

INVESTIGATING THE CONTRIBUTION OF ROLE-PLAYS FOR SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: DESIGNING A ROLE-PLAY GAME FOR CSR COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

With the growing emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR), scholarship has recognized that CSR communication is vital, but also very challenging. CSR communication has been called a double-edged sword, meaning that although it is important, communicating CSR too overtly can be “counterproductive.” Another issue is that there has been a dearth of research on how to teach CSR communication. While research has emphasized the importance of teaching CSR and business ethics, it is not clear yet what kind of learning activities are most appropriate for teaching the subject. To address this question, an original role-play game was created for teaching CSR communication. The role-play game is focused on a labor scandal at a fictitious multinational sporting goods company, modeled after true information from the Nike Labor Scandal of the 1990s-2000s. The students are divided into different stakeholder roles (e.g. supplier employees, executives, investors, labor activists), and then role-play these stakeholders in a community meeting to understand the different priorities for each stakeholder before discussing the key problems. Afterward, students of mixed roles form stakeholder teams to discuss their viewpoints and create a communication plan to address the CSR communication crisis. The teams then present these CSR plans to work professionals experienced in CSR and public relations, who would role-play as the CEO and Board of Directors at the company. This instructional design takes elements of role-play and combines them with service learning through the inclusion of experienced work professionals as part of the role-play team. It provides an active learning experience for teaching sustainability, while enhancing the understanding of how role-play contributes to CSR communication. This paper describes the rationale behind the design of this role-play-based teaching approach, as well as how it may be further investigated and enhanced in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication has become much more prevalent in recent years, and is considered a critical part of effective CSR (Bortree, 2014; Jauernig & Valentinov, 2019). However, Garcia-Torea and colleagues (2019) stated that reporting models rather than the application of these models can be a key reason for CSR reporting failure. The authors noted that reporting models do not facilitate the production of information that enables stakeholders to appreciate CSR impacts of firms (Garcia-Torea, Fernandez-Feijoo, & De La Cuesta, 2019). Further empirical research on the implementation of sustainable practices and CSR have also discovered that simply engaging in frequent CSR communication or sustainability activities frequently does not always yield positive outcomes. For example, Cachon-Rodriguez et al. (2021) reported that sustainability activities can be viewed as irrelevant by employees, especially when the actions do not address relevant issues within the company. Although the authors found there was a relationship between employee commitment and sustainable actions of a firm, sustainable actions do not always lead to higher employee commitment, especially if employees are not involved in the decision-making regarding sustainability activities (Cachón-Rodríguez, Blanco-González, Prado-Román, & Diez-Martin, 2021).

However, there has been other research that has indicated that effective CSR communication can build employee loyalty, and legitimacy of the company (Cho, Furey, & Mohr, 2017; Fitch, 2018; Gill, 2015). In fact, research has shown that effective CSR communication must be built on the foundation of dialogue and compromise among the many different stakeholders in order for it to be truly effective (Cho et al., 2017; Fitch, 2018; Gill, 2015; Illia, Romenti, Rodríguez-Cánovas, Murtarelli, & Carroll, 2017). While some authors have questioned the intent behind CSR communication in the past (Frankental, 2001), empirical research has indicated that CSR communication plans can be very effective for enhancing company reputation if CSR communication plans are conceptualized around establishing a constant dialogue with the various publics rather than simply presenting positive news about the company (Camilleri, 2016; Cho et al., 2017; Fitch, 2018; Illia et al., 2017; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Illia and colleagues (2017) cautioned that it is insufficient for corporations to merely create dialogue spaces about CSR with stakeholders. How these processes of CSR dialogue are initiated is just as significant. Moreover, corporations must create deliberative spaces that actually allow deliberation rather than merely inform stakeholders. It is apparent that CSR communication must have a clear strategy behind it, and its implementation can be challenging (Illia et al., 2017). As a result, CSR education should also be an integral element to practicing effective CSR communication.

In summary, while CSR has become a significant movement within the world of business since it was first introduced back in the 1990s (Lim & Greenwood, 2017), it does not seem to have been fully implemented or communicated effectively, with numerous labor violations and work-related disasters that have killed or injured thousands of workers (Fitch, 2018). The continued prevalence of communication strategies such as denial or blame shifting in the wake of sustainability problems also indicate that

CSR communication practices especially in a crisis must still be further improved (Arendt, LaFleche, & Limperopulos, 2017; Lim & Greenwood, 2017; Rudkin, Kimani, Ullah, Ahmed, & Farooq, 2019; Siano, Vollero, Conte, & Amabile, 2017). Although research has identified the instances where CSR can be most effective (Cho et al., 2017; Lim & Greenwood, 2017), there is still a lack of understanding about how to educate students on how to practice CSR communication effectively.

Role-play learning has been proposed as a suitable teaching method for developing interpersonal communication skills and allowing participants to apply their knowledge in a work context (Chen & Martin, 2015; Rumore, Schenk, & Susskind, 2016; Sogunro, 2004; Taylor, 2018). As a learning method, it is described as an activity in which students act out different roles to address a problem in a real-life context. By playing different roles, students are able to experience an issue from multiple perspectives other than their own, and are also able to question and reflect on their actions. Scholars have claimed that the emotional engagement aspect of role-play games enables these activities to not only engage learners in the learning process, but also change their behaviors and attitudes as well as try new ways of handling situations (Latif, Mumtaz, Mumtaz, & Hussain, 2018; Rumore et al., 2016; Taylor, 2018).

Yet, educators have also critiqued role-play learning. Sogunro (2004) stated that role-play learning is only effective when all the students are motivated, enthusiastic, and take their roles seriously. There were also reported issues with some learners not enjoying group work, feeling intimidated by the learning activity, and adopting inappropriate stereotypes of their roles due to a lack of appropriate prior knowledge. In light of these criticisms, educators have suggested that participants be given adequate training and time to prepare for learning via role-play games (Sogunro, 2004; Taylor, 2018). Taylor (2018) further noted that the emotional engagement of role-plays can actually become a hindrance to learning. Other scholars have observed participants who refuse to participate, become defensive, or have performance anxiety (Kettula & Berghäll, 2013; Sogunro, 2004; Taylor, 2018). Taylor (2018) concluded that learners who are not adequately prepared for learning via this approach, “can quickly find themselves being tossed about in the waves of emotional reactions” (Taylor, 2018, p. 775). Despite these strong claims, the evidence of impact of emotions are still anecdotal at this point. In fact, research has shown that studies on the influence of emotions in education have been slow to emerge (Pekrun & Schutz, 2007). Although there has been an increase in research on the nature of emotions experienced by students and teachers, very few studies have linked emotional assessments to role-play or other learning activities (Pekrun, Goetz, Frenzel, Barchfeld, & Perry, 2011). To date, both proponents and critics of role-play learning have largely based their assessments on their experience as educators, as opposed to empirical research findings. As with the literature on simulation-based learning, the evidence is mainly anecdotal and descriptive (Baranowski & Weir, 2015; Levin-Banchik, 2018; Lohmann, 2019; Lourdel, Harpet, Laforest, Gondran, & Brodhag, 2006; Sierra, 2020).

In summary, there are still important gaps in both the role-play/simulation literature as well as the CSR communication literature. Role-plays have been applied to limited sustainability contexts, and there is still room to better understand how to prepare future work professionals to conduct effective CSR communication practices at different companies (García-Rosell, 2019; López-Pérez, Melero, & Javier Sesé, 2017). To further understand the value of role-plays for teaching CSR communication, this study will propose an original role-play game that depicts a key stakeholder meeting for a multinational company trying to address serious work violations among their suppliers.

STAGES OF THE CSR ROLE-PLAY

The role-play is modeled after the Nike Labour Scandal of the 1990s (Beder, 2002; Lucchini & Moisello, 2019). In the role-play scenario, the students are key stakeholders for Adsport21, a global sporting goods company. Adsport21 is dealing with a PR crisis due to numerous workplace violations committed by its suppliers. Due to the protests in front of Adsport21 stores around the globe, the CEO and Board of Directors at Adsport21 are looking for a new CSR communication plan that will help restore the company’s reputation and end the protests. Students participate in this role-play learning module over a five-week period, and are divided initially into the following stakeholder roles:

- Company Executives
- PR/Communication Team
- Company supplier employees
- Labour Activists
- Investors
- Customers

The learning sequence will be described in the following paragraphs. Before the students begin role-play activities, they will be given an information handout on the scenario for them to review and consider. During the first week of the class, the students are assigned to different roles (e.g. company executives, supplier employees, investors, customers), and provided with a handout that describes the priorities and problems of their stakeholder role. This help students understand and prepare for their role before the stakeholder meeting during the following week (week two).

During week two, students will participate in a stakeholder meeting where they share their respective priorities with other stakeholder groups and discuss the key problems as they see from their stakeholder perspective. The students will ask each other questions and discuss any disagreements they have on the key problem. For example, there may be conflicts between the PR/Communication team and the labor activist group in terms of what they believe the key problems are for Adsport21, and they will be

able to discuss these differences before determining the most pressing problems that need to be solved by the company. After all stakeholders have shared their priorities and their views, the entire group will vote to determine the most pressing problems for the company that should be addressed in the immediate future.

During week three, students will do a debriefing of the stakeholder meeting and share the learning experience from each stakeholder group. The students will then be informed about the second half of the role-play, which is that the CEO and board members want the stakeholders to take what they have learned from the meeting and collaborate with members of the PR/Communication team to come up with a suitable communication plan to address the crisis and communicate the actions to the public in order to restore the company reputation. In essence, the PR/Communication team members will lead several new “mixed stakeholder” groups to pitch a new CSR communication campaign that will address the problems as highlighted in week two. The PR/Communication team members will be free to select any students from the other stakeholder groups to collaborate with, and these new mixed stakeholder groups will conceptualize a new CSR communication campaign that represents the interests of the different stakeholders at Adsport21 that offers actionable solutions to the workplace violations. The students will then brainstorm communication and management actions to propose in the week four class.

In week four, the CSR communication teams will present all of their ideas for addressing the problems at the start of the class for further discussion. The class analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of various communication and management strategies, and the instructor will also point out key concepts to remember when doing CSR communication planning. The students will be given the rest of class to work on their CSR presentations before they present them to the work professionals, who will role-play the CEO and Board of Directors of Adsport21 in week five.

In week five, the groups will present their CSR communication plans to the CEO and Board of Directors. The groups will have 8 minutes to present before doing a 5-minute Q&A session with the CEO and Board about their proposed plans. The CEO/Board members will evaluate each presentation on the content and the ability of the students to respond to questions. They will then grade each presentation and provide comments on the presentations.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The rationale behind this role-play game was informed by a conceptual framework based on previous research on role-plays, CSR communication, and how sustainability education should be taught and evaluated. The framework (Figure 1) is comprised of three key sections: antecedents for learning (A), role-play game (B), and the knowledge, attitude, and skill development from the role-play game (C). This framework not only helps with the design, but also informs the evaluation measures.

Lopez-Perez and colleagues (2017) said there are still significant gaps in CSR education/training, and recommended that education in this area should be viewed as a social learning process. These authors also stated that students may have a naïve awareness of individual contributions to sustainability and environmental challenges, such that education initiatives should focus on further developing students’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards sustainability, as well as preparing students for implementing systemic organizational change and management. The authors also emphasized that while employees want to be a part of organizations that demonstrate a concern for society, more research can be done on how businesses are supporting CSR education in universities (López-Pérez et al., 2017).

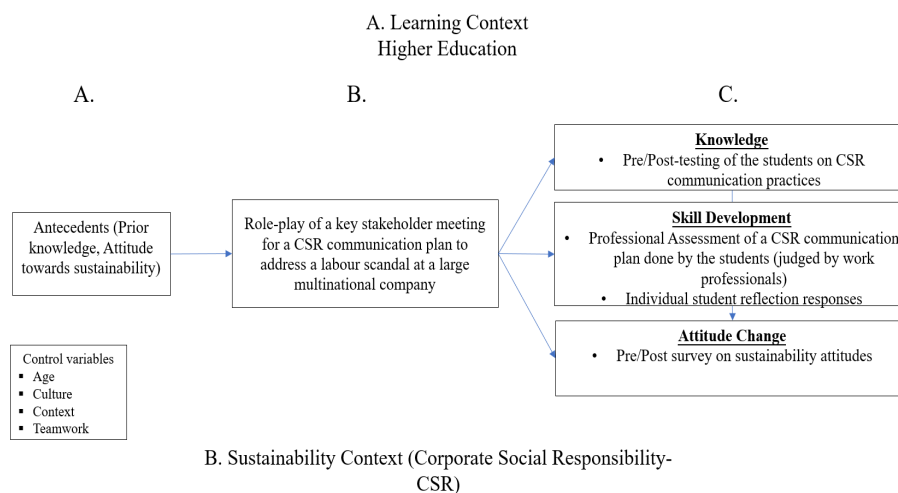


Figure 1. Conceptual model for studying the effects of role-play learning on changes in knowledge, attitude and skill change

Scholars have suggested that attitude, knowledge, and skill development must all be effectively measured to truly understand the learning outcomes (Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, Kronlid, & McGarry, 2015; Olsson, Gericke, Sass, & Boeve-de Pauw, 2020; Sass et al., 2020). Brundiens and Wiek (2017) further argued that the demand for sustainability competency is increasing rapidly, with the recognition that students will need actionable knowledge on global sustainability challenges for both the present and future. Wiek et al. (2015) operationalized the key competencies into five categories, which include the ability to see sustainability problems across different sectors (systems thinking), the ability to anticipate how sustainability problems might occur (futures-thinking), and the ability to compare, reconcile, and negotiate sustainability values (values-thinking). Two other key competencies according to Wiek et al. (2015) are the ability to develop plans to mobilize resources to address sustainability issues, and the ability to facilitate different types of collaboration (Wiek et al., 2015). Although these competencies have been identified, specific professional skills required for meeting sustainability challenges in the changing workplace are not always taught in higher education (see also Foucrier & Wiek, 2019).

The second part of the framework focuses on the role-play for CSR communication. There were several reasons why a role-play approach was selected as the best teaching method for CSR communication. First, while much research has been done on the use of role-plays for education and sustainability (Hallinger, Wang, Chatpinyakoo, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2020; Wright-Maley, 2015), there is still a lack of study specifically about the effect of role-plays on teaching CSR communication, although they have been mentioned as effective teaching methods by CSR education scholarship (García-Rosell, 2019; López-Pérez et al., 2017). Second, previous research has stated that effective CSR communication has shifted away from one-way communication and must be based on creating dialogue with various publics (Cho et al., 2017; Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2020; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). The research has also emphasized that CSR communication is not simply about posting the information on sustainability efforts, as CSR communication can actually harm a company's reputation if not planned out properly (Cho et al., 2017; Christensen et al., 2020; Fitch, 2018; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Due to the fact that role-plays are based on participants taking on different roles and understanding the perspectives of different individuals (Chen & Martin, 2015; García-Rosell, 2019; Rao & Stupans, 2012), role-plays seem to be an effective learning activity for helping students understand what CSR communication is, and how to practice it.

The third part of the framework focuses on the objective assessments of learning outcomes from the role-play activity. As research on ESD has emphasized that sustainability learning must develop appropriate knowledge, attitudes, and skills for addressing key issues (Foucrier & Wiek, 2019; Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Mogensen & Schnack, 2010; Olsson et al., 2020; Sass et al., 2020), one potential gap is the evaluation of the CSR communication plans. Another issue has been the measurement of learning. Anderson and Lawton have cautioned that student perceptions of learning are often significantly greater than actual learning gains (Anderson & Lawton, 1988, 1997, 2009). The research review by Hallinger and others (2020) of simulations and serious games used in education for sustainability supported this cautionary note. Their review suggested that research has done a better job of illustrating the "perceived potential" of simulation and game-based learning activities (SBL) than assessing its impacts through rigorous research. On a related note, scholars have indicated that the evaluation should be done with external experts, who can more objectively attest to the skills and competencies exhibited by the students (Andersson & Andersson, 2010; Brundiens & Wiek, 2017). For the present role-play plan, a unique addition was the inclusion of work professionals with experience in public relations and CSR. With their knowledge informed by the industry experience, they provide a novel way to objectively assess CSR communication competencies shown by the students, which can in turn provide further empirical evidence of the teaching efficacy of role-play games.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Several precautions must be taken when using the present approach. One of the challenges is that there must be adequate time (at least one full class period) for the students to understand and explore their roles. Due to the integral part that students play in the learning outcome, adverse effects on learning are also possible if they are not fully committed to participating in role-play games (Sogunro, 2004; Taylor, 2018). It is therefore extremely important that students be given adequate time to prepare for playing their roles. This represents a key limitation of role-play compared to computer simulations or board games, which require significantly less preparation time before participation. It is also highly recommended for instructors to check-in with students while preparing for their roles to ensure they are clear on their role and confident they can play the role realistically. The competency in communication are also essential, as the interpersonal elements of role-play require high levels of verbal communication and listening comprehension. For instance, in the event the role-play is done with students not in their native language, additional steps must be taken, such as doing the role-play face to face and not online.

One final precaution concerns the inclusion of work professionals. While the participation of work professionals allows for unbiased and objective feedback to the student CSR communication plans, finding suitable work professionals to participate may be challenging. It is highly recommended that the work professionals have actual experience in conceptualizing campaigns and CSR messages so that they can provide further consultation on the quality of the CSR communication plans. If these limitations can be accounted for, the activity should be able to impact participants positively on an attitude and knowledge level. However, further influence of its impact on competency development should be carefully studied in future empirical research.

CONCLUSION

The present approach represents a blend of service learning with role-play. While it is not significantly different in its design from other role-plays for sustainability learning, it does differ with respect to its focus on social sustainability as opposed to environmental sustainability. The suggested role-play activities feature aspects derived from an actual case, which lends credibility to the approach. The role-play also allows students to not just comprehend the problem, but also come up with solutions to problems

that they may encounter in the future. The inclusion of work professionals role-playing as the CEO/Board further allows objective feedback to be given to the students, to further improve their competencies in communication planning. Moreover, the feedback from the judges can become invaluable as part of the learning process, in addition to evaluating student competencies.

The exercise described also has additional benefits:

1. It is highly flexible and can be adapted to address different aspects of sustainability (economic, social, environmental), and for different courses beyond just management.
2. It is relatively easy to conduct and flexible in the duration (4-5 weeks)
3. It helps students not only develop knowledge in CSR, but also enhances their understanding of how to conceptualize and plan CSR communication, which has proven to be a complicated endeavor for many businesses.

For instructors planning to utilize this role-play approach, it is recommended that learning measurements be conducted at multiple levels (e.g. knowledge, attitude, skill development) to substantively assess the learning. As research has emphasized that sustainability learning must impact student knowledge, attitude, and skill development, future research for this approach should apply multiple measurements to monitor the learning outcomes. For instance, a CSR Knowledge test will measure the increase in knowledge from participating in the role-play, while a sustainability mindset scale may be applied to track any attitude changes during the learning process. To further supplement this data, CSR communication presentations will be graded by judges and statistical correlations may be conducted to determine if CSR knowledge and sustainability attitudes correlate positively with presentation grades, which may provide more compelling evidence for the value of the role-play to avoid perceived learning measures that have been criticized in previous research. In summary, while the present approach offers a unique blend of role-play and service learning to enhance learning efficacy, further research is required to allow the analysis of how exactly this approach contributes to the learning of social sustainability as compared to simply measuring the perceptions of learning among the participants.

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