

EXERCISE: CONDUCTING ROLE PLAYS USING STUDENT GENERATED CASES

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how role-plays that are based on student written cases were used in a graduate level Motivation and Incentives course. At the start of the semester, each student was asked to write up a motivation related case based on his/her job experiences. During each subsequent class, students played the role of either a problem solving consultant or a firm's manager. To obtain closure on the case, the manager then presented how the problem was actually solved by the firm described in the case. The exercise was then debriefed.

INTRODUCTION

A review of past ABSEL Proceedings suggests that the role-play technique has been used in a variety of settings and situations. Furthermore, it has been used to achieve a wide array of objectives. For example, Masuchun, Wisenbaker, and Butler (2000) formed 109 student triads and asked group members to role-play a Mexican negotiator, an American negotiator, and an observer. The purpose of this experiential negotiation role-play was to determine if an experiential exercise could be used as an agent for collecting data. Similarly, Butler (1997) used a negotiation role play to: (a) explore the effects of trust, information sharing, and conflict styles on negotiated outcomes; (b) to demonstrate the need to determine whether goals are compatible before deciding on a conflict style; (c) to illustrate two types of integrative agreements, logrolling and bridging; and (d) to give an example of two faces of power, personal and socialized.

Gentry and Hambley (1991) developed an extended international role-play to allow students to experience principles learned in the international marketing course. During the role-play students played the role of Japanese and American business people that were engaged in early stages of negotiation. Totten and Overby (1991) had students role play a sales management case in which a copier saleswomen is attempting to qualify potential buyers when one of them attempts to "come-on" to her. One of the major purposes of

this role-play was to teach students how to handle sexual harassment situations.

Davis and Baten (1990) developed a role-play in which students conducted performance appraisal feedback interviews. The purpose here was to develop student skills in conducting these interviews. Finally, Bellance, Markulis, and Strang (1986) conducted a role play in which some groups of students managed a company using a typical business simulation while other groups acted as the firm's Board of Directors. The managers needed to report periodically to the Board regarding the former's decisions.

While faculty generated or obtained cases have been used as the basis of role plays in several of the above exercises, there are no reports of conducting role plays using student generated cases. In this paper, we will report on how this approach was used successfully in a MBA level course.

THE EXERCISE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this exercise are as follows:

1. To enhance student's problem solving and critical thinking skills by having them develop solutions to 12 actual, student-prepared cases.
2. To enhance student's writing and oral communication skills by asking them to write up answers to 12 cases and to present one to the class.
3. To familiarize students with actual case situations and how those firms solved those cases.
4. To enhance students' understanding of various motivation principles and concepts.
5. To provide students with an understanding of the various approaches firms use to motivate employees.
6. To provide students with insight into the techniques their own firm uses to enhance employee motivation.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

This exercise was conducted in two different graduate level classes in Motivation and Incentives, each of which met one night a week for three hours. On the first night of class,

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002

each student was asked to prepare for the following week a motivation related case based on their current or former job experience. The case was to include the following information:

1. A short description of the firm's business and how it is organized. Students were asked to make up a fictitious name for the firm and all employees.
2. A description of what actually occurred at the firm, in chronological order, that led up to the problem.
3. A statement of the problem that the manager or firm confronted. Students were told to make sure that their case presented an issue to be solved, not just a description of daily life at a firm.
4. Two to four questions that the remaining members of class should answer.

During the second week of class the instructor collected all of the students' cases and organized them by topic based on the chapters in the book. Copies of all cases were made and distributed during the third week of class. Each case was assigned a date to be discussed in class. Each week, students were required to write answers to the questions that appeared at the end of the assigned case or cases. Answers were required to be a minimum of 250 words and students received three points for each case judged acceptable. In addition students were told that if their final grade was on the borderline, the case write-ups would be the tiebreaker.

During the class discussion of each case, all but one student was asked to play the role of a consultant and to ask questions and provide advice regarding how the firm in the case should solve the problem presented. However, the one student who had developed the case played the role of the manager in the case that had a problem to be solved.

The role-play began with the consultants asking questions of the manager to obtain information not presented in the case write-up itself. Then, the consultants would suggest solutions to the case while the manager listened. Then, after all of the consultants had given their advice, the manager would state what he/she/the firm actually did in the case. Finally, the consultants would critique the manager's/firm's solution. Each week one or two cases were roles played in this fashion for approximately 30 minutes.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

After each case was presented and the consultants were told what the firm actually did in the case to solve the problem, the role-play was debriefed. This took several formats but the major one was for the professor to ask the class questions regarding the lessons to be learned from the case. What theory of motivation or motivation concept is the case related to? What motivation concepts did the firm in the case follow or violate? What are the likely short and long-range effects of the firm's actions in the case?

RATIONALE

Cognitive learning theories have long assumed that learning is an active, constructive and goal-oriented process (Brewer et al., 1998; Shuell, 1986;). Active learning has been shown to be more effective for promoting the retention by students of concepts and understanding in the long-term memory than passive teaching techniques, such as lectures (Silberman, 1996). Constructionist theorists view the cognitive process of learning as knowledge construction rather than knowledge transmission. Under this epistemological view, the learner is building and transforming knowledge [Applefield, Huber, and Moallem; 2000]. Applefield, Huber, and Moallem assert that the learner constructs meaning through actively striving to make sense of new experiences based on what is already known or believed about the issue. Role-plays provide a venue for active learning. The scenario provides the situation wherein the learning occurs. Knowledge is conceived as being embedded in and connected to that situation.

On a fundamental level, when students play roles in a scenario, they are constructing a social reality. Shapiro (1991) provides insight into understanding the cognitive processes involved in a role-play learning experience. Shapiro contends that a person weighs and balances information from different sources to determine the situational usefulness of a memory. This proposed relatively automatic and unconscious mechanism is viewed as one of a number of conscious and unconscious mental processes influencing the construction of a social reality. According to Shapiro's model, a student constructs the social reality in real time based on relevant memory traces. Information provided in the role-play materials serves as cues used to decide which memories are relevant. Memory is used to store and process knowledge, dynamically changing a student's knowledge. Anderson (1983, 1993) proposes a semantic network consisting of nodes or chunks that may be associated by experience to produce a procedural memory containing skills, called 'automatic procedures' based on condition-action rules that are already contained in memory. Experiential learning through role-play provides an opportunity for students to develop procedural memories.

The theoretical rationale and advantages for combining the case approach and the role-play technique can be found in several learning models. The well-known Bloom's Taxonomy organizes skills in ascending order of sophistication. The skills include:

- 1) Knowledge - skills that explain or recall; remembering.
- 2) Comprehension - skills that serve to establish relationships, categorize, classify.
- 3) Application - skills whose functions facilitate transfer.
- 4) Analysis - skills which break apart abstractions in order to clarify.
- 5) Synthesis - skills which create new expression.

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002

- 6) Evaluation - skills which utilize methods, materials, ideas, values, and techniques for learning how to learn (Blanton, 1998).

Asking students to role-play their own cases appears to encompass all six levels of learning. In terms of the comprehension and knowledge level of learning, this technique requires that students recall facts related to the case, to arrange the events that took place in the case sequentially, and to identify the key elements in the case. The application stage of learning is emphasized when students interview the manager during the role-play and when students are asked to explain the lessons learned from the case during the debriefing stage. During the exercise, students need to report on what they recommend the firm do to solve its problems and determine the likely cause of its problems. Both of these cognitive skills fall into the analysis level of learning. The synthesis level is emphasized when students need to write up their case analysis and to do the role-play itself. Finally, the exercises requires that students make judgments, debate their answers, recommend solutions, and defend their positions, all of which are part of the evaluation learning level.

The role-play method of instruction encourages creative thinking as a natural part of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. During creative thinking, students learn by exploring, trying out, manipulating, experimenting, questioning, and modifying ideas. As an experiential-based learning exercise, role-play engages students on many levels, especially when the exercises involve some emotional risk-taking. However, the debriefing that takes place is also critical for students to connect to other students in the class [Grauerholz; 2001].

CONCLUSION

The exercise presented represents a blend of case analysis/discussion with the role-play technique. In some respects, this exercise is not significantly different from role-plays presented elsewhere, including prior ABSEL Proceedings. Many of these also use cases or simulations as the basis of the role-play. However, it is important to note that the approach described here is significantly different from other role-plays in several important ways. First, this approach uses actual cases written by students based on their own work situations vs. instructor developed or obtained cases. Students know, or at least believe, that the cases are actual, not fictitious, thereby giving the cases greater credibility. Second, during the role-play, students can ask questions of the case writer to obtain more information regarding a case. Students therefore are less likely to conclude that they can't solve the case because too much information is missing. In most case discussions, students never learn how the firm or manager actually solved the problem presented in the case. In this exercise, the student who presents the case ultimately states what the firm actually did which provides closure to the case.

The exercise described above has additional attributes that should be noted:

1. It is highly flexible and can be adapted to many different courses, not just to a Motivation and Incentives class.
2. It is relatively easy to conduct. Other than organizing the cases, the instructor's main task is that of debriefing the exercise.
3. It helps students develop problem-solving skills, enhances their writing and oral communication skills, and helps them to better understand course concepts and principles.

It should also be noted that several precautions should be taken when using this exercise. One of these is that cases must directly relate to the course topics, not topics covered in other classes. Since students are told to write up a case on the first day of class, they may not fully understand what topics will be covered in the course. Therefore, it is helpful for the instructor to review course topics before making the assignment. Faculty members may also wish to talk with each student regarding his/her proposed case or review each case prior to submission to the rest of the class. Further, the case must present a problem that a manager or the firm needs to solve. In this regard, it may be helpful to suggest to students that they write up a case that depicts a crisis situation at work. This is important because it is hard to develop students' problem solving skills if the case doesn't contain a problem to be solved. In addition, students need to be told to only write up a case with which they are very familiar. This is important because during the role play other students (the consultants) will be asking questions regarding the case and the student (manager) must be able to answer the questions. Finally, the student (manager) who writes the case must know how the firm actually solved the problem presented in the case. This solution is presented to the class at the end of the role-play and helps to bring closure to the exercise.

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Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002

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