

Using Role Play to Increase Student Engagement With Academic Literature

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Abstract—This paper presents an approach developed in a course about regional planning that revolves around student role play as a method for increasing engagement with academic literature. In this paper we will outline what is meant by role play in our case, and the ways in which we saw positive benefits associated in using this method in an undergraduate course which is quite literature heavy. We will also reflect on some of the challenges or downsides of the role play approach.

Index Terms—Role play, student engagement, active learning, academic literature, presentations, videos.

I. INTRODUCTION

A quite common problem that teachers at university discuss is difficulty around academic literature and student engagement. Word in the coffee room is that it can often be difficult to encourage students to read the academic literature, and even when they do they can struggle to understand and engage with it on a deep level. In the regional planning course we have been teaching, there is a quite a high demand on the students to read academic papers relating to both theoretical perspectives and empirical cases of regional policy and planning. We were concerned that the students' motivation levels to engage with the literature might be low, and/or this could be related to the inaccessibility of academic writing for undergraduate students and frustrations they might encounter when trying to read quite advanced materials. Nevertheless, it is part of both the disciplinary tradition in the social sciences that students read and engage with academic literature from the outset of their studies, and also part of the learning objectives both for this particular course and other courses in the program. As such we wanted to develop an approach that actually helps the students to learn how to engage with and enjoy academic literature so that they develop their learning abilities for the future in addition to learning better the materials for this specific course.

We landed upon role play as an approach to achieve the above big picture goals quite instinctively or serendipitously, and tested it out in our course. We didn't have particularly high expectations or assumptions about how this would pan out, but we wanted to try something new and different, partly in response to feedback from other teachers in the program that it can sometimes be difficult to achieve good understanding of and engagement with the literature. We were pleasantly surprised with the results in the student performance during the end of course exams,

and also the feedback we received on the course and decided to embed the role play element permanently into the course and re-iterate it going forwards. We were also spurred to go beyond our gut instinct to experiment with this method, to find out more about the research and theory behind it and conduct our approach in a more rigorous and evidence-based manner. This paper is the outcome of that process and intended to share our own experience and knowledge gained about the role play method.

II. WHAT IS ROLE PLAY?

A. Some Definitions

First it is necessary to explain what we mean by role play in this paper. Readers might have experiences with role play through, for example, role playing games which are currently quite popular. Or they might have practiced role playing knights and dragons, or hospitals, with their kids. The Oxford dictionary definition of role play is to “act out or perform the part of a person or character”, quite simply.

In the higher education pedagogy world, the use of role play and simulation is quite well established in the medical fields, for example, but it is less established in a lot of disciplines (Clapper, 2010). Summarizing the possible benefits of incorporating a role playing approach, Clapper says (2010, p.40): “Those involved in role play are also actively involved in the construction of their learning which has also been shown to enhance student's critical thinking skills, especially when used in conjunction with good facilitator questioning techniques.” There are a couple of points in this summary that require emphasizing. First, is that role play can serve as part of our suite of active learning techniques, which will be discussed further below. Secondly, critical thinking can be enhanced by role play, which is often a learning objective on courses, especially in the social sciences where building critical thinking skills is one of the core objectives such as in critical spatial thinking that we are familiar with as human geographers (Goodchild & Janelle, 2010). Third, the teacher's role in role play is key: it is not an option which removes the importance of the teacher, for a number of reasons we will explore below, but as Clapper points out the instructor needs to ask questions to make the approach work fully.

In role play, learners are encouraged or required to move and interact as part of the process (Clapper, 2010). Role play can be grouped together with other teaching tools such as guest speakers, individual and group projects, and simulation as part of what Maxwell et al. (2019) call experiential teaching models. Indeed, these various elements

are combined in the course we discuss in this paper, and come together to build up a multi-faceted experiential learning environment that draws on role play as one of its main elements. Khudoyorovna (2022) suggests the benefits of role play exercises are that they encourage students to think more critically about complex issues and see situations from a different perspective. Looking at teaching feedback, Stevens (2015) finds that the majority of students have a positive impression of role play in the classroom, but that it might have negative associations for weaker or underprepared students.

However, it is not as easy as simply adding a role play scenario to the class and hoping for the best: careful planning and design is required. As Khudoyorovna (2022) explains, role play activities should be content driven, consistent with the learning objectives of the class, and relevant to real world situations. Harbour & Connick (2005) agree: the role play situations should be realistic and relevant to the participants and focused on developing a particular skill or skill set. Erturk (2015) also lifts the importance of the teacher's questioning in the role play exercises and suggests teachers might need to practice their questioning skills in advance.

In terms of class design, online roleplaying is also an option that has found to be enjoyable and effective (Lebaron & Miller, 2005). No doubt during the pandemic many role playing tasks were moved online (including in our course) and we didn't witness any particular issues in taking the activity from the real into the virtual sphere. Our version of role playing didn't involve much movement and physical contact, however, which could be a problem for the kinds of role playing and simulation activities used in medical education, for instance.

III. DESIGNING A ROLE PLAYING EXERCISE

Harbour & Connick (2005) set out how a role-playing activity should be designed: we will illustrate this with details about how we arranged our activity in our class. These authors define role play as an "experience around a specific situation which contains two or more different viewpoints or perspectives" (Ibid.). They suggest usually a brief is prepared and different perspectives on the same situation are handed out to different people, with different objectives, who then come together to discuss. Harbour & Connick (2005) explain how this should lead to learning outcomes: how each role player handles the situation forms the basis of skills practice, assessment and development.

In our case, we split the students up into two groups for each exercise, of around 5 people (the exact number is not really important, but we found 5 means they can allocate out different elements of the task and also leaves some flexibility in the group for absences etc.). The groups were allocated an academic article, and one group was asked to prepare a presentation of the article as if they were the author. The other group was asked to provide a commentary on the article as if they were a reviewer. So, we asked the students presenting the article to discuss the article as if they had written it. We also provided them with short video clips where we interviewed the real authors of the papers (available at: <https://coffeebreakwithresearchers.org/>), so they could get a deeper insight into the person behind the

paper, their motivations for writing it, and their experiences in their research.

The presenting group had 15 minutes to give their overview of the paper, and in the first session we gave them some pointers of things they could cover such as the main theory used, the main methods used, the main findings and conclusions, the limitations of the study. We also gave the reviewers some example questions such as "why did you use this theory and not that one?", or "why did you use this method and not that one?", and "what would you do differently next time?". We gave them 10 minutes to ask questions, and then opened up the questions to the whole class. Then, the teacher would take 10 to 15 minutes to cover any points about the paper not already covered in the role play, answer any remaining questions, and also give their own feedback and impression on both the academic article (from their expert perspective) but also on the groups work and especially what they did well in their presentations. We did not grade the presentations, but seminars were mandatory so we took a register and made sure the different members of the groups were actively participating when it was their turn.

In terms of the wider structure, we allocated two papers per two hour seminar slots (around 45-50 minutes for each paper worked well using the schema above) - with a decent break in between. We had three seminars each week, and one lecture (so 8 contact hours). This worked out as 6 academic papers to read each week, which we thought was a realistic amount for them to cover but actually retain and remember what they had read. The groups took it in terms to present and discuss on a rolling schedule- so not every group had to present every paper but we asked all students to read the papers in advance so they could engage in the sessions properly. The course is 7.5 credits, and the teaching runs for around 5 weeks, but we also have an individual course paper they prepare during that time. Whilst our example comes from a social sciences course taught in the Department of Human Geography, role play is not subject or discipline specific. For example, Erturk illustrates a role playing classroom example from a computing and IT bachelor's programme

IV. BENEFITS OF THE APPROACH

We saw that our course received quite good scores when compared to what we had personally received previously, and also compared to the other courses in the programme being taught to the same students. We believe there is some element of "novelty value" associated with this, and if all of our colleagues were using role playing exercises in their courses the students would probably get tired of them, or at least accustomed to them, and we would see less of an uptick in our own scores, though this is just a hypothesis.

For us as teachers, we enjoyed using this method- it felt less arduous to try to get the students to read the papers in advance of the class! We believe actually having a task in groups, and needing to present their work to the rest of the group, gave some focus and pressure to actually read the papers properly and discuss them in a group first, which led to deeper insights and understanding than if the students were just doing the reading by themselves, and probably not discussing it with anyone else. We also found they helped

“problem solve” for each other when there were difficult elements or things they didn’t understand- this meant the questions that came to the teacher were of a more advanced nature, and fewer in volume, because they had already solved a number of each other’s queries through the role playing exercise and the preparations for it.

In addition to providing some rather funny moments in the classroom (for instance when asked why they chose such a method over another one, the students came up with funny answers like “I used a qualitative method because I am too bad at maths to use a quantitative one”, or “I couldn’t be bothered to do any more work, so I just stopped it”), we believe that deeper insights and understandings with the academic literature were gained through this process of actually putting oneself into the author’s shoes and thinking hard about why they made the decisions they did in terms of their research process and how they present their findings. On the side of the reviewers, we think being in this role helped students to read the articles more deeply and critically, again asking questions of why choices were made beyond simply repeating what is said in the article.

One element we had not planned, but emerged quickly as we went through the papers, was that the presentations they prepared served as a nice set of notes on the paper for later revision, so we made a folder on Canvas where groups could upload their presentations for everyone to use.

We found that the students became more interested in academic articles, how the publishing process works, and how research and ethical decisions are made by researchers, on a much deeper level than we have experiences in seminars before where we took a more traditional approach to reading papers and discussing them. The role play, we believe, really helped the students get into the author and reviewer mindsets and engage with the papers on a deeper level. Accompanied by the videos, they also had a feel for the authors as more than a name on a piece of paper and connected more to the work. At the end of each class we checked in with them about points they had questions on, or found hard to understand, so the teacher could step in a clarify any things which were problematic in the papers. In this way, we first allowed the students to find the answers to their questions amongst themselves, but the “expert eye” of the teacher was available to fill in the gaps.

V. CHALLENGES WITH THE APPROACH

As we explained above our class size is middling- we are not sure how well the approach would work with very small (less than 20) or large (more than around 60) students. For small classes one option would be to do the same tasks in pairs instead of small groups- we don’t see any reason this wouldn’t work. For larger classes it would probably make sense to split in half and repeat the seminars if teaching hours were available rather than doubling the groups to around 10 participants- we think this could be hard to coordinate and might lead to redundancies where some group members aren’t actively participating.

There is more organizing up front- setting the groups and the schedule with the papers and rolling role play parts. Also, if the students are not used to this approach, some time and energy is needed in the first few sessions to get them accustomed to the structure and also discussing things

in a different way than they are used to during seminars. However, we found after a couple of sessions they caught on very well, and the remainder of the course ran smoothly once they were into the flow. The role play approach in this class is quite heavy on presenting and speaking in front of the class. This would need to be adapted for students with disabilities related to this, with support of disability services or via modifications made by the teachers. A possible modification could be that the students pre record their presentation and show the video rather than presenting in person. Another modification is that they share out the roles in the group so no one person has a heavy public speaking load.

In the end, despite any challenges or hurdles with this approach, we see value in in, and agree with Clapper (2010, p.43) who says that:

“If teacher innovation is truly something that is high priority, then the use of role-play and simulation should be more common place, given its proven value as a learning strategy”.

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