

Adding value to online role plays: Virtual situated learning environments



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Role-play as a means of involving learners in experiential learning opportunities has been a characteristic of student-centered learning environments for many years. Developments in the digital environment have enabled the design of more sophisticated role play environments in which learners deal with the complexity and ambiguity of real-life issues and the same time develop their knowledge of the advantages and limitations of online communication. Virtual Situated Learning Environments (VSLEs) add a further 'real-world' quality to role-plays. Using several examples of VSLEs created to underpin courses in management and negotiations, this paper seeks to explore their effectiveness in providing a more real-world environment in which participants engage in role-play activities in common 'safe' environments and develop their knowledge and skills beyond the 'known' domain of their existing practice.

Keywords: role-play; virtual situated learning environments; student centered; action based

Introduction

In the global workplace in which knowledge (both explicit and tacit) is the competitive advantage for individuals, businesses, governments and organisations it is incumbent upon universities to provide educational environments for learners that enable them to acquire skills to continually add to their existing body of knowledge. Brown (1999) explains the real formula for success in a knowledge economy as being continuous learning to see and do things differently.

In applying this to formal education, Biggs (2003) argues that there is need to extend educational opportunities beyond the simply transmission of known theories, practices and discipline specific knowledge:

when the basic bodies of knowledge and knowledge relating to professional practice, are changing as rapidly as they are, it no longer makes sense to teach students all those things they will need to know in their professional careers....Students should be taught how to learn, how to seek new information, how to utilize it and evaluate its importance, how to solve novel, non-textbook, professional problems. They will need metacognitive skills, and an abstract body of theory on which to deploy them, so that they can judge reflectively how successfully they are coping with novel problems, and how they may do better (Biggs 2003, p.90)

This requires the teacher to 'steward' knowledge, guiding, motivating and facilitating a learning environment such that what is created is a "context of learning which encourages learners actively to engage in subject matter" (Ramsden 1992, p.114). In this environment the learner becomes an active 'doer', presenting, analysing, questioning, judging, and combining ideas and information in order to solve problems and construct ways to develop knowledge. Subject matter becomes integrated across a broad range of disciplines, and learners work both individually and in teams to collect and assess information to solve problems. This results in a student centred learning environment in which the conceptual knowledge of both the teacher and the learners is shared, discussed, analysed and reflected upon (Laurillard 1994).

Such a learning environment is not only valuable for pre-work experienced students but also for practitioner learners. Role play is particularly valuable in providing opportunities for postgraduate practitioner learners to engage in learning outside their usual workplace. It meets the need recognised by management educators of providing learning opportunities that can assist managers to handle complexity in the workplace (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). It assists participants to reflect upon their practice in order to develop understanding and thus provides opportunities for what Schon (1987) calls reflection in action through which practitioners use problem solving, theory building to re-appraise situations.

Role play: Experiential learning in the online environment

Role play provides experiential learning opportunities that engage both the affective and cognitive domains of the learner (Bloom et al 1956). Through role play participants engage in acting out scenarios that are either open ended or are defined by situation. Crookwell et al (1987, p.155) describe role play as a “social or human activity in which participants ‘take on’ or ‘act out’ specific ‘roles’ often within a predefined social framework or situational blueprint. In role play each ‘actor’ develops a particular behaviour, adopts an approach and/or responds to a scenario on the basis of a combination of the role they are asked to play and their interpretation of the particular scenario with which they are presented. Role play can be designed as a subset of a simulation (Gredler 1994) or as a total simulated learning activity in which learners are presented with “...‘as if’ or ‘simulated’ actions and circumstances” (Yardley-Matwieczuk 1997, p.1).

In so doing role play provides practitioner learners with the opportunity to share their practitioner knowledge and, at the same time, extend this knowledge into new domain. An oft quoted suggestion for improving management/leadership and negotiation skills is to ‘put yourself in someone else’s shoes’. The reality is that it is very difficult to do so within the limits of one’s own professional practice. Role play provides the opportunity to ‘act out’ and experience situations from various perspectives and thus assists in reducing the gap between knowing what to do and actually doing, or bridging the ‘knowing doing gap’ (Pfeffer and Sutton 2000).

Digital developments have extended the potential of role play into the online learning environment. Although initial use of the digital environment learning tended to ape a more teacher centred approach (notes in the form of power points uploaded for student download), the potential for a more two way innovative use of the digital environment is evident. One such innovation approach is the design of role play for the online environment that provides opportunities for more realistic scenarios to be developed.

The value of role play in the online environment has been variously discussed. In their description of postgraduate students engaged in a role play of regulation in the Securities Market in Australia, Freeman and Capper (1999) identify two particular benefits from the deep learning that occurs as learners role play various parts. First, the anonymity of online role play provides an environment that reduced fear, anxiety and guilt that is sometimes associated with role play. They noted that students from non-English speaking backgrounds particularly valued the anonymity. Similarly Bell (2001) states that online role play provides academics with a level of comfort in which they can contribute without fear of ridicule. Freeman and Capper (1999, p.259) concluded that the anonymity enabled students to “challenge their own stereotypic views of gender, race and age as well as the content of securities market regulation”. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that participants do not misuse this anonymity. This requires the ‘teacher’ to have some degree of control over the environment, particularly in being able to identify and ‘block’ any disruptive persona’. Second, the asynchronicity of the online environment enables reflection on the response made by others and this leads to enhanced student learning. The asynchronicity also assists the ‘teacher’ to control (and block) unacceptable contributions.

Naidu, Ip and Linser (2000) discuss an extension of online role play into a web based dynamic goal based role play simulation in which learners assume a role associated with a mission or task (goal). This simulation, they claim, offers participants the opportunity to experiment with different responses in various situations. In so doing the learner not only learns in context but also is also able to make mistakes without serious consequences. Further depth is provided by Virtual Situated Learning Environments (VSLEs) in which the practitioner learner becomes a role player of a ‘virtual’ situation that has been designed as an ‘atypical’ environment.

Virtual situated learning environments and role play in the digital environment

While some argue the advantages of simulated learning environments, others argue that learning requires real world environments (through work integrated learning or action based learning) rather than simulated learning environments. Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989 p.2) argue that there is a “symbiotic relationship between knowledge and the situation in which it is produced...[and thus students need to].... acquire, develop, and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity” (Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989, p.10). This results in learning that requires immersion in real situations, in which meaning and purpose are socially constructed, rather than in formal learning environments that make it difficult for students to make sense of real world activities.

Stein (1998, p.1), on the other hand, argues that while learning should be grounded in the actions of everyday situations it is possible, especially in an adult classroom, to create learning environments in which participants can experience the complexity and ambiguity of learning in the real world by engaging as actors in situations that are robust and complex. This can be achieved through the design of 'Situated Learning Environments' (SLEs) in which the learner can experience 'real world' challenges that simulate real world situations.

SLEs create a common simulated environment in which the learner can participate in a broad range of either closed or open ended challenges (Jones & McCann 2004; Jones & McCann 2005). By providing this common environment learners can normalise their experiences in relatively controlled conditions, and thus provide consistency in their learning experience and assessment, while at the same time recognising that every response will be different. This allows all participants to analyse and reflect upon the various stances adopted by participants. Participants can be asked to adopt different responses over the course of their learning and thus 'experience' challenges from different perspectives and personas. At the same time the role of the academic in facilitating the link between theoretical knowledge (know what) and real life experience (know how) is enhanced (Jones 2006).

The online environment provides the opportunity to add a further level of realism by the design and use of Virtual Situated Learning Environment (VSLE). Reeves (1993) argues that a well designed multimedia environment can be used to provide a wealth of learning support activities through the design of situated learning environments. Building on this, Reeves, Herrington and Oliver (2002) argue that online situated learning environments can add to the authenticity of a face to face learning environment by enabling learners to:

move freely around the resources provided rather than move in a linear fashion that may not ape the complexities of real life. Problems presented to students can use the full capacities of the technology to present situations and scenarios in video clips, texts links and images to give meaning and purpose to the students' endeavours, and to provide motivation to complete the task (Reeves, Herrington & Oliver 2002, p.566)

The analytical framework they suggest should be used when designing online situated environments includes the need to: have real world relevance, include ill defined complex tasks which learners can define from different perspectives using a variety of resources, provide opportunities to collaborate, involve and reflect on various beliefs and values, extend beyond a single domain and enable seamless and integrated assessment to allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome and, finally, are polished products valued in their own right rather than as preparation for something else (Reeves, Herrington & Oliver p.565). VSLEs do provide such an environment (Jones 2006).

It is perhaps surprising that despite the various separate research into role play, simulated learning and situated learning environments there has been little written on the link between these concepts. This gap is particularly important when considering the possibilities created by the digital environment. This may be partly explained by the definition of virtual companies as part of reality in which students develop real products and services on behalf of real customers (Westera, Sloep & Gerrisen 1999). Those who use this definition argue that virtual companies differ from role play in their openness compared to the closed system characteristic of many self contained business simulations.

This paper presents examples of VSLEs that, although not existing as part of reality, do engage practitioner learners in role play activities that are open ended. They thus bridge the gap between traditional role play and virtual organisations by providing a real world environment in which participants engage in role play involving open ended complex problem solving. The VSLE provides an additional advantage of engage practitioner learners in role play activities in common 'safe' environments that assist them to develop their knowledge beyond their existing practice.

Research methodology

The question posed for this research was: Can VSLEs provide a more real world learning environment in which students use role play to develop knowledge and skills beyond the known domain of their existing practice. Given the exploratory nature of this research an Action Research methodology was chosen. As both the designer of the new learning environment, and the practitioner introducing and testing its validity, I used Dick's (1992-3) definition of action research as a combination of action to bring about change and research to increase understanding of the effects of the change.

The Courses for which the VSLEs discussed in this paper were designed are all offered at the postgraduate level in which there is a prerequisite of between 3-5 years work experience. They include courses in Negotiation Skills, Employment Relations, and Knowledge Management (Appendix 1). The courses are designed according to a capability development map, particularly in decision making, strategy development, negotiation and resource management. Courses are offered on – campus with a combination of weekly three hour sessions, intensive workshops and the online role play activities associated with the VSLEs. Students are experienced Human Resource Management practitioners and Managers enrolled part time. Class sizes varied over the five years from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 50.

The research began with my introduction of the first iteration of the online version of the SLE in 2001 and continued each year to 2006 (10 iterations in total). Each year, as the VSLE was adapted to take into account student feedback and ensure its contemporary relevance, information was collected from participating students, peers and self through personal reflections and from data recorded on the Blackboard functions used for the online role-play. To ensure that student contribution of information for assessment and research purposes was completed separated, student informed consent via ‘permission to reference forms’ was obtained once they had completed the course. Data on student online contributions was collected and sorted using online functions that sort contributions by name, date and thread).

Cases

The VSLEs are ‘virtual’ in two senses, they are designed rather than actual organisations and they are accessible in the digital (virtual) environment. The role-play activities that occur within the VSLEs are designed to engage practitioner-learners in ‘real-life’ professional practice activities that they are likely to face. New activities are continually being developed to reflect contemporary situations. Professional practice activities include negotiations of employment policies and practices, discussion and agreement of implementation processes for new organisational policies, values and strategies, development of public relations material. Assessment of knowledge and skills developed through the role-play is designed to encourage personal and group reflection on the interactions through learning journals and reflection papers. There is a hurdle activity of participants making a minimum of 2 contributions to the discussion associated with each role-play activity, with graded assessment made on demonstration of the exploration of theoretical principles in practice.

Three VSLEs form the context for this research: a Restaurant Company (Delicate Dining), a Hotel and Restaurant complex (Fibco) and a Manufacturing plant (Renovators Dream). The first-named VSLE (Delicate Dining) consists of a chain of outlets in which each learner participates as either a manager/lessee or employee (chef, kitchen hand, waiting staff, bar staff). The second VSLE is a globally-based, American-owned Hotel and Restaurant complex that has diversified into raw material (foodstuffs) and travel. Learners participate as managers and employees in the various country-based facilities in role-plays aimed to explore cross cultural issues and challenges. The third VSLE (Renovators Dream) is an Australian owned manufacturing company that has a factory in China. Learners participate as Managers, Specialists and process worker in role-play activities designed to explore work design principles. In each case the VSLE provides information on the organisations strategic plan and vision cost and organisational structure and human resources.

The VSLEs are accessible through a web-interface in the form of a company website that has the ‘look and feel’ (or graphics and navigation) of the real company website. The website is accessible from within the University online system (Blackboard) using a protected student login. This presents a ‘real-world’ quality to the role-play but at the same time provides the security required to protect students from external ‘predators’ by providing a barrier between the university online learning system and the www. This also enables the academic as moderator to ‘control’ discussion to prevent adverse behaviour such as discrimination, harassment, and racism and to ensure that equity principles are maintained. The academic, as instructor, can add contributions and remove participants).

The website provides participants with information about the background on the Company (ownership, structure, business strategy, past performance, costs, geography, management, workforce, working conditions). Common information relevant to the particular role-play exercise is also provided through the Blackboard.

The particular experiential role-play activities are designed to occur over a finite period (usually a week) as part of a ‘blended’ rather than totally online environment. Web-tools that enable role-play participants

are used to place participants in online Discussion groups within which they discuss or negotiate a particular scenario. Some role-play participants may have access to more than one discussion group (for example a participant may have access to the discussion group that includes employees from one particular part of the company and may also access to a 'management' or 'employee' discussion group.

Role details are emailed to staff prior to the role-play activity. This adds a further element of reality as it separates participants from the known personality of classmates to the unknown of the role-play character. These details include contemporary issues facing the organization and the role-player. The information requires a significant degree of interpretation by the role-play participants who have to define the task with the knowledge that there is no 'right' approach. This presents open-ended complex environment in which participants can more realistically adopt the 'role' they have been assigned using their interpretative skills.

Role-play participants are able to access all relevant information at the start of the week and may join the negotiation at any time during the week, with the normal face-to-face session replaced by the role-play. The online role-play is generally followed by an intensive (full day) session during which face-to-face role-play may continue, and/or progress to another stage and time can be allocated to discuss various learning that occurred during the role-play. This format has been chosen because it provides a reasonable time over which a relatively small issue may be discussed, negotiated, problem-solved to either a conclusion or without a face-to-face element and ensures that participants maintain a level of interest. It enables time-stressed practitioners to participate at a time that is convenient to them and according to any time zone in which they may be working.

Findings

Data collected from the online contributions has consistently shown that student online contributions are generally significantly higher than the minimum required for assessment purposes. Activity is generally spread over the week allocated to the activity, with initial activity during the weekend following the emailing and posting of specific information and a surge of activity in the 3 hour allocated period that replaces the face to face class. The only experience when I, as moderator, had to encourage participation was in one semester when the role play was timed over a month rather than the usual week.

Participant reflection on the extent of activity included comments like "the extent of activity was 'staggering' especially for someone who had to catch up in the evening having been travelling during the week". Another participant reflected, "the online communication became addictive". Yet another described the participation as "having the potential to be quite infectious if time and access were unbounded". One participant even complained of the "noise factor caused by the plethora of messages".

The next section assesses the ability of the VSLE to add value to role play in terms of providing real world relevance to develop skills and knowledge that will assist in both current and future practice

Real world relevance

The first indication that the role play experience in the VSLE provides real world relevance is the degree to which participants realistically adopt the roles they had been assigned. In several instances the late entry of one player to the role play led to incorrect assumptions of the reason for their non-contribution that, in turn, affected the tenor of the role play with participants becoming less tolerant and more confrontational. One participant stated that they interpreted the early non-contribution as "deliberate avoidance" and in response they adopted "a sceptical approach to the possibility of a mutual gain negotiated solution".

Many participants reflected that they were surprised by the extent to which they became involved in the role play. One participant stated, "I found the whole experience quite engrossing and it enabled me to rapidly immerse myself in the scenario". Another found that the gap between the role play and real life interactions was reduced "we were well developed in our roles and this really carried over into the face to face interactions. This made things more meaningful for me as I had already absorbed the role and the persona of my character...and reflecting on this with the group helped when dealing with the group dynamics and tension"

Other participants reflected that not only did they adopt a realistic role when they were actually participating in the role play, but it also spilled over into time they had not devoted for the exercise. One stated "communicating online became addictive and I found myself leaving the website on all day and

kept constantly checking responses”, while another reflected, “participation had the potential to be quite infectious if time and access were unbounded”

The reality of the role play was further enhanced by the extent to which participants used their experiences to interpret and act out the role play. One participant reflected, “participants brought with them something of themselves, their tacit knowledge, and together we gained many perspectives instead of the limited number each of us or a group much smaller may be able to gain”.

The extent to which participants realistically adopted their roles in the situated environment in which they were placed actually resulted in the need to build into the activity a full day intensive face to face session in order to enable participants to finalise any unfinished issues and to engage in debrief of the participants from their roles. For example, in a recent iteration, one of the participants misinterpreted the role he was asked to play and this resulted in the group in which he was participating being unable to reach a resolution to the particular situation. When this was discussed during the face to face debrief it resulted in other members of this group expressing their dismay at feeling betrayed and fooled. As the particular participant was not present at the face to face session it was necessary to continue to debrief the group outside this session. In addition this session has been valuable in encouraging reflection not only on the role play, but also on the experience of the online environment (discussed below).

Knowledge developed

Participants developed an extensive amount of knowledge that went beyond the explicit discipline knowledge learnt in the face to face class as it called upon participants using their tacit knowledge to adopt the role they were assigned. This enabled the opportunity to test theories against practice but also the opportunity to reflect upon their existing practice. One participant reflected, “It was a good experience to learn something you cannot find in books. Sharing between people is a key factor to make knowledge flow and growth”

Participants identified the development of their critical analytical capabilities stemming from the opportunity to read the written comments of others, to reflect on the different points of view and thus to gain an understand of the many different interpretations there can be. One participant reflected “I was able to see the contradictory views of my colleagues and their justification of them. This led me to further understand the ethical codes which they adhered to”. Another participant reflected, “I have achieved what I hoped to gain and more, in that the practical aspects mixed with the theoretical teaching provided for active learning and most importantly successful application in the workplace”.

Change to professional practice

Participants reflected on how the experience provided them with a new perspective on their past practice. One participant reflected on “the extent to which I realised I use my physical presence in face to face negotiation was astonishing”.

An initially unexpected learning resulted from the realisation of the extent to which the www has changed practice. Reflection on the experience varied from recognition of the previously unconscious influence of email on current practice to the extent of new skills required to work in the digital environment. One participant reflected that they had not consciously considered that email is “a permanent written record of discussions’ and the effect this may have on practice. Another participant reflected that they were acutely aware that comments made online were like a ‘time capsule that could hold the writer to ransom at any time in the future’.

Others reflected on how the online environment changed the skills that are they require if relationships are to be built and maintained in both the face to face and digital environment. One participant reflected, “the years of experience gained in face to face corporate negotiations meant little when faced with the unfamiliar situation on an unfamiliar medium”. Another participant identified the importance of face to face negotiations for ‘gauging personality changes and other visual and auditory cues, that are lost in the online environment’. This was reiterated by another who stated that “I was unable to develop relationships - I was negotiating with strangers with uncertain agendas’ and assumption”, and another “I had underestimated how much information is obtained through visual and oral cues”. However another stated that they felt the online environment assisted relationship building, “I found it was a good way of helping to rapidly develop relationships...the online experience accelerated our group cohesion”.

Finally, the power of the online environment to change the nature of knowledge flows was commented on. Many participants reflected on the potential loss of control as information becomes freely shared between the participants. One participant reflected on the plethora of information that enabled each individual to participate and “negated positional advantage that can come from venue, stature, theatrical antics, seating arrangements, hierarchical structures and historical scenarios”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the research is limited by its exploratory nature within one university setting, the experience and reflections of a number of different groups of practitioner learners over a period of five years demonstrate the value of VSLEs in providing real world environments as the basis for practice based learning. This is summarised in the reflection of one participant “My participation in these courses has increased my self awareness and challenged my thoughts on a lot of issues. I have gained different perspectives and a heightened awareness of issues, from listening to other class members that have entirely different experiences in various work environments across a number of countries”. The ability for students to link virtually, at any time, in asynchronous role play presents significant opportunities to link students globally. This presents new opportunities for students to experience the effect of different cultural influences upon professional practice. Further exploration of role play in VSLEs is required to identify how these environments may be used to extend experiences of real world work challenges both within university learning environments and as partnership learning opportunities between university and organisations.

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Appendix A: Negotiation and mediation skills

Capability map	VSLE	Activity	Assessment
Recognise the importance of planning for a successful negotiation outcome	Delicate dining 	Online mapping and negotiation exercise related to VSLE	Contribution to online discourse
Discriminate between win-lose and win-win negotiation outcomes		SLE role-play	Learning Journal
Choose appropriate strategies and tactics for differing negotiation situations		VSLE role-play	Online participation
Plan and use tactics appropriate for negotiating in groups		VSLE role-play	Reflection Learning Journal
Plan and implement appropriate styles of negotiations for differing cultural contexts		Design and role-play SLE	Reflection on relationship between design and implementation Learning Journal
Plan and implement appropriate tactics for technology assisted negotiation environments		VSLE role-play	Online participation Reflection on role-play negotiation Learning Journal

Appendix B: Employment relations in a global context

Capability map	VSLE Fibco	Activity	Assessment
Diagnose salient issues for the changing work environment in a complex and paradoxical global business environment		SLE (F2F)-role-play - work practices and social justice issues in a global world	Analysis and reflection on role-play activities - Learning Journal
Frame judgements and make decisions concerning social justice, equity and sustainability		VSLE role-play - online	Online participation
Identify and design employment relations strategies to encourage collaboration and team work (national and international)		VSLE role-play - online: changing nature of workforce	Online role-play analysis of online environment Learning Journal
Plan employment relations strategies appropriate for various cultural situations		VSLE role-play - cross-country link	Reflection of online role-play - Learning Journal
Recognise challenges for employment relations in a technologically assisted work environment		VSLE as a new environment	Online participation Overall reflection on role-plays

Appendix C: Knowledge management

Capability map	VSLE	Activity	Assessment
Diagnose salient features of the knowledge era	Renovators dream 	SLE: Design KM Consultancy	Analysis and reflection on role-play activities- Learning Journal
Frame judgements and make decisions about managing and leading change appropriate for a knowledge era –		VSLE role-play - online: values and meaning	Online participation
Make culturally appropriate decisions about managing knowledge that are economically and socially viable		VSLE: Culture and relationships	Online role-play: analysis of online environment – Learning Journal
Recognise the opportunities created by a Value Network approach		VSLE: Developing Networks	Online role play: contribution
Discriminate between options for maximising knowledge development and sharing		VSLE: Knowledge Sharing-Virtual CoPs	Reflection of online role-play– Learning Journal
Recognise opportunities and challenges for sharing knowledge through the virtual environment		VSLE: Sustainability	Online participation Overall reflection on role-plays

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