Employing role-play in teaching and learning: A case of higher education

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Abstract
This article looks at how an approach like role-playing could be employed in higher education settings in order to give students an opportunity to practise and to apply knowledge they have learnt about Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN). The main objective of the research was to explore the feasibility of using role-play as a strategy to integrate experiential learning activities in the classroom in order to develop skills for identifying LSEN by students. The secondary objectives were to report students’ role-playing experiences, together with the advantages and difficulties of using this form of teaching mode within the tertiary environment, and finally to find out how role-play could be enhanced. To this end qualitative research was employed to bring this investigation to realisation and a questionnaire was administered to undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Zululand. The results suggest that although students experienced the role-play activity as pleasant and saw value in using it, there were however disadvantages associated with it.

Keywords: role-playing, Learners with Special Educational Needs, interactive methods

INTRODUCTION
The training of professionals is the business of higher education, and academics always aspire to expose students to teaching methodologies that will produce reputable professionals. Traditional lectures have been used successfully for centuries in educational institutions by lecturers to achieve this goal. This method still has a role to play in academic studies as it maximises theoretical teaching components. Much has been documented on the use of this method. A study conducted by Sajjad (2009) on effective teaching methods in higher education revealed that the traditional lecture method is popular with both lecturers and students. Reasons provided by students for the rating was that: the teacher explains all the points, gives notes, and answers all questions; while lecturers revealed that: it is good for big classes, the lecturer...
becomes the authority of knowledge, and students become disciplined because they want to be provided with notes or take notes. In another study (Stevenson and Sander 2002) where medical students ranked teaching methods; the authors reported that the lecture method is the most preferred teaching method (68%) compared to role-play and student presentations. These findings (Sajjad 2009; Stevenson and Sander 2002), point to the fact that traditional methods are overused in higher education institutions (HEIs). Poorman (2002) maintains that true learning cannot take place when students are ‘passive observers’ of the teaching process. The researchers envisage that reputable professionals should progress through two learning processes, that is, assimilation and accommodation; not assimilation only. The lecture method emphasises and develops the assimilative mode of learning which is more inclined to the assimilation and the regurgitation of everything the lecturers says resulting in them ‘knowing what’ [declarative knowledge] rather knowing ‘knowing how’ [procedural knowledge] (Eysenck and Keane 1990).

Methodologies that encourage the development of procedural knowledge are rarely used. Students are supposed to be given an opportunity to develop their procedural knowledge, so that they attain the ability of learning how to apply declarative knowledge. This in essence means that lecturers need to explore interactive methods. Effective learning is more likely when students are engaged in knowledge exchanging activities (Kahan 2004). There is growing consensus (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Zhao and Kuh 2004) that students who are engaged have better grades, more confidence and satisfaction, and adjust better to the school environment. The world of work needs students who have skills and skills go beyond the knowledge of facts. The expectations of the workplace remain challenges that need to be addressed, not only through theoretical learning components which put more emphasis on non-interactive methodologies, but also through practical learning components that employ interactive methodologies such as computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), problem-based learning (PBL), project-based learning, co-operative learning, play or game-based learning, and role-playing among others. CSCL is a pedagogical approach wherein learning takes place via social interaction using a computer or via the Internet. This kind of learning is characterised by the sharing and construction of knowledge among participants using technology as their primary means of communication (Stahl, Koschmann and Suthers 2006). PBL is a popular instructional activity that lends itself well to CSCL because of the social implications of problem solving. Complex problems call for rich group interplay that encourages collaboration and creates movements towards a clear goal. Project-based learning is similar to problem-based learning in that it creates the impetus to establish team roles and set goals (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer-supported-collaborative-learning). In co-operative learning learners work together in small groups to help one another achieve a common working goal. It is based on a belief that learners can achieve more by working collaboratively than by working alone or by passively receiving information from a teacher (Killen 2010). Play on the other hand, is used to facilitate indirect learning,
allowing learners freedom of choice and creating an element of risk that includes experiencing enjoyment and intrinsic motivation (Snodgrass and Grant 2009). Role-playing affords students an opportunity to enact situations they would come across in their professions. Unlike play, role-playing cannot always guarantee the participants’ enjoyment as some situations may be uncomfortable to enact. What is common with interactive methods is that they engage students in knowledge creation and knowledge exchanging activities. Social interaction and knowledge building are central in interactive methodologies. Learning is deemed more effective if learners do experiments themselves or if they watch a demonstration performed by the teacher (Ferreira 2011) and for that matter if they enact situations relevant or even related to their careers. Of significance is that through interactive methods ‘they can marry theory with practice in order to enact teaching through trial and error with the help of cooperative teachers and peers’ (Nyaumwe and Mtetwa 2011).

On analysing the current practice at most faculties and departments of the university under study, the researchers noted the over use of the lecture method. This observation prompted the researchers to explore other interactive methods. Approaches that help students ‘learn how to do’ should be considered. Of the existing interactive teaching methods the researchers were particularly interested in role-play because of its under use in the Faculty of Education in general, and the Special Education module, specifically. Students have to be exposed to real-life situations they will encounter in their profession. There is also a dearth of evidence regarding studies done on role-play, with specific reference to its use regarding developing students’ skills in handling ELSEN. Denying students exposure to a variety of methods, particularly those that encourage active participation, can be dubbed an ‘academic catastrophe. Van Ments (1989) notes that students exposed through role-play to situations they are likely to encounter in their professional lives are more likely to make the right decisions in similar cases in future. The researchers also believe that students will, in addition, be in a better position to comprehend situations they will come across in their professional lives.

Evidence shows that credible professionals are those who have mastered the requisite attitude and skills, and acquired knowledge during their study years (Sajjad 2009). To instil all these competencies, which should cover both the assimilative and the accommodative modes of learning, students need to be exposed to methodologies such as role-play. The researchers therefore pose questions about how students will describe their experience of being exposed to role-play as another teaching method. The underlying premise is that if students are exposed to role-play they will master some of the requisite skills for identifying and handling ELSEN and transfer these to their profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a range of research into the use and the effectiveness of role-play as teaching approach in the field of social sciences and human sciences and related fields. Kormos (1999) used role-play for managing conversations the candidates’
abilities and he found it effective. Within the same context, a role-play activity was used by Johnson, Sutton and Harris (2001) to teach communication skills to students in an information technology degree and he found it effective. Oberle (2004) used it to evaluate a geography activity of undergraduate college students. Luca and Heal (2006) used a case study of two student teams to test the effectiveness of role-play as an approach to acquiring and improving teamwork skills and perception of teamwork skills and the results indicated that it was effective. Taylor and Drury (1999) on the other hand used role-play cases based on real life information systems application in teaching interviewing skills in information system of analysis. The findings of her study showed that students were generally positive in their comments they stated that they found the exercise valuable and enjoyable. Glass (1995) examined the use of role-playing in teaching ethics in information systems to first year students. Schaap (2005) used a role-playing activity to teach students political theory. The results indicate that the students enjoyed the role-playing activity. Blank (1985) assessed the impact of role-playing, case studies, and simulation games into undergraduate course in agricultural economics. Results indicated that each aid can improve students, performance.

Kerr, Troth and Pickering (2003) conducted a study to explore the attitude of information systems students towards role-playing, and the attitudes and experiences of information systems students participating in the role-playing exercise (participants) compared with those who are observing the role-play exercise as part of the class audience (observers). Overall, answers to the open ended questions for the entire sample indicated that students consider that role-playing allows them to be more involved in the case as well as making the subject easier to understand and to be more realistic, and offers a friendlier and fun environment for students to learn about information systems. Kodotchigova (2002) has used role-play in teaching culture. She concluded that if role-play could be implemented carefully it can be very effective for experiencing cultural principles and cultural awareness.

The role-play approach to instruction is not as simple and as appealing as studies report. Students often confuse role-playing with amateur theatrics and game playing (Jones 1988) and not all students would want to be actively involved and some may in fact feel intimidated (Kerr et. al. 2003) as it is often unfamiliar to students, including teaching staff (McGuire and Priestley). Unfamiliarity can lead to fear, and anxiety and students may withdraw completely (Mitchell 1998). In addition students may become too self-conscious and thus misrepresent or exaggerate the role they are playing. Role-play may also be unpleasant if players do not respect each other.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Several theories underpin role-playing as a teaching method. This study is informed by the following theories: the Social Constructivism Theory (Vygotsky 1978), the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb and Fry 1975), and the Theory of Development (Piaget 1973).
Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social constructivism focuses on social interaction.

Kolb’s (Kolb and Fry 1975) theory argues that knowledge is created through transformation of experience and that experiential learning is important in the acquisition of skills. Experiential learning according to this theory is a cycle where the learner ‘touches all bases’ i.e. experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting.

Piaget’s (1973) theory, on the other hand, highlights two modes of learning, that is, assimilation and accommodation. The accommodative type of learning is useful in learning different types of skills. Blatner (2009) points out that skills cannot be learned by reading a number of books. The best way of leaning all skills is through role-playing.

Role-playing goes by many names: acting, improvisation, dramatic play, pretend play, socio drama (Sajjad 2009). It can be used for teaching literature, history or science or for complex social problem demonstration (Kozma, Bell and Williams 2000) and as a method for teaching insight and empathy competence (Blatner 2005). It has been recognised as a training method to acquire knowledge, attitudes and skills in a range of disciplines (Blatner 2009). It is a type of simulation that focuses attention on the interaction of people with one another (Van Ments 1989) as they take different roles. According to Jones (1982), participants must accept the roles and responsibilities of their roles and functions and do best in the situation in which they find themselves (be it difficult and simple situations). Role-play as a strategy offers several advantages for teachers and students. Research (Poorman 2002) has shown that experiential learning activities in the classroom lead to a better understanding of the course content and increased involvement. The result of involvement according to Fogg (2001) is increased learning. Glass (1995) found that role-play allowed students to discover insights about themselves and others, and also to express strong opinions. It increased interest instils empathy in students (Morris 2003; Poorman 2002; Steindorf 2001), improves interpersonal skills (Teahen 1975), improves communication skills (Huyack 1975), fosters autonomy, responsibility, solidarity (Bonnet 2000), students make connections between the characters they play and real situations (Morris 2003 ) and enhances communication. As students are directly active during role-playing, it is more effective in embedding concepts (Alden 1999). Overall role-play is a beneficial teaching tool as it develops practical professional skills as well as academic knowledge. Besides its advantages, the literature (Nestel and Tierney 2007) highlights that introducing role-play to a group always meets with resistance and/or anxiety from some students. They also reveal that interdependence in learning may prove to be a barrier to some students. It is through active involvement and therefore personal experience that students’ practical/professional skills as well as academic knowledge are developed (Norman 2004).

Role-playing instruction requires good presentation and management (Teed 2008). Factors that may facilitate a high success rate in using role-play include stipulating objectives, planning the structure and implementation (Monoron and Pollock 2006). During role-play the teacher observes. After role-play, takes comments from
observes, ask other participants to comment. The teacher should summarize, drawing out learning points, leaving participants with positive comments and feelings (Sajjad 2009).

**The role-play activity**

The role-play activity was undertaken by third year Education students doing a module-Special Education. The activity took place in a lecturer hall during three two hour double lecture periods. The guidelines and tips of Manoron Pollock (2006) and Sajjad (2009) were adhered to.

- The goal of the activity was to develop skills associated in identifying learners with special educational needs (LSEN) in class and to discover insights about themselves and others.
- A structured approach in which students had to play fixed roles of an educator, an LSEN, classmates and observers was employed.
- The educator’s role was to identify LSEN in class.
- The learner’s role was to display symptoms that typify a specific category of special needs, for example epilepsy.
- The classmates’ role was to react as typical to what normal learners do when they see something or a behaviour that deviates from normal, For example they would laugh, get surprised.
- Observers were to identify skills demonstrated in the areas of content explored.

Students were given a chance to practice the role-play activity. They were also afforded 10 minutes for presentations.

**METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the feasibility of using role-play as a strategy to integrate experiential learning activities in the classroom in order for students to develop skills for identifying ELSEN. The article addressed the following research questions:

- What are the opinions of students towards being exposed to role-playing as a method of increasing quality learning?
- What are the benefits and the disadvantages of using role-play as a teaching method?
- How can role-play be enhanced?

A non-experimental descriptive research approach was deemed appropriate for this study. Data was collected from a purposive sample of forty under graduate students registered for a Special education module in the faculty of education. Research
(Sajjad 2009) indicates that students are the qualified sources to report on extent to which a learning experience was productive, informative, satisfying and worthwhile.

An evaluation questionnaire comprising of close-ended questions (to capture information about students’ experiences of role-playing) and open-ended questions (to allow free expression regarding benefits, demerits and, recommendations of role-play) was used to collect data. Demographic data was not collected from students as it was not part of the subject of investigation. The students first engaged in the role-play activity and thereafter completed an evaluation questionnaire. Before the subjects could complete the questionnaire the researchers assured them of confidentiality and anonymity and also made them aware that the information derived from their analysed responses would be used to improve future sessions and would be disseminated to the professional community. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the close-ended statements. Qualitative data were thematically analysed. The responses to each question were examined separately to ascertain similarities and differences and names were given to categories descriptive of responses. The themes identified were explicated to reveal the respondents’ responses to the benefits and demerits of role-play; and recommendations for improving the role-play methodology.

**FINDINGS**

Out of the 40 students who participated in the study, only 35 completed the evaluation questionnaire. The following discussion tables the quantitative and qualitative findings. These findings are arranged according to the research objectives.

The first research objective sought to identify the opinions of students towards being exposed to role-play as a method of increasing quality learning. The quantitative findings, derived from close-ended questions, revealed that most students (91%) reported a pleasant experience while the remainder (9%) reported an unpleasant experience. This means that more probing might be necessary after the role-play activity in order to follow up on issues which might be personal, emotional, or even culture related to the detriment of maximising the students’ active participation.

The second objective intended to explore benefits and demerits of role-playing. Three key themes were identified in response to merits of role-play: academic development, social interaction and self-discovery. One theme was identified in response to demerits: and it related to individual needs.

The majority of respondents (34/35) indicated that being participants in the role-play activity had resulted in a better understanding of the subject content. It was felt that it had maximised their learning to the extent that they are now familiar with what the profession expects of them (33/35). They (33/35) also perceived role-play as having resulted in them comprehending how to deal with LSEN.

All respondents (35/35) reported having learnt a lot through increased involvement in role-playing. Almost all (34/35) of the participants felt the strength of the role-play methodology rested on its ability to facilitate learning through play. Respondents (20/35) felt that role-play afforded them not only the opportunity to be
creators of knowledge, but also extended to them the privilege of interacting with their classmates (35/35). Some students (18/35) considered self-discovery as another important merit of role-play, as through it they learnt how to communicate freely (16/35) while others got a chance of knowing their abilities (14/35).

However, participants (15/35) felt that the methodology disadvantaged them in a sense that it did not accommodate shy people like them. They indicated that some of them were scared to be observed by other people (12/35). Other respondents revealed that they found it difficult to fake a part (10/35). Other disadvantages expressed related to the students’ ability to express themselves in English as this is a medium of teaching and learning (25/35). There were respondents who considered the time allocated for preparation of the activity as not accommodative to individual differences (8/35).

In order to achieve the third objective which required participants to indicate how role-play could be enhanced, participants were required to express themselves freely by responding to an open-ended question. All participants responded to this question.

Respondents were of the opinion that the lecture hall that was used for this teaching and learning method was not spacious enough to allow movement (33/35). They insisted that a bigger venue be considered for future role-play activities.

Some respondents felt that language (English) was a barrier to effective participation in the activity (20/35). They suggested that a session for instilling and improving communication skills would be beneficial, as it would facilitate maximum participation.

Some respondents indicated a need for more feedback (10/35).

Some students felt that they must be given more time to practise roles and that the method must be used more often (8/35). They also suggested the time for role-playing should be extended.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The study sought to unravel that role-play as an interactive method can facilitate quality learning. The study was informed by learning theories and principles of adult learning all of which emphasise that learning must not only focus on theory but must also consider practical experiences. The results of the study can be summarised as follows:

An overwhelming number of students embrace role-play and only a handful expressed discomfort with it. These results are not surprising as they confirm the findings of Nestel and Tierney (2007) in which 96.50 per cent students found the role-play experience helpful. The reason for the pleasant experience might be attributed to the fact that when students are active role-players in a learning situation they
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forget that they are learning because learning is unstructured and informal. Another reason might be that they forget about inhibitions caused by other methods like the lecture method and engage in creating knowledge through playing and reflecting. These findings are in line with theories of learning (Kolb and Fry 1975; Vygotsky 1978) which emphasise the importance of interaction and accommodative learning. It has been noted that fewer students revealed discomfort with role-play. The findings about those who reported an unpleasant experience (9%) is insignificant, but it is a pointer to the notion that not all teaching methods will suit all students, especially those that are novel to them. This difference in experience also cautions researchers about variables like individual differences, different learning styles, as well as personal and cultural issues which might impede students from participating in a role-play activity.

It turned out that role-play has a number of merits as it has allowed students to apply skills related to LSEN and to feel the distress of LSEN as their own. It has also allowed them apply concepts and problems that have been introduced through lecturers and other traditional methods. Role-play has also afforded respondents an opportunity understand the subject matter but also an opportunity being involved in creating learning as they interact with others. The discovery of one’ strengths are mainly possible through active participation and experiential learning. This confirms the findings of Taylor (1999) which reported that students found the exercise valuable and enjoyable as they could practice the skills they had discussed in a ‘safe’ real life setting. These findings also accord with those of previous studies (Blank 1985; Taylor 1999) which reported that students viewed the role-play strategy to instruction as effective in improving performance and skills. Basically role-play has allowed participants to discover insights about themselves and others (Glass 1995) and provided a platform to learn skills attitudes and behaviours expected of their profession regarding LSEN.

It also emerged that role-play has demerits such as language, inhibitions that are personality related, and cognitive differences that can be a barrier to successful role-play. These findings accord with those of other researchers (Kerr et. al. 2003; Mitchell 1998) who found that not all students would want to be actively involved and some may in fact feel intimidated and may withdraw completely. The reason for their discomfort may be attributed to individual differences and different learning styles among others.

It is remarkable that almost all respondents considered an appropriate and spacious venue as an important factor to be attended (enhanced) to in order for role-play to be effective. It must be admitted the lecture halls at the case study university are not designed for interactive leaning hence the discomfort experienced when exposed to role-play. It not surprising that most students recommended a session for instilling and improving communication skills, as deficient communication hindered maximum participation; students who have language barriers can use a scripted version. The issue of more feedback and extended time was proposed for inclusion in future role-plays.
The research literature revealed the effectiveness and the desirability of role-play which was confirmed by this study. It has also confirmed that it not free from demerits as research literature has indicated. Although the study involved students registered for the Special Education module, lecturers teaching other modules may be able to use the findings of this investigation. Although Special Education is not a language module, the findings suggest that it should be integrated with other language learning activities in order to address language limitations. In conclusion, role-play must be used to complement traditional teaching methods – not to replace them. Precautions must be taken against the overuse of this method (or any other) or it may be reduced to ineffectiveness.

REFERENCES


