

TITLE OF PAPER: Play and its role in online course development

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## PROPOSAL

### **Play and its role in online course development**

In the process of developing an online creative writing course within the Department of Continuing Education at Lancaster, we designed an online workshop in order to be able to play with ideas and to spark new approaches to writing. The modules for the course had already been offered for about a year, built around a Lotus Notes database and were successful in terms of supporting discussion and reflection, but we had no forum to 'play' - which is a significant element in face-to-face equivalent courses.

For our on-line workshop model we used the imagery of a group of students each having a pack of 'post-it' notes on which they could write and post onto a board. In our online layout we have a space at the centre for our 'stimulus', (which could be words, pictures or sound) and the pasting of post-its around it as the responses of students, which may be sequential to each other or individual. All participants choose a colour to be associated with them each time they use the workshop; all responses to the same stimulus are open and visible at the same time; and each response 'post-it' can act as a stimulus at the next level within the workshop.

With the emphasis on 'anything goes', there has been interaction, engagement and fun in the workshops. The playful side of our participants is an aspect that we only rarely see and it gives a glimpse of another part of each of us which is valuable when working together elsewhere online.

Of course there are snags. Not everyone likes to play. Nor did we set out with a clear vision of where we have got to; and we haven't always used the workshop in the best way we could. But this has all been 'grist for the mill' and helps thoughts towards the next stages of development.

While the whole issue of enabling creativity is a fascinating debate in itself, it is interesting to consider the role of 'playing' in learning and in online group development. On one level we might consider that simply because it encourages more interaction that our workshop is positive in terms of developing a group online, but playing itself has a particular quality to it that makes it valuable in any domain. Within our course we have found that discussion boards typically foster reflection and editing, not unmonitored 'brainstorming' types of activities or half thought-out, surreal or humorous responses. And yet all of these have their place in sparking idea and making connections for the learner.

The creative writing course as a whole might be viewed as a constructivist learning environment and is characterised by an ethos of working with what the participants bring forward. As well as giving an opportunity to play, the online workshop also provides opportunity for interactivity and collaboration not available through our discussion boards and could thus be viewed as enhancing that learning environment.