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Hold on, a simulation game without tech? Exploring the power of role play in experiential learning

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Emma Connor and Jingyang Ai

Introduction to the case

In business education, we frequently hear about business simulation games and role play. These tools use digital technology to create scenarios that help students improve their problem-solving skills in a safe environment. Technology-based simulations are well cited in pedagogic literature in business education as useful vehicles for learning and experiencing decision making in close to real environments. However, studies on the implementation of drama-based simulations and role play in these settings are comparatively rare.

In this blog, a final year Undergraduate advertising module is discussed that employed a role play game in its design, simulating an advertising agency environment which responded to programme level feedback from students wishing to gain more practical experiences to prepare them in a career advertising.

Students formed groups between four and six agency members, embodying advertising agency roles from current Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) job descriptions. Each week, experiential advertising challenges set by live clients were posited to students whereby students embody the role of Creative Director, Copywriter, Account Planner, Art Director and more. Live clients ranged from the corporate events, pet food, toy, travel and tourism industries, social enterprise, and public sector. Including a range of settings and industries, reflects the diversity of advertising experiences needed to produce a varied portfolio. Providing students with the opportunity to create tangible advertising assets that can be refined and improved with client and peer feedback, supports the building of key employability skills before graduation.

Utilising the drama-based approach, the module explored the relationship between creative drama and emotional development (Rao and Stupans, 2021), (Briones et al., 2022), providing students with the opportunity for students to form broader learning and career goals facilitated through the development of metacognition. The six, separate, live advertising challenges were designed to integrate employer feedback into the recursive process of experiential learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2009).

Giving students a supportive space to frequently showcase their creative skills and reflect on lessons learned by embodying professional advertising roles over a six-week

period, has had a positive effect on student engagement. This is evident in large number of submissions received to the weekly challenges, ranging video and social media advertisements and rehearsed pitches.

Literature on drama in education

Role play, applied across various subjects, empowers students by assigning them specific roles, enabling them to gain practical knowledge and insights.

However, drama in education goes a step further. As Water (2021) notes, “If we perceive cognition and emotion as interrelated, then drama as an educational tool becomes essential.” Learning is embodied, meaning 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. 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 of drama-based role play in higher education. For instance, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, studies demonstrate significant improvements in language acquisition (Luo et al., 2024). In tourism and hospitality education, they found that drama helps students develop essential customer service and problem-solving skills (Özoğul et al., 2020). In nursing education, they showed that drama enhances empathy and patient communication (Jefferies et al., 2021).

Drama-based learning and metacognition

The drama-based approach can enhance meta-learning; thus, the process drama technique was embedded in the module. This technique was implemented to foster student reflection on their own drama and role play performances. This approach enhances their meta-learning processes and cultivates a deeper awareness of how they learn. By engaging in process drama, students are not only encouraged to critique and improve their performances but are also prompted to think critically about their learning strategies. This method supports the development of self-regulated learning skills, empowering students to become more conscious of their learning processes and more effective in their educational journeys. Through this reflective practice, students gain valuable insights into the dynamics of learning, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and a more profound understanding of the learning process itself.

While much of the research on meta-learning focuses on machine learning, we advocate for a broader definition that includes human learners. Empowering learners to learn “how to learn”, equips students with the potential to be perpetually relevant and

resilient beyond university education. Today's continually evolving knowledge society, is rapidly moving away from routine and manual work, placing great significance on HE institutions in teaching students how to learn, rather than what to learn (Tanaka et al., 2016). In addition to domain-specific knowledge, students must acquire critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration skills to be prepared for the labour market, yet students have few chances to participate in real-life problem-solving activities in Higher Education (Chernikova et al., 2020).

Drama-based methods encourage students to reflect on their performances, creating connections between fictional scenarios and real-life experiences. Such as the process drama is a structured yet flexible pedagogical approach that involves the active exploration of fictional roles and scenarios. Unlike traditional drama, it does not focus on a final performance but rather on the educational journey and experiences gained through participation. Process drama emphasizes the co-construction of dramatic worlds by learners, facilitating immersive and realistic communication practice in the target language.

For instance, the "mentor of experts" approach places students in fictional roles where they assume expertise in a particular field. This method, combined with reflective phases, such as using the Reflection on Learning Inventory, helps students self-assess and deepen their understanding.

Final thoughts

In conclusion, drama-based role-play is a cost-effective way to create simulation scenarios. It fosters embodied learning, stimulates emotional involvement, and enhances meta-learning. Facilitating the experience of an agency environment in the design of the module via role play enabled students to be exposed to a new way of learning evoking joy and reflection into future career paths. In addition to the development of industry specific employability skills, student's career search has benefitted from the drama-based learning approach.

"The real live briefs gave us insights about the industry and made us more certain about our future graduate roles. I really enjoyed this module to the core".

In designing assessment for modules employing drama-based role-play, we posit that including reflection on the contributions of the individual in relation to their assigned role, and separate reflection on group dynamics, challenges, and successes within the process of learning, encourages authentic and rich written reflection. The External Examiner of the module included in this blog, has praised the assessment design on its authenticity, advertising curriculum relevancy and resistance to AI misuse.

By using these techniques, students can monitor and adjust their learning processes, leading to more effective education outcomes.

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[Emma](#) is the Programme Leader of the MSc Digital Marketing Management and leads final year undergraduate and master's level marketing modules at Greenwich Business School. Her areas of academic interest are: advertising and marketing communications, digital marketing, and consumer psychology. Emma is a Senior Fellow of HE, and her curriculum design is heavily grounded on experiential learning, and she is a passionate advocate for technology enhanced learning, business simulation games and employer led assessment. Emma is pursuing a PhD in consumer behaviour, with a particular focus on advertising appeals, and has presented at the European Marketing Academy. Emma brings practical experience in managing large web projects, search engine marketing, CRM, analytics and is a trained copywriter. Emma is a member of the Digital Marketing Institute and the Institute of Data & Marketing.

Email: ge28@gre.ac.uk

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/emma-connor-905aa698/>

Jingyang is a University Learning Technologist in the Academic and Learning Enhancement (ALE) Department at the University of Greenwich (UoG). She holds an Associate Fellowship of CMALT (Certified Membership of the Association for Learning Technology) and earned her PhD in Education in 2023. Jingyang's research focuses on the role of digital games in shaping learners' experiences within higher education. Additionally, she has a keen interest in innovative learning and teaching practices, cultural comparisons, particularly in the context of technology-enhanced learning. Jingyang is passionate about exploring how creative approaches and digital tools can enhance educational outcomes and foster a more engaging and inclusive learning environment.

Email: j.ai@greenwich.ac.uk

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jingyangai/>