% (80)	9%(9)	10%(10)

Two students commented:

> I think today that technology is relevant to all subjects
>
> Yes it has a place in our life - why should drama be an exception.

Despite the success of the integration of technology into the unit, face to face practical workshops will remain. They are fundamental to the development of interpersonal and dramatic skills. As one student remarked:

> While technology increases in everyday popularity and importance, I believe that nothing can substitute personal contact in a subject relating to the human existence such as drama.

Collaboration

An important generic skill that students have developed in this unit is the ability to work collaboratively. In practical subjects like drama, team work is essential to the learning process. This is incorporated into practical acting and theatre making tasks within the unit, but not necessarily a requirement of more formal written work. Due to the design of the online assessment task students could not avoid working collaboratively. In effect, students now work collaboratively in both the practical sessions *and* in the theoretical, written domain.

Students commented positively on being able to view each other's work (Table 4) and said that the process enhanced their understanding of a production's theatrical and dramatic elements:

> Sometimes it pushed me to look further into the play and in fact I enjoyed the play more and it broadened my knowledge of drama.

> This has been an easy and simple process. Making elements of drama more clear and understandable in a single glance.

> What others said sparked new ideas and viewpoints other than my own.

Furthermore some students appreciated being able to see the standard of other's writing skills.

> I was curious to see the standard of everybody's responses. I found that I was about average in comparison in my use and handling of language.

Our evaluations also support the findings of Bullen (1998), ie for many students the online environment can be liberating because it allows sufficient time to contribute thoughtfully constructed messages. In a face to face tutorial, competition from more verbally competent students can inhibit some participants, or invite a more hurried response to tutorial questions.

In summary, the authors noted the following learning outcomes for students in terms of the curriculum as a whole:

- a stronger grounding in the discourse underpinning successful play production;
- greater confidence approaching and effectively completing the more substantial final assignment (Director's Project) as a result of exposure in the first online task to a variety of views and opinions;

- for weaker students, exposure to and support from the more competent writing styles of other students (scaffolding);
- reinforcement of the skills required for group work; and
* the development of computer literacy.

Integrating the technology - adapting to change

We were determined to ensure the students' pathway into the unit was as painless as possible. Like Foley and Schuck (l998, p.137) we believe that 'reliable and easily accessible hardware and software is essential if the promise of web based conferencing is to be realised'. Centralised technical support from the Library IT Help Desk alleviated pressure on teaching staff by solving simple but potentially time-consuming problems. Some students encountered technical difficulties, for example in downloading QuickTime movie samples of student work, but most reported no technical difficulties in accessing online material (Table 7).

Table 7

Did you have any technical difficulties accessing the online material?	Year	No	Yes
	1999	59(61%)	26(27%)
	2000	76(77%)	23(23%)

The combination of reliable technical support from centralised services, clear print support documents and a user friendly interface ensured access problems were minimal.

Previous research (Bullen, l998; Nicholls & Philip, 1999) indicates that adopting the new technologies may involve risks for students. The lack of consistent and reliable access to a computer, failure of the technology, and poor self efficacy in regard to the ability to manage the technology successfully are sufficient reasons for students not to choose an online assessment, given the option. As Toohey (1999) points out both staff and students need support with change management in order to adapt and gain new skills. Furthermore, it is not equitable to introduce innovations into the curriculum unless they are pedagogically sound and staff can be reasonably sure that students will not be disadvantaged. Taking a staged approach to technological innovation is one way of ensuring issues of access and equity are addressed and desired assessment outcomes are achieved.

A staged approach

In stage one of this project (1999) we began with a self selecting group of students who had reliable access and who were confident about meeting

the assessment criteria. The assessment results of this group showed no loss of academic standards, indicating that the task was valid and an effective form of assessment. This was corroborated by focus group and questionnaire data. We asked non-participating students in what circumstances they would consider participating in an online assessment in the future. Interestingly the majority of students (97%) said they would *when the task was made compulsory*. Notably only one student cited the need for better access to a computer and the Internet before they could complete the task.

The results of the 1999 research surprised us because they indicated, potentially, a better level of access than expected. We envisaged that access would be problematic for several years to come, so were reluctant to make the online assignment compulsory. Evaluations from stage two of the project (2000), however, confirmed that 96% of respondents said they had sufficient access through the University Library computers, workplace arrangements or from home to complete the online task. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2001) show that in 1998 one in eight households in regional and urban Australia had home access to the Internet In 2000 it was one in three, and by December 2001 it is expected to be one in two. The ABS figures confirm our findings (Table 8) and the findings of Stein and Annemieke (1999) that student access to the Internet is rapidly improving.

Table 8

Where did you most regularly access the website?	Year	Home	On campus	Work	Other
	1999	47(49%)	22(23%)	1(1%)	8(8%)
	2000	74(75%)	15(15%)	6(6%)	8(8%)

Our students reflect the growing use of information technologies in our society. In our view, there is a recent shift from a resistance to learning about computers, particularly in humanities based subjects, to an emerging attitude that is more accepting of the technology. Drama is no exception, and our data shows that most students acknowledge their responsibility to become computer literate.

Furthermore, as work and study patterns change, students need more flexible options to allow them to successfully complete tertiary study. George and Luke (1995) note that computer literacy 'is the enabling process, a meta-skilling which is critical to flexible delivery methods in formal contexts and the on-going personal pursuit of knowledge beyond the walls of the university'. Like Stein and Annemieke (1999), we note the closing of the gender gap with regard to computer literacy, competency

and efficacy. This is interesting, as our student cohort is predominantly female, recent school leavers enrolled in their first semester of tertiary study. It is encouraging to see that these students are enthusiastically acquiring generic computer literacy skills, especially given that this may be the first assignment that some students complete at university. Even over a two year period it is observable that students' attitudes towards the technology have become more positive. This change in attitude is likely to affect students' ability to overcome and quickly deal with technical problems. This view is supported by McMahon et al (1999), Palloff and Pratt (1999) and Rimmershaw (1999) who recognise the importance of rapid mastery of the technology for successful online study.

The following comments are typical of student reactions to the new technology:

> It is such a growing area that any subject should be involved with technology. It was easy to use and made the assessment different. I found I was motivated and inspired by the originality of the subject.

> Definitely a new innovative way of doing assignments which broadened my knowledge on Internet use. New and exciting teaching method.

Teaching perspectives and outcomes

Issues that arose of particular interest from the teaching perspective were:

- marking assessments online
- the substance and quality of students' dialogue online
- the efficacy of short bulletin board contributions versus a substantive essay
- the scaffolding process

Three staff members on the teaching team shared responsibility for marking. Each staff member chose to read and mark online principally because students' contributions were short, and needed to be read and assessed in context. Staff returned their graded comments on marking sheets that documented students' ability to meet the assessment criteria (content, analysis, clarity of expression and the ability to build on the comments of others). Unlike many online discussions which require considerable time to read, process and mark (e.g. Falk, 1999), teaching staff reported that this task required no more time to mark than an individual essay. In fact they found that reading and marking online was more efficient.

Notably, however, one staff member still had reservations about the new assessment, but acknowledged her caution may have related to her level of comfort with marking traditional essays. The other two teaching staff

believed that the task opened up a wider and deeper critique amongst students, and that the substance and quality of the online dialogue was comparable to writing found in individual essays, even though in a different form. One staff member commented that the task was a 'rich way for students to contact each other'. Staff valued the analytical and communication skills students developed by contributing concise, considered comments so as to build a shared understanding of a theatrical experience. Had students only written an individual essay this opportunity for substantial shared dialogue, so important to the educational experience (Laurillard, 1993; Jonassen et al, 1995), would not have been available to all students. Through the scaffolding process of accessing and building on the comments of others (see example in Figure 3), we believe students were better prepared to undertake the final assignment - the large director's project.

Article No. 425: posted by Student A on Sun, Apr. 30, 2000, 22:17
Subject: Lighting Techniques
I felt that the lighting design accentuated the desired mood each scene required and enhanced the five actors within their individual character roles. For example, when Sandy was talking about his Aboriginal roots the lighting created a backdrop of desert sand reminiscent of his birth home. Lighting was also effectively utilised to highlight the sense of loss between Jimmy and his birth mother. Each of the gifts she had bought for her "stolen" son each year are placed in a long strip of light. Perhaps the most poignant use of lighting was the shadow the lighting cast on the backdrop of Jimmy hanging in his cell.

Article No. 503: [Branch from no. 425] posted by Student B on Sun, May. 7, 2000, 14:17
Subject: re: Lighting Techniques
I agree that the lighting helped accentuate the mood within each scene. In this way, the lighting played a very important role, as the mood was altered very quickly throughout the performance. In some cases, lighting was used in the place of words. An example of this is the way the light shone on Ruby when she was "chosen" to go away for the weekend. The lighting helped to create a sense of irony as the audience, by the second time, knows that the "chosen one" will suffer sexual abuse, an issue associated with dark, hidden secrets. The spotlight, reminiscent of a winner at an awards evening, reinforces to the audience how unfortunate they actually are.

Article No. 632: [Branch from no. 503] posted by Student C on Sat, May. 13, 2000, 21:10
Subject: re: Lighting Techniques
I believe that the lighting not only accentuated the mood within each scene as Student A and Student B have already noted, but also highlighted the issue presented in each scene through the images the lighting projected. While the audience viewed Anne confronting the knowledge that her biological parents were Aboriginal, lighting was used to depict the differences between her two sets of parents to highlight her confusion over her identity. Two images, one of a suburban house the other of housing commission flats, were projected alternatively onto a screen. Two profiles were created in front of them through the use of shadow which represented Ann's different parents. It was a clever technique involving lighting to highlight Anne's inner-conflict in determining her place in each family.

Figure 3: Example of scaffolding process from the play 'Stolen'

Overall staff successfully created a learning environment based on constructivist principles. It fostered personal meaning making and discourse which enabled students to construct the knowledge that was most meaningful to them, rather than 'requiring them to "learn" the teacher's interpretation of that experience or content' (Jonassen et al, 1995, p.13).

Conclusion

The overwhelming success of the use of web based technology in *Elements of Drama* has been fascinating. This was one of the earlier units at our institution to adopt WebCT. That the unit coordinator was particularly reluctant to continue to offer the unit to distance students, let alone to incorporate new technology into an already successful unit, were two factors that could have mitigated against success. However, the coordinator had a commitment to teaching and learning and drew on experience developed across the university in designing and facilitating quality online discourse. The results changed her teaching praxis and attitude to the technology.

What made the project work?

- the innovation met a curriculum and communication need within the unit, at the same time enriching an already successful unit;

- support from the institution in terms of funding, training and educational design;

- appropriate structuring of the assignment as a first assessment task for students new to university, and the technology;

- embedding the assignment in the subject matter so as to support later assignments;

- improvement in online access for students;

- alternative provision for students who could be disadvantaged by the requirement for online access;

- strategic facilitation by teaching staff which encouraged students to construct their own learning in a collaborative environment;

- use of the bulletin board to improve communication within the unit; and

- no appreciable increase in the workload either for staff or students after the initial development phase.

While the authors are convinced that it is not easy to move away from habit, ritual and precedent in tertiary teaching, it is possible to successfully adopt new paradigms if the process focuses on understanding students'

needs, and supporting staff through the change process. If there is a strong interest in continuing to improve and enrich the learning environment, then even subjects like drama can find a place for online learning.

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Jennifer Nicholls
Lecturer, Division of Early Childhood and Education
Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia
jnichols@iec.iec.mq.edu.au

Robyn Philip
Educational Developer, Centre for Flexible Learning
Macquarie University, NSW, 2109, Australia
http://www.cfl.mq.edu.au/