

Using drama-based approaches with technology enhanced active learning (TEAL) to enhance students' engagement and learning in higher education

Emma Connor and Jingyang Ai

University of Greenwich

Abstract

This opinion piece explores the integration of drama-based approaches with technology-enhanced active learning (TEAL) to enhance students' engagement and learning experiences in higher education. Drama-based pedagogy encourages active participation, collaboration and creativity and in the two examples of teaching practice covered, we argue that drama-based approaches align well with the interactive and student-centred environment fostered by TEAL. The TEAL model combines digital tools, flexible classroom layouts and group work to promote collaborative learning and reflective thinking. By incorporating drama-based techniques such as role play, improvisation and simulations in higher education teaching, students can engage more fully with course content, experience diverse perspectives and develop a stronger connection to the material.

We argue that this approach not only fosters engagement but also enhances communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills, which are essential competencies for the modern workforce. Moreover, the combination of TEAL and drama creates a dynamic and immersive learning environment, making abstract or challenging concepts more accessible.

Key words: Experiential learning, simulation games, role play, learning technology, collaborative learning, technology enhanced active learning, TEAL

Technology-enhanced active learning in education

Technology-enhanced/enabled active learning (TEAL) is an educational format combining technological tools, student experiences and instructional content delivered by lecturers to create an engaging, interactive learning environment (Dourmashkin, Tomasik and Rayyan, 2020). By combining pedagogy, technology and classroom design, this approach seeks to improve students' academic professional growth by introducing novel concepts into the learning process (Shi *et al.*, 2020).

In higher education (HE), TEAL, when integrated with social work education, has gained effective learning and teaching outcomes (Lee *et al.*, 2019). As they are digital natives, students may be helped to develop skills appropriate to the twenty-first century by means of technology, in conjunction with drama-based approaches and experiential activities (Zakopoulos *et al.*, 2023).

At the University of Greenwich, TEAL classrooms are part of the room inventory, which may be used for teaching and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) purposes. TEAL classrooms are used by both academics and learning technologists, due to the available software, such as Mersive Solstice which enables Active Learning. In this opinion piece, we

draw upon the experience of a Senior Teaching Fellow in Digital Marketing utilising Active Learning mode, which is facilitated by a TEAL classroom. Active Learning mode enables 1) collaborative working within and between small groups and 2) the sharing of content centrally and locally, with an emphasis on visualisation helpfully replicating the post-graduation employment setting in advertising communications to which students aspire and offering them authentic, 'real-world', practice-based experience and learning to nurture their creativity and collaborative skills. However, if TEAL is not applied with a sound pedagogical foundation, it risks becoming an inefficient use of resources and time. Simply integrating technology into the classroom without a clear purpose or alignment with learning objectives can lead to disengagement, confusion and superficial outcomes. We argue that TEAL can be enhanced with drama-based learning, as we have found that this combination of pedagogical approaches successfully engages students actively by means of dramatic techniques, such as role play.

Drama-based approach in education

Water (2021, p.1) notes, "*If we perceive cognition and emotion as interrelated, then drama as an educational tool becomes essential.*" Learning is embodied, meaning that our brain, emotions and physiology are constantly connected. Drama engages these connections, allowing students to achieve deeper understanding through performance and improvisation.

Historically, the use of drama in education dates back over 2,000 years to ancient Greece. Aristotle recognised its potential to stimulate emotional involvement and enhance learning (Heyward, 2010). In the 1960s and 1970s, drama in education thrived, and today, we see its application in business subjects as well.

Current research highlights the effectiveness in HE of drama-based approaches (Luo *et al.*, 2024), which can be particularly valuable in scenarios requiring students to develop professional roles or build their confidence as HE learners. For example, role-play exercises in teacher training or healthcare education allow students to practice real-world interactions in a safe environment, enhancing their ability to navigate complex situations (Özoğul *et al.*, 2020; Jefferies *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, drama can support skills such as teamwork and empathy, which are essential across disciplines (Tizzard-Kleister, 2022).

However, implementing this approach may prove challenging: one significant barrier is staff development. We have found that many educators, lacking training or confidence, feel unprepared to facilitate drama-based activities. Additionally, the perception of drama as 'non-academic' can result in its exclusion from curricula, despite its proven benefits. To address these barriers, institutions could offer professional development workshops and integrate drama into broader teaching strategies, demonstrating its potential to engage students deeply and transform their learning experiences.

Although having drama experience can help lecturers achieve better outcomes with drama-based methods, it is not a requirement for success. What matters most is their willingness to step out of their comfort zone and experiment with new techniques. With clear guidance, practice and a supportive environment, lecturers can effectively use drama to enhance student engagement and learning. Small steps, such as starting with simple role-play activities, can gradually build confidence and lead to meaningful results, even without a background in drama.

Implementing drama-based strategies in TEAL

It is not merely enough to provide students with technology-enhanced learning environments such as classrooms and labs without also, on the basis of sound pedagogy, clarifying for the class the theory underpinning the practice. We argue that it is the combination of learning technology and role play that creates an engaging classroom environment in which students may simulate the working world through group work. Two cohorts – levels 6 and 7 advertising and marketing students – serve for our examples. These learners had to reflect on their experiences of group work in classroom environments combining drama methods with TEAL, this strategy being our response to their module evaluation feedback (EvaSys) and to programme-level qualitative comments from the National Student Survey (NSS) for level 6 students, both of which sought more engaging and employability-focused learning.

The first example illustrates a six-week, drama-based learning experience for a level 6, final-year advertising undergraduate cohort. Simulating the real-world environment of an advertising agency, students formed group of up to five and were assigned a table area (pod) whereby members could connect to the Mersive Solstice software. Each student embodied the role of a team member (e.g., Creative Director) of the agency, and had to respond to live advertising challenges set by real clients. Solutions to the assigned problems included market research, identification of the target audience, formulation of a creative strategy and execution. Screen-sharing was the TEAL feature of the pod and paramount to the creation of the advertising assets within the group, but, although the physical agency environment was created through the agency pod layout, we argue that the transformational aspect of student learning did not lie in the technology alone: the students themselves underwent transformation – through role play. TEAL allowed the teacher to provide simultaneous, real-time feedback to multiple group seating pods without interrupting the flow of role playing. So, many groups can engage in a drama-based simulation and receive immediate learning-reinforcing feedback on the work produced, rather than merely playing roles without direction. Engaging in collaborative learning activities is key to successful problem-solving and meaning-making for learners and is further strengthened by technology (Liyanawatta *et al.*, 2022). Students' feedback, in the summative reflective report submissions, confirms that the simulation helped them to envision the day-to-day life of an agency and that they are now more firmly committed to their aspirations of undertaking a career in advertising. Their informal feedback showed that the module's pod areas with screen collaboration indeed felt like a real agency, so convincing us that combining TEAL with role play had real value.

The second example is a level 7 postgraduate master's digital marketing cohort, with which the TEAL classroom and drama-based learning combined to simulate the digital marketing agency environment. Given the positive feedback on a previous module that combined role play and TEAL, we designed an activity at postgraduate level to explore other possibilities of these interwoven strategies. Students had to simulate a pitch for a Customer Experience (CX) design client, in a time-constrained activity. The tutor instructed student groups to divide the requirements of the brief and to rehearse dialogue and write script, with more emphasis on creating a performance in which students had to take on the characters of current team members of a digital marketing agency. Other students, who formed the audience for the activity, acted as the client and actively participated in the performance, interacting with their peers. Giving responsibility of learning to actors and spectators in this way supports collaborative learning, raises self-esteem and prepares for real-life employment scenarios

(Chandra, 2015). To combine educational technology with transformational play ensures that both performers and audience experience transformation; it also thus constitutes a digital stage for the performance of drama (Liyanwatta, *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

We argue that combining drama-based approaches with TEAL can enhance advertising and marketing students' learning experiences, so strengthening both methods and creating a dynamic, interactive environment where students can engage more deeply with course material. The collaborative learning approach, in which responsibility for learning is held by students and peers (Chandra, 2015), is effectively delivered by role play, which engages those learning environments most supportive of student presentations and pitches. Drama-based methodology encourages active participation, creative expression, critical thinking and empathy, while TEAL contributes flexible space arrangements and advanced technology. Together, they create a learning atmosphere that not only fosters deeper understanding and retention of knowledge, but also prepares students for real-world challenges by promoting collaboration, communication and reflective practice. For future work, we plan to conduct research on the effect on drama-based learning of live briefs from employers.

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