

An experience with conducting a role-play in decision making for a food and nutrition policy course

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In 2005 post-graduate students participated in an online role-play in a distance Masters in Public Health course, *Food and Nutrition Policy Studies*, at the University of New South Wales. A major course outcome is for students to appreciate the political dimensions of policy formulation and to understand that it is not just a matter of researching and analysing relatively objective food and nutrition data. The strategy we chose to achieve this was a two-week online role-play, using a WebCT discussion group, in which students were assigned roles as members of an inter-sectoral national Food Policy Planning Committee. This was embedded in a realistic case study, which forms the backbone of the 14-week course. The online environment offered these distance students a real opportunity to learn about the complexity of policy negotiation. We reflect on the factors that appear to have contributed towards the success of this strategy.

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Introduction

Food and Nutrition Policy Studies is a fully distance course in the Masters in Public Health (MPH) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). In brief, the course introduces students to a staged model of food and nutrition policy development. The model comes alive for them when they use it to analyse the food and nutrition situation in a hypothetical community (the 'Pacifica' case study). Having practised the steps of the model with the case study, their assessment task is to apply the same model in developing a food and nutrition policy for a real community that they have selected themselves.

An important outcome of the course is exploring the complex negotiations that arise as players with different sectional interests engage in the process of policy development. Previously we had required students to video- or audio-record an oral defence of their written policy, as if they were presenting it to a meeting of the stakeholders. While this approach was effective for students who were involved in the area of food and nutrition interventions, it was much less effective and a source of angst for others with no background in the area.

With the introduction of WebCT, it was possible to make the course more interactive. Previously it was only available in paper-based format, supported by electronic interactions for administrative purposes. In 2005, students were offered the opportunity to participate in an on-line role-play of policy development, as an alternative to the oral defence assignment. We reasoned that participation in the actual negotiations would give the students an appreciation of the complexity of the politics of food and nutrition. We evaluated their experience by monitoring online interactions and from students' written reflections on how participation in the role-play contributed to their learning.

Development of the role-play

Use of existing resources

The idea for the online role-play arose from the case study around which the course is structured, which contains a detailed description of a hypothetical country, 'Pacifica.' Based on the authors' work-experience in the Pacific, the case study contains realistic demographic data and descriptions, and

includes information on stakeholders and their perspectives. We had not envisaged using a role-play when we first wrote the case study, as the students were very widely dispersed and the course is fully distance, but when WebCT provided the opportunity for online interactions, Pacifica provided a good basis for students to make an easy transition from merely reading about stakeholder perspectives to acting them out in the role-play.

Role-play outline

Five students volunteered to participate. Each was assigned to represent a different sectional interest on the Pacifica Food and Nutrition Policy Planning Committee. The 'Planning Committee' had two main tasks. They were to participate in a series of Committee meetings in which they were to (a) prioritise six food-related health outcomes and then (b) propose strategies to achieve the top priority outcome. The health outcomes were provided to the Committee prior to the role-play commencing.

Instructions were clear and specific. Pacifica set the context of the task and the Departmental/Sectional perspective of each Committee member. This information was available to all players. We also supplied brief character notes by private email for each role, which included personal perspectives, alliances or antagonisms, and other relevant information. In this way each role had a clearly defined public and private persona but retained a certain amount of liberty for improvisation in the subsequent interactions.

There were few role-play rules except that the interactions should simulate a formal face-to-face meeting. Each Committee member had to contribute to the discussions and respond to other people's contributions. They were free to agree or disagree with each other but always had to justify their point of view. One member was designated to chair the meetings.

Two weeks were allocated for the Committee to complete the tasks. Participants then disengaged from their roles and wrote a reflection on their own learning during the exercise.

Use of WebCT

We set up a WebCT discussion group with access limited to the role-play participants. We chose asynchronous discussion, even though it is a less realistic simulation of a meeting than the WebCT chat or voice options, because the students were dispersed across several time zones. We also sought well-considered responses, which are less likely with real-time interactions.

The moderator posted general instructions for conducting the role-play, and invited the Chair to open the meeting. During the role-play the moderator acted mainly as facilitator and not as a stakeholder or Committee member. Interventions were primarily to encourage contributions from participants early in the role-play, and no contributions were made to the substance of the discussions.

Contributions were initially slower than we anticipated. On reflection, we believe that participants required extra time to re-read the Pacifica notes and to prepare themselves for their roles. It took the full two weeks to achieve the two tasks. Participants (more or less) maintained their roles for the duration. The pattern of contributions suggested two main peaks of activity relating to the main tasks. Participants responded to each others' comments, and their contributions provided evidence that they were acting in their publicly-stated Departmental/Sectional position, with some aspects of their private allegiances. There was also evidence of some improvisation.

Debriefing and reflecting on the learning process

Participants were supplied with guidelines to assist them to reflect individually on the successes and failures of the group in getting the tasks completed. Their responses suggest that the role-play had been a valuable learning experience.

A number of the reflections related to an understanding of the political process:

'People often complain how slow government works but now I have a better idea of why'
'It is difficult to get different people from different groups to agree. Many compromises must be made'
'Collaboration between different divisions is easy to state but (it is) difficult to obtain an agreement that suits all'
'People also own the policy if they have been involved in the development of it'

Other reflections articulated more personal thoughts on their learning from the process:

'I now realise how hard it is to make policies, especially one everyone will be happy with'
'People usually have a reason for taking a position' 'I toed my line first, but then I compromised to an extent'
'Sometimes I even found the process frustrating when no decisions were made'

There were few reflective comments about the role-play as a learning medium or about the on-line process. One participant found that

'being online made it harder than it would have had it been in person. You can't ask questions at the time and expand if necessary. You also have to wait for people to reply to questions posed online.'

We did not specifically ask them to reflect on these aspects; rather we asked them to reflect on what they had learned about the process of policy food and nutrition policy development.

Discussion

Role-play is not a new teaching method. When the issues considered are realistic, role-play enables students to have a more authentic experience of the constraints and pressures than would be possible using more conventional teaching strategies (van Ments, 1994). In face-to-face classes some students find the acting required of them detracts from the value of the learning experience. On-line role-play does not require acting, offers anonymity and allows more time to concentrate on constructing considered responses (Spears, 2002).

Participants were informed at the beginning that the moderator would take a minor role in the process, primarily as facilitator and observer but that she would intervene if circumstances warranted it. They were also informed that they could request additional information if they thought it necessary, but none did. The facilitator did intervene successfully on several occasions to encourage slow responders to contribute.

Hedberg (2002) considers role-play to be an effective strategy when the learning task is to explore the perspectives and issues surrounding a process. The elements that contribute to a successful role-play are: realism, participants having researched the topic, roles in which some characteristics are public and some are known only to the player and the moderator, a specified length (ideally about two weeks), a clear outcome, participant anonymity, and following the role-play, a process of participant reflection on the group's success or failure to complete the task.

We evaluated our role-play against Hedberg's elements. With regard to realism, the Policy Committee meeting modeled a formal work meeting surprisingly well and provided a reasonably authentic experience of the difficulty of policy negotiation. This was, after all, the point of the exercise. We acknowledge that a real time chat might have been more realistic but working across different time zones made it impractical. From our perspective, as course designers, the role-play was more effective than previous strategies in helping students to understand policy development.

In terms of knowledge of the topic, all students were working from the same knowledge base, the Pacifica case study. They did not explicitly contract with the moderator, as Hedberg suggests, in order to define their characters. The public persona was defined by the case study and known to everyone; some additional aspects of the private persona were provided by the moderator. Within these boundaries, participants, as postgraduate students, were considered to be adult learners and given a certain degree of freedom as to how they chose to develop their character. We feel that the flexibility of this approach

allowed for character development as the role-play proceeded and added realism. For the most part, participants remained faithful to the role and it was not necessary for the moderator to intervene.

Hedberg (2002) suggested that a simple role-play should have one week preparation, one for the actual interaction and one for debriefing and reflection. We allowed two weeks, and this appears to have been just sufficient for preparation and interaction; although more time may be needed to accommodate students from different time zones. We did not allow sufficient time for reflection. van Ments (1994) has stated that the debriefing session is the most essential component of conducting a role-play. The session enables reflection on both the process and product; it allows meaning to be clarified and reinforces the lessons learned. Participants wrote individual reflections, but a group reflective discussion on the experience would have been beneficial for the participants and for us. Next time, we will pay more attention to the three perspectives identified by Ip et al. (2002), i.e., students' own perspective revealed through reflection, the role/character perspective, and the perspective of an observer in which the process itself is analysed. The importance of the debriefing process is illustrated by a comparable number of contributions posted during the debriefing as during the role-play itself (Barron, 2003).

Our role-play required a clear outcome. This was well understood and valued by the participants as it was assessed. The tasks assigned to the Committee were concrete and deceptively small and simple. Our estimate that two tasks would be sufficient turned out to be realistic. If this had turned out not to be the case, it would have been easy to set additional, clearly defined tasks.

Ideally participants in a role-play refer to each other by their character names, and Hedberg suggests a strategy to maintain the anonymity of participants by using the role name to sign on. We chose not to do this, as it would have meant going outside WebCT. In WebCT each contribution appeared with the students' real name as there is no option to assign an alias. We circumvented this problem by getting students to use their role title as the subject. Although this was not an ideal solution, participants did not mention lack of anonymity as a constraint.

This role-play was particularly well suited to achieving the course outcome. It appears to have provided an appropriate simulation of the kind of issues that face decision makers in developing a food and nutrition policy. In future courses, we intend to have several concurrent "Committees", and it is likely that some of these will select different priorities and strategies. Such a situation could open up the opportunity to deepen learning through participation in a final discussion across the groups about the process that led each to different conclusions.

Conclusion

This first run of an on-line role-play appears to have been successful for a number of reasons. The course already had a detailed case study that lent itself to further development, so it was a reasonably small step for the designers to create the role-play and for students to identify with the roles. The role-play was an appropriate strategy for achieving an important course outcome, which was to explore perspectives and issues surrounding a process. The role-play was assessed, and so it was valued by the students. It was within students' and moderator's technical capability, because it used WebCT, with which UNSW staff and students are now familiar.

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