Promoting Deep Learning Through Integration of a Tri-sequel Role Play

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Abstract. Undergraduate students tend to struggle with courses offered in abstract fields such as Marketing Strategy, due to a lack of relevant work experience. As a consequence, the topic becomes difficult for students to comprehend. Based on a case study, this paper describes how the integration of the active learning technique of role play is used in an undergraduate course Cases in Marketing Strategy, in order to foster deep learning. Particular emphasis is placed on the seemingly overlooked area of role play progression. The role play setting is tri-sequel with a point of departure in three progressively more complex business cases for which empirical insight is available from three years of offering the course. Contributions include a discussion of progression on several levels within the sequential role play setting, and a role play model is offered as a tool for visualizing and analyzing sequential role play advancement in such courses. The paper is rounded off with recommendations for teachers in higher education that are interested in integrating sequential role play in abstract university courses.

Keywords: active learning, cases in marketing strategy, progression, sequential role play**.**

1. Introduction

The majority of university courses given within the field of strategy have traditionally been delivered through teacher centered (Schneider & Lieb 2004) lectures, case studies (Okumus & Wong 2007) and individual assignments (Arias-Aranda 2007). The general "spoon feeding" approach of teacher-centered education is typically employed in courses with abstract and complex content, targeting undergraduate students with minimal work experience (Shen, Nicholson, & Nicholson 2015). There is a risk when inexperienced undergraduate students are being introduced to abstract concepts while passively listening, that such concepts are approached in a naive and detached way (Gremler *et al.* 2000). For courses in Marketing Strategy this is precisely the issue (Schneider & Lieb 2004) - a gap exists between the content of the course and the students' pre-understanding, which in turn causes the students to struggle to make sense of the abstract concepts being taught.

One possible way to bridge this gap is to make use of active learning which is an increasingly endorsed pedagogic approach (Mikalayeva 2016). This is

practiced with the objective of engaging the students so that, by applying or experiencing the course material (Gremler *et al*. 2000), they can ultimately create their own knowledge (Powner & Allendoerfer 2008). Thus, they transition into the roles of "partners in the learning process" (Mintzberg & Gosling (2002, p. 65). Overall, by empowering the students to be active participants, typically via problem solving (Gremler *et al*. 2000; Mikalayeva 2016), it is believed that the students benefit from deeper learning (Mikalayeva 2016). There are different types of active learning approaches or "techniques" (Lean *et al.* 2006), e.g. case work, structured debate (Mikalayeva 2016), group discussion (Powner & Allendoerfer 2008), computer simulation (Arias-Aranda 2007; Mitchell 2004), gaming (Rao & Stupans 2012), and role play (Dingli, Khalfey, & Leston-Bandeira 2013; Stevens 2015).

Role play can be very effective and is characterized by a shift in control and ownership from the teacher to the students (Mikalayeva 2016) for whom the role play offers a venue, or "microworld" (Valler-Jones, Meechan, & Jones 2011, p. 628), in which to put conceptual course content into practice (Dingli, Khalfey, & Leston-Bandeira 2013). The integration of role play therefore helps break the endless passive listening (Schneider & Lieb 2004) during lectures and in seminars (Mikalayeva 2016; Wilson 2015), and aids in creating a balance between theory and skill training (Fong 2015). The newness of the role-play has been found to excite the students and increase their motivation to learn (Mikalayeva 2016) as the approach often is perceived as different and fun (Shen, Nicholson, & Nicholson 2015; Valler-Jonas, Meechan, & Jones 2011). Role play also stimulates understanding and long-term recollection through emotional activation (Heyward 2010) and leaves the participants with a stronger feeling of confidence with the given subject area (Inks, Schetzsle & Avila 2011).

However, the interest of integrating role play into higher education courses appears to vary greatly between fields. Role play appears frequently incorporated into pre-service professional practice courses such as nursing (e.g. Fossen, & Stoeckel 2016; Valler-Jones, Meechan, & Jones 2011), teaching (e.g. Hoan Cho, Yon Yim, & Paik 2015; Heyward 2010), and social work (e.g. Moss 2000). There are some examples where role play has been integrated into business courses but these are limited to certain (non abstract) subject areas and scenarios. For example, a study by Germain-Thomas, Lafarge and Sidibe (2019) describe how business students enrolled in an advanced negotiation course wrote their own business cases later to be used in role play. Their findings reveal that the role play prepare the participants well for their future career. Barrera, Venegas-Muggli and Nuñez (2020) integrated role play in a course for business students using fictitious company cases. The results of their study reveal that role play lead to engagement among the students and had a positive effect on student grades and pass rates.

As shown above the practice of incorporating role play as an active learning approach can be found in various higher education settings, including some business courses. Although single role play activities have clearly proven

valuable, multiple role play settings in higher education appear particularly promising (Sierra 2020). Not least since a key criterion when integrating role play in business courses is repetition as it fosters reflection, confidence and competency development (Inks, Schetzsle, & Avila 2011). While calls for more research on multiple role plays (Seiler *et al*. 2011) may indicate a lack of consensus in this domain, there are available examples of research integrating multiple role play in business courses. Such examples reveal that business courses which integrate multiple role plays tend to be directed to graduate students (Delpechitre & Baker 2017; Hartley & Eboch 2017; Weiss 2003) and cover topics within sales (Delpechitre and Baker 2017; Inks, Schetzsle & Avila 2011); economics (Sierra 2020); negotiation and culture (Weiss 2003); and strategic sourcing (Hartley & Eboch 2017). While the majority of these role plays appear to be anchored firmly in textbook cases (Shen, Nicholson, Nicholson 2015; Quarstein & Peterson 2001), alternative basis included sales process stages (Inks, Schetzsle, & Avila 2011), sourcing project phases (Hartley & Eboch 2017), and professional sales situations (Delpechitre and Baker 2017). The number of integrated role plays varies, with a common number being three (Shen, Nicholson, & Nicholson 2015; Sierra 2020). One critical aspect of the multi role play setting that is missing entirely or left implicit in the reviewed articles is a clearly explained progression between the role play sessions, Weiss (2003) being an exception. In fact, while research exists that communicates the integration of multiple role plays in business courses, there remain questions around the progression between role plays.

It appears therefore, that there is a need for more research contributing with insights on how to integrate multiple role plays, particularly in abstract business courses such as marketing strategy offered to undergraduates, in relation to the progression within such role play series. The particular course under scrutiny in this case study is a 7,5-credit undergraduate level course Cases in Marketing Strategy offered to a diverse group of international students. The ambition was to share the experience of orchestrating not one standalone role play, but three consecutive role plays, i.e. a tri-sequel role play, in an abstract undergraduate strategy course, with teachers in higher education. The purpose in this paper is therefore to describe the integration of a tri-sequel role play within the Cases in Marketing Strategy course. We also seek to answer the question of how role play issues can be managed in a strategy course in order to stimulate deep learning through the progression of role plays. In particular, this progression is discussed with regards to the role play aspects of control, preparation, advancement between role play cases, evaluation, participation and assignment of roles.

The remainder of this paper begins with a conceptual discussion of role play. This is followed by a description of how the tri-sequel role play was integrated into the undergraduate Cases in Marketing Strategy course. A discussion follows with particular emphasis on the role play progression on multiple levels. The paper ends with conclusions and recommendations for further development.

2. Role Play

Role play is a type of simulation (Lean, *et al.* 2006; Mikalayeva 2016), but more in particular, and as the name indicates, a role play consists of a role and a play (Shapiro & Leopold 2012). The role can be an actual authentic role, an imitation, or a fully fictional role, while the play dimension roughly ranges from a strict script to an improvisation. The scripted role play is not to be confused with the nature of a theatrical play, but rather keeps the interactive order of the players under control (Alden 1999). Regarding the interactive nature of the role play, the context is "non-computer based" (Lean, *et al*. 2006) and can range from non-interactive to fully interactive. In the interactive role play the students interact with each other as part of playing their roles, while the non-interactive role play essentially consist of a presentation in which the presenting students have taken on a particular role. In the interactive role play there is not only an element of the students learning from each other, but also social learning, which is highly dependent on the collaboration between the students (Stevens 2015).

Role play can further be deciphered considering aspects of control, preparation, advancement between cases, evaluation, reluctance towards participation among the students, and assignment of student roles. Regarding control, problems are likely to originate from the shift in focus from the teacher to the students, in which the teacher risks losing some of her/his control. In fact, the role play setting is often relaxed and unrestricted (Alden 1999) due to a lack of clear directions and detailed frames (Mikalayeva 2016). Therefore, the challenge to make role play efficient, i.e. facilitate deep learning, seems to be to find the right balance between giving the students freedom and giving them directions and guidance (Mikalayeva 2016). Gremler *et al*. (2000) state that the teacher must go from being the boss to becoming a coach or facilitator. Thus, while role play stipulates a shift in focus from the teacher to the student, the teacher should be present and offer advice and support during the entire role play process. Particularly for undergraduate students, it is important that the teacher is available for discussions during the role-play process in order to avoid leaving the students feeling abandoned (Quarstein & Peterson 2001).

In order for the students to feel self-confident during the role play it is important to allow for plenty of preparation time (Mikalayeva 2016). According to Rao and Stupans (2012) pre-activity planning might completely eliminate reluctance to participate. Such preparation includes preparing for the role play on a concept level (Heyward 2010). This is particularly the situation in conceptually demanding courses where the average undergraduate student lacks the experience needed to solve problems and make decisions as part of their role play. In order to minimize such obstacles, the role play should be anchored in carefully elaborated business cases (Wilson 2015) on which the students can base their actions. Particular emphasis should therefore be placed on choosing appropriate