

Maintaining the momentum throughout *The Campaign*: Role-play in political communication

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Abstract

The Campaign is an online simulation of an election campaign in which students role-play as journalists and political advisers. Maintaining the momentum throughout the role-play is a challenge in an online environment. In the case of The Campaign, the momentum is maintained as a result of the tight integration of events in the role-play, student activities, assessment tasks, skills-based mini-workshops, in the lecture topics and reading tasks. Students indicated The Campaign was 'fun' and 'engaging' and gave them a break from traditional essay writing. They enjoyed the problem solving aspects. It was useful in forging productive working relationships between themselves and other students, which also helped them to feel part of the academic community. Momentum was achieved through tight integration of tasks and material.

Keywords

online role-play, political campaigns, media and communication

Sustaining a role-play online

Role-play is a method of teaching and learning with a long tradition in primary, secondary and tertiary education settings. While there are many different forms of educational role-plays, they all revolve around a 'real life' problem that is simulated in order to engage students in its solution (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999). Although taking educational role-play into an electronic environment is a relatively new idea, as soon as technologies have become widely available they have been used for this purpose. At the University of Melbourne online role-plays were used in teaching and learning even before the introduction of the World Wide Web. Ramsden (1992) reports on the development of an email-based role-play around the politics of Middle East by Dr Andrew Vincent in the Department of Political Science. Following on from this work, Ip, Linser and Naidu (2001) and Ip and Morrison (2001) describe the development of a web-based role-play simulation system for the purpose of supporting goal-based scenarios. Riddle and Davies (1998) describe the development of a different web-based role-play system, designed to enable final year law students to learn about procedures and ethics relating to the handling of legal cases.

Mock elections involving role-play activities have been used to promote experiential learning (Kathlene & Choate, 1996) and to increase students' active engagement with the topic (Smith & Boyer, 1996; Shellman, 2001). These and many other role-play simulations have been conducted in the classroom without the use of computer-mediated communication. However, role-plays that are conducted online can take advantage of the features that current communications technologies afford. Harasim et al (1995) describe a wide range of ways that online communications can be used in educational settings, arguing that there are many advantages, in particular with regard to collaboration between students. Teles (1993) and Waugh and Rath (1995) argue that online communication can mediate student-teacher and student-student discourse to enhance knowledge building and mentorship ('cognitive apprenticeship' or 'tele-apprenticeship').

In the online environment, the following questions arise: How is it possible to make learning 'real' through the use of a virtual learning environment? How do we keep momentum going in the predominantly online learning environment where physical cues and interactions are not present? *The Campaign* has addressed both of these questions.

The Campaign

The Campaign is an online simulation of an election campaign in which students role-play as journalists and political advisers. It is an integral assessed component of the subject *Political Communication*. Students are divided into two groups: political advisers in a campaign team, and journalists covering the campaign. Initially, each student is given a 'pair' or 'contact' on the opposite team. It is the political adviser's job to try to influence their journalist's reporting. It is the journalist's job to get behind the 'spin' and report the campaign. This relationship is not only highly interactive but also, as in the 'real world', both cooperative and competitive. Students do not have to stick to their pair and so a political adviser may try and court several journalists at the same time. A number of unannounced events occur in the online campaign simulation that students have to consider in their role-play behaviour. There are key assessment tasks that the students have to complete.

The subject is a part of a coursework masters degree in media and communications. Postgraduate students in the Media and Communications program come from diverse countries, have experience of different media systems and many are working, or aim to pursue careers, in media and related cultural industries. It is necessary to provide them with appropriate experiences that help them to gain a deep understanding of the relationship between media and political processes and give them some first-hand experience of how communication operates within and across various political contexts.

Without this project, the subject would be taught using the traditional method of lectures and seminars, and assessment would take the form of written assignments. With the project, the subject combines traditional lectures and seminars with the online simulation (running from Weeks 2 to 9 of the semester) and mini-workshops on key skills and concepts that correspond with the work the students are doing in the role-play simulation (see below). *The Campaign* allows students to explore the key issues related to political communication and journalism production. The central focus of *The Campaign* is to explore these issues by focusing on the relationship between journalists and political advisers, and to allow a more authentic way to examine the strategies used by political actors to communicate in a political campaign. Being active participants in this simulated political campaign means that students have to examine a range of possible options and make a series of key decisions. By becoming part of the action, they are in a position to learn the processes and strategies involved. This is particularly valuable because political communication is about strategy and choice; different actors use different strategies to try to achieve their aims. The students must also react to the strategic moves of others. Learning in a simulation lets them make these strategic calculations and miscalculations, and then reflect and report on the process.

The simulation runs for eight weeks — it imitates a four-week campaign period so that two online weeks equals one real week of a typical election campaign. The elongated online time period gives students time to communicate with each other, and to complete key assessment tasks. During Weeks 2–9, the students use the simulation outside of class time but there is also some seminar time used as a mini-workshop on skills development so students can work on a key issue or skill that is relevant to their work in the role-play simulation. In Week 9, one hour of the face-to-face seminar is devoted to conducting a final 'live' press conference, where advisers brief the candidate and journalists question her. At the end of the role-play period, the students have built up a small portfolio of work consisting of items such as press releases, news articles, campaign itineraries, and so on, which are assessed.

The student roles

Each student is allocated a role as either an adviser or as a journalist on the system. When students log in, *The Campaign* home page shows a picture of the campaign headquarters (a terrace house), and an image of a newspaper office. Only advisers can enter the campaign HQ and only journalists can enter the newspaper office. When they enter, they have access to links to a diary page that contains a to-do list of activities that must be completed for that week of the campaign. These activities and tasks are different for advisers and journalists. Typical activities might include: listening to a mock radio broadcast; reading a news article; reading a note from the boss (candidate or newspaper editor); writing a plan for the campaign launch or writing a newspaper article; communicating with a journalist or adviser (as appropriate). Each task is ticked off as the student completes it. The students have strict deadlines for each task, as in a real work setting. The four virtual weeks of activities (occupying 8 actual weeks) are time-released sequentially, allowing for unexpected events to take place during the campaign period.

At the end of each campaign week, a question is posted in the to-do list, and the students have to reflect on the key issues and themes that have arisen in their work over the past week. A number of different events occur throughout the simulation, including some are surprise events, leading to difficult ethical dilemmas. They are designed to challenge the students in many different ways, calling upon different skills and conceptual abilities. As advisers or journalists, students have their own specific tools and resources, including reference lists for research material and links to websites with more information. Advisers and journalists have different work items to complete. This could range from writing a press release (for advisers) to writing a newspaper article (for journalists). These are key assessment tasks and are called 'folio tasks' in the role-play simulation as they end up in each student's 'work folio'. At the end of the simulation, students have a completed folio of work that has been submitted online.

There are a series of audio and video clips contained in *The Campaign*. These provide mock radio and television reports throughout the campaign. As well as assisting with the establishment of an authentic context and experience for the campaign, these reports are a device by which unexpected events can be announced. How will the political advisers react to a sudden outbreak of a bush fire that captures all of the headlines and media in the middle of the campaign? A 'live' press conference is the culmination of the campaign. The press conference class also acts as a debriefing session so that students can analyse the role-play in a constructive manner. Other devices are used too, such as the 'article of the week' to showcase the best of student work.

Maintaining the momentum throughout the role-play

Maintaining the momentum throughout the role-play is a challenge in this predominantly online environment. In the case of *The Campaign*, the momentum is maintained as a result of the tight integration of events in the role-play, student activities, assessment tasks, skills-based mini-workshops, in the lecture and reading tasks. A simplified version of this integrated scheme is shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: Relationship between tasks and events in *The Campaign's* virtual weeks

Week	Writing tasks		Simulation events
	Advisers	Journalists	
1	<i>Campaign itinerary</i>	<i>1st news article</i>	Establishing journalist–political adviser relations
	<i>Press release</i>	<i>2nd news article</i>	
	<i>Forum question</i>	<i>Forum question</i>	
2	<i>Plan for campaign launch</i>	<i>3rd news article</i>	The Campaign launch. Issue: reporting on policy or personality?
	<i>Forum question</i>	<i>Forum question</i>	
3	<i>Plan for media stunt</i>	<i>Journalism techniques report</i>	National disaster — campaign receives no media coverage. A media 'stunt'.
	<i>Damage control strategies</i>	<i>4th news article or analysis piece</i>	
	<i>Forum question</i>	<i>Forum question</i>	
4	<i>Online press conference (briefing of candidate)</i>	<i>Online press conference</i>	Sex scandal breaks. Preparing for the press conference.
	<i>Victory or concession speech</i>	<i>5th (campaign wrap-up) article</i>	
	<i>Forum question</i>	<i>Forum question</i>	

The role-play simulation lasts from Week 2 to Week 9 of a 12-week semester. Interspersed with the tabulated tasks and events are a series of lectures and reading topics, and some skills-based mini-workshops. The mini-workshops are centred around practical skills associated with the two main roles: writing press releases, writing news articles, establishing effective working relations, evaluating news coverage, media stunts and promotion, journalism techniques, damage control strategies, and speech-writing.

Conclusions

So, if momentum was achieved through tight integration of tasks and material, what about engagement? Feedback was obtained from both the students and the lecturer. Students indicated they enjoyed using *The Campaign* and that it helped them ‘learn by doing’ and to link theory to practice. They said it was ‘fun’ and ‘engaging’ and gave them a break from traditional essay writing, which they appreciated. They enjoyed the problem solving aspect of *The Campaign* and having to think through realistic possibilities for action. They said it encouraged them to use resources in a way they would not normally do, and to seek out different sources. Interestingly, the students said it was useful in forging productive working relationships between themselves and other students, which also helped them to feel part of the academic (and subject-specific) community. The forum questions at the end of each week helped them to reflect on their actions.

The lecturer could not believe how much work some of the students put into their assessment tasks such as political speeches and media releases. Some were incredibly detailed and well thought out. There was some exceptional and really creative work submitted that the lecturer would not have seen in a normal essay submission. The lecturer also made the following observations that indicate that she too was drawn into the role-play in a more engaging fashion:

I was pleasantly surprised by how much students entered into the role-playing. I was concerned they might think it ‘babyish’ to take on roles etc but they were actually really enthusiastic. Some really relished the Machiavellian chance to be a ‘spin doctor’, and others became investigative journalists to rival Woodward and Bernstein! It was, as everyone warned me, more work than I expected for the subject coordinator, but I think it was well worth it. I enjoyed it as much as the students and worked cooperatively with them (role-playing as the journalists’ editor and the advisors’ candidate) in a way that broke down some of the traditional student–teacher barriers. There was less distance and formality and more collegiality — which is appropriate for postgraduate students. We felt like part of a team. It helped me to get to know the students better and to see them learning in a more immediate way than I would normally.

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