Role play as a teaching method to improve student learning experience of a bachelor degree programme in a transnational context: an action research study

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Abstract

Role play provides additional learning opportunities to students through interaction with other students in classrooms. Modes of delivery in modules for a bachelor degree programme at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool (XJTLU) – a transnational education (TNE) provider – are mainly teacher-led lectures and seminars. In my action research, an intuitive proactive approach was adopted, Kodotchigova's modified role play method. After the role play, a survey with open-ended questions (modified from XJTLU Student Module Feedback Questionnaire) gathered the perceptions of students of the role play on their learning experience. Twenty-five students aged ≥ eighteen years (twenty females and five males) agreed to participate. Eighty per cent of the students reported that role play helped them to learn and seventy-two per cent that role play stimulated their interest in the module's subject. In conclusion, role play was a very useful teaching strategy for helping students to demonstrate, after first learning various theoretical perspectives, practical application to real-life situations. However, role play might not be suitable for all students, as some may prefer it mixed with other teaching strategies in classrooms, particularly in a TNE context.

Keywords: Business education; role play; pedagogical approach; transnational education

Introduction

The world is changing fast and advances in technology have profoundly influenced modes of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Effective teaching methods can help students to think critically and generate enthusiasm for actively engaging in classrooms (Cherif and Somervill, 1995; Wood, 2003). In addition, critical-thinking skills have been regarded as an important tool for the intellectual development of students, especially in a transnational education (TNE) context (Fonseca *et al.*, 2015). However, the main educational focus of most universities local to Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool (XJTLU) is to deliver factual information to students, not to involve them in active learning or improve their ability to think critically. Such traditional modes of learning and teaching can limit students' development of critical-thinking skills and their productivity (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013; Rayner, 2007).

A review of the literature has suggested that learning is a process involving social and peer-to-peer (i.e. student-student) interaction (Hurst *et al.*, 2013). For example, the 'VARK' model of four modes of learning (visual, auditory, reading and kinaesthetic) details how students learn in classrooms (Hawk and Shah, 2007). One teaching technique that can encourage

students to participate actively in the classroom is role play (Chan, 2012), a learning technique allowing students to act out adopted roles in simulations of real-life situations. Confucius, a famous Chinese reformer and philosopher once said, "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." (Specht and Sandlin, 1991). Role play, in enabling students to interact with each other in the classroom, can therefore provide them with additional learning opportunities.

Role play requires active participation by and motivation from students (Rashid and Qaisar, 2017). A role play activity can help participating students to develop critical-thinking skills and allow them to apply their knowledge by engaging them in various real-life scenarios (Rashid and Qaisar, 2017); deployed by teachers, it proves an effective strategy for nurturing critical thinking among students enrolled in transnational education (TNE).

A review of the literature has shown that role play can help students to apply their knowledge to practice (Chan, 2012; Kodotchigova, 2002; Specht and Sandlin, 1991). For example, role play has been incorporated in business education so that undergraduate and postgraduate students may come to understand business processes. They may also, since they find themselves exposed to alternative interpretations of and explanations for their own and other students' contributions to the role play, develop the ability to argue cogently. Role play has the additional advantage of facilitating peer-to-peer interaction, associated with such positive learning outcomes for students as social and motivational benefits (Kodotchigova, 2002) and so promote a higher level of cognitive learning. However, role play does not take place spontaneously in classrooms and teachers play a significant part in making it happen.

More and more universities have now combined to offer TNE and, in this century, university staff and students may travel freely from one country to another country (Bovill *et al.*, 2015). TNE may be defined as a higher education study programme in which learners are based in a country different from that of the awarding institution (Knight, 2016) and it may manifest itself as distance learning, branch campuses, collaborative provision or partnerships, some of which may overlap with each other and thus not form a discrete type (Knight, 2016). One example is XJTLU, an international Sino-British joint-venture university between the University of Liverpool (UoL), United Kingdom (UK), and Xi'an Jiaotong University, China. Undergraduate students enrolled in XJTLU are awarded with degrees both from the UoL and XJTLU, while postgraduate students – including doctoral students – receive a UoL degree. In the National Student Survey, the UoL's overall satisfaction rate was 85%, placing it tenth within the Russell Group. English is used as a teaching language throughout XJTLU modules and classes.

According to the feedback from my module questionnaires and the students I taught, some new teaching strategies, such as role play, were deemed to have improved student learning experience at XJTLU, a TNE provider. Having received this feedback, I therefore reflected upon my own teaching practice – as a step towards enhancing the quality of learning and teaching practice at XJLTU. I decided to use the 'intuitive proactive' approach in my action research project, as best suited to my own pedagogical practice. Such an approach could also help me to address my action research questions (Dunlosky *et al.*, 2013; Marsh and Roche, 1993).

Methods

Research question

In my project, my primary research question was: How effective was role play as a teaching method for improving students' active learning experience and critical-thinking skills by facilitating peer interaction in a diverse student body within XJTLU (i.e. a TNE context)?

My secondary research question was: How did the students feel and think about the use of role play in classrooms? Did the use of role play improve the students' overall active learning

Procedures

I adopted the modified role play methods of Kodotchigova (2002) for my project. In semester 2 of the academic year 2018-2019, the role play activity took place after a one-hour lecture on the topic of the module in a bachelor degree programme at XJTLU, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China. Importantly, the lecture first provided the knowledge and skills for the students to apply in the role play. Without the lecture, students would have been unable to understand the situation of the role play and the given roles. At the beginning of the role play, students were briefed about the roles and the description of the situation. They were asked to form smaller groups of four or five people and were then given a specific task and role to be completed in fifteen minutes. Having been asked to imagine themselves as the experts in the roles they were assigned, they then played the roles. After the fifteen minutes, each group was asked to present its members ideas and thoughts on the task and role they had played, while the other groups would pose two questions based on the presentation given. This ensured that every student in the group had an equal opportunity to participate in the role play activity. Finally, students were asked to complete an open-ended question survey – modified from the XJTLU Student Module Feedback Questionnaire – in order to collect their perceptions of the effectiveness of role play in improving their learning experience.

To ensure that all students participated in the role play, I had set some ground rules for the students to follow. I had also obtained the ethics approval (Ref. no. 18-03-12) from the XJTLU Ethics Committee prior to the implementation of my project. All the data from students were kept confidential and anonymous.

For the data analysis, qualitative and quantitative data were collected. I applied coding and categorising techniques in order to organise students' perspectives of the role play into different categories and themes. In addition, I used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for the descriptive analysis in my project.

Results

Twenty-five Year 1 students aged ≥ eighteen years (twenty females and five males) agreed to participate in my project. Eighty per cent of them reported that role play had helped them to learn better in classrooms and seventy-two per cent that role play had stimulated their interest in the module's topic that I had taught. Ninety-two per cent reported that I had explained the role play clearly, with an appropriate level of guidance, and a majority (seventy-two per cent) found role play a valuable learning experience and said that it had improved their critical-thinking skills.

Of the twenty-five students, a majority (eighty-eight per cent) provided some written feedback in the questionnaires that enabled me to perform some coding analyses – I categorised the written feedback into different themes. Most of the students (sixty-four per cent) reported that they understood the content of the lecture better after the role play; a majority of the students (sixty-four per cent) found that role play had made the learning in classrooms more interesting and practical; a minority of students (twenty-four per cent) were more active in classrooms when the role play was introduced.

However, a small number of students (twenty per cent) reported that some – but not all – students had been actively involved and suggested that a longer time should be given for the role play. The students also suggested that *every* student, instead of each group, should be asked to present her/his ideas and thoughts and that, in addition, alternative learning topics could also be introduced and included in the role play so that it could maximise their gains from this classroom learning experience.

Discussion

Before conducting my project, I was doing most of the talking and students demonstrated limited active engagement in my classroom. However, after the project's completion, I noticed that students were now more actively engaged in the class activities and I was doing less of the talking. Furthermore, I have now become more reflective. Before the project, I would blame the students for not actively engaging in my class activities, but afterwards, I turned the analytical power of deep reflection upon myself, my practice, my module design and my class activity content, realising that the problem of lack of engagement by my students lay not with them but with my own methodology.

During the first five minutes of the role play activity, I noticed that some students seemed afraid to share their ideas and thoughts in front of their peers and teacher, even in a small group, perhaps because it was their first experience of role play or because of low self-esteem or lack of confidence in expressing opinions (Rashid and Qaisar, 2017). Yet, when the activity was over, it was apparent that the students who had previously been shy now were showing more self-confidence and had made some improvement in their communication skills, possibly indicating the positive influence of increased interaction with their peers. Such forms of student-student and teacher-student interactions may well enhance communication.

Role play can develop students' problem-solving skills, too, thanks to simulations – of real-life situations – which enable reflection on personal learning experience and then encourage the application of critical-thinking skills and effective construction of argument, drawing upon knowledge gained from the lectures (Choy and Cheah, 2009).

Did the role play activity improve students' overall learning experience? Based on my findings, the answer is 'yes'. The feedback from my students was largely positive. The role play had helped them to engage actively and provided them with opportunities to relate theory learnt in the classroom to practice. My findings were consistent with those of other action research projects (Kuśnierek, 2015; Moss, 2000; Rashid and Qaisar, *op.cit.*): role play encourages peer-to-peer interaction; students can learn by interacting with other students rather than only with teachers. Role play can also be used by teachers to assess students' understanding of a topic previously taught in class.

Although some students reported that participating in a role play session can sometimes be a stressful learning experience, this challenge can be overcome if the session is well-designed and led by a well-trained teacher (Johansson *et al.*, 2012). In my case, for the role play to be carried out effectively and to meet planned learning outcomes, I need to have very good understanding of module topics; I also must establish a classroom environment conducive to the acquisition of critical-thinking skills through active learning.

Using the Gibb's model, I reflected that, before the implementation of my action research project, I had been working within my comfort zone and not experimenting with alternative teaching strategies that might improve the student learning experience. I have now acquired some new ideas for encouraging active classroom engagement (Craig, 2018) and been challenged to continue reflecting on my learning and teaching practice, especially in a TNE context (Smith, 2009).

My findings suggest that role play can be used as a productive teaching strategy to enhance student learning experience in a diverse student body within XJTLU (i.e. a TNE context) and have helped me to understand better the role of a teacher working in such a TNE context as this (Waters and Leung, 2013). Thanks to the project, I have incorporated inclusive teaching methods into my own practice and intend to develop these. Now, I am able to acknowledge, recognise, meet and accommodate the different learning needs of a diverse student body in my classroom (Yorke, 2003). XJTLU advocates a student-focused approach and the application of an outcome-based method to its TNE education. As a TNE teacher, I am thus very aware of my responsibility for facilitating my students' development (Tian and Martin, 2014).

I need also to be aware of the differences in learning approaches between Chinese and Western students. Confucianist elements have significantly influenced learning and teaching approaches in China, including a strong hierarchical relationship between students and teachers (Heffernan *et al.*, 2010). Chinese students are less likely to express their own opinions (Heffernan *et al.*, *op.cit.*; Hou, 2015) and might well lack confidence in speaking English (Wang and Roopchund, 2005). As a TNE teacher at XJTLU, in the light of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, I can better understand and explain how my students engage with and experience the differences in culture of learning and teaching in my classroom (Greenholtz, 2000).

The inclusion of more local content in my module is another approach I should like to explore, with examples, short videos and case studies related to public health in China, so that they may able to distinguish how public health systems in Asian and Western countries differ from each other. By means of pedagogical context in assessment tasks, I can help to improve the student learning experience (Jayakumar, 2008; To and Carless, 2016).

I acknowledge that, when I design the role play activity again, I should like to set more initial ground rules, whilst also giving more flexibility to the students. I hope that, with these changes, student engagement in the role play will increase, thereby resulting in the achievement of the module learning outcomes. Conversations with students have indicated that a mixture of techniques – including role play but with the addition of, say, the flipped classroom or online discussions – to meet varying learning styles may address what I have

observed: that role play as a single strategy, no matter how hard I try, will not interest all students to an equal degree.

I should also like to include some research-led learning and teaching elements in my classroom activities, because students would like to know how the knowledge they learn can be applied to real life or the research world. Subsequently, this will help them to undertake inquiry-based learning and become active learners. I wish to re-design my module and assessment tasks, incorporating some virtual learning environment and in-class technologies, because online and offline learning now can supplement each other to improve students' learning experience and encourage, in my students, greater learner autonomy. A reconfiguring of the module learning outcomes and having a flipped classroom will almost certainly help to maximise time for supporting student learning.

How to apply these findings to other disciplines, including business education?

As a teacher, especially one working in TNE, I realise that there are many different challenges in teaching, including the urge to maintain enjoyable and captivating teaching and learning processes in classrooms. I do believe that my project findings could be applied to other disciplines. In a business education programme, which involves teaching to students the fundamentals and operations of business practice and industry – communications, entrepreneurship, leadership, international business and interpersonal skills, some of these topics are rather abstract and most students have limited working experience; here – especially for students enrolled in TNE – role play would be beneficial because they can develop global competency skills and understand diversity in the business environment. The incorporation of role play into teaching and learning business processes may actively engage students in classroom and improve their learning outcomes.

Conclusions

My findings have provided me with a rich and contextualised understanding of role play. I have demonstrated that role play can be used as a pedagogical approach to improve students' active learning experience in the classroom because it is a student-focused approach. In addition, I have found that role play has played a significant role in improving the communication skills and learning behaviour of students in my own classroom within the TNE context. My findings also suggest the applicability of role play as a teaching and learning method to other disciplines, such as business education in TNE, because it can reinforce learning and enhance knowledge retention among students in the classroom. It is therefore important that future studies should consider exploring its much wider application.

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