

Advancing student engagement in business management education: The impact of practice-based role-play as a pedagogical tool

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Abstract

This paper explores the findings of an action research (AR) project, part of a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCert HE) educational research project, aimed at understanding the impact of role play as a pedagogical tool to increase student engagement. The study involved a diverse cohort of 56 Master's-level students enrolled in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme at a higher education (HE) institution in London. A mixed methods approach was adopted, combining surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participant observations to gather comprehensive data to understand the impact of role-play as a method for increasing student engagement and consequent academic outcomes. Using Lewin's AR model, this study followed the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (2018) with ethical approval given by the university's ethical board, and the findings validated through triangulation principles to minimise researcher bias and ensure reliability. The study achieved a 60% response rate from participants across two different seminar groups, with the results indicating a strong positive relationship between the use of role-play and increased student engagement. Role-playing activities fostered active participation, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving amongst learners. The competitive elements embedded in the role-playing activities, such as 'internship role-playing', resulting in significant improvements in key employability and consulting skills – including communication,

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leadership, and strategic decision-making. The high pass rates for the module (96.5% for group 7 and 88.9% for group 12), further validates the effectiveness of this teaching approach.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that role-play, when integrated into business curriculum, holds significant potential for improving learning outcomes and preparing students for real-world challenges, lowering the gap between academia and practice. These results provide a basis for further exploration and refinement of active learning strategies in HE, contributing to authenticity in teaching and learning in HE.

Introduction

One of the contemporary challenges of Higher Education (HE) institutions fuels conversations around bridging the gap between theory and practice, for practitioners (Grafström, Jonsson and Klintman, 2023; Cohen, 2007; Rynes, Giluk and Brown, 2007) as well as for learners (Boud and Solomon, 2000; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Jackson, 2015). With this issue in mind, this research project was developed to address the applicability of practice-based learning through role-play activities in HE institutions as an approach to enhance student engagement and outcomes for one of the most complex modules (SG7001) within the Master's in Business Administration (MBA) programme in a university in the United Kingdom (UK). Focused on the impact of role-play as a pedagogical tool, an Action Research (AR) project was developed with implementation of team-based consulting projects paired with 'in-class' role-play internship activities, to facilitate a new learning experience for students, aiming therefore to provide insightful analysis and recommendations for effective and interactive educational approaches that can best support the learning and engagement of learners in HE, especially those undertaking postgraduate studies.

Research question: 'To what extent does the integration of practice-based role-play and team-based consulting projects enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in the SG7001 module of the MBA programme?'

This research question encapsulates the core elements of the AR project by highlighting a shift toward a relational, practice-oriented methodology. It emphasises the use of role-play and collaborative consulting assignments designed to narrow the divide between

theory and practice, thereby fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment for students.

Context

Effective teaching is, according to Biggs (2014), an action requiring constructive alignment that ensures that learning activities and assessments are geared towards the desired learning outcomes whilst also being engaging for students. This principle is also embedded in the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) prompting significant implications for HE professionals, especially regarding how teaching and curriculum development, as well as student engagement, are approached (Office for Students, 2023). The notion of reflexivity – a key promoter of self-examination that encourages educators to critically reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and professional engagement – is another key consideration that was applied throughout this research to enhance the teaching and learning experiences for learners as well as educators (Brookfield, 2017).

Furthermore, as an educator teaching the SG7001 module, through continuous reflexivity, and observations complemented with student feedback, I observed a common sentiment among students enrolled on the module – a diminishing interest in the seminar activities, attributable to the overly theoretical nature of the content, evidenced by a notable decline in attendance over the weeks. Most critically, students reported an inability to relate the theoretical concepts taught across the module with any practical implications.

These findings highlighted the need to implement innovative strategies to foster student engagement and participation, particularly among learners managing multiple commitments—a demographic that comprised most MBA students at the institution where the AR project was conducted.

Through continuous research and informed considerations, practice-based role-play proposed great possibilities for positive changes within this programme, enabling students to engage with ‘in-class’, practice-led consulting projects as well as internship role-playing activities that required learners to ‘step out of their comfort zones’ to foster the development of key leadership and critical thinking competencies.

Noor *et al* (2020) emphasised the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation through the development of active learning

environments that facilitate dynamic exploration and personal development over rigid theoretical frameworks. Thus, based on their work, this AR project sought to prioritise the development of a learning environment that is conducive to adaptation and discovery, offering a stimulating solution to the previous, overly theoretical approach and content.

Empowering authenticity and higher education through action research

Empowering authenticity in HE through AR requires a commitment to continuous reflection and adaptation. As noted by Efron and Ravid (2013), AR serves as a systematic inquiry that enables educators to identify pedagogical challenges, implement interventions, and assess their effectiveness. Furthermore, recent explorations of AR (Jensen and Dikilitas, 2025; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2020; Gibbs *et al.*, 2017) expanding upon foundational scholarship (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Carr and Kemmis, 1986), positions AR as a transformative mechanism for social change through self-reflective inquiry aimed at promoting social justice. These contemporary studies further demonstrate AR's capacity to enhance authenticity in teaching and learning, reinforcing its role in fostering meaningful and equitable educational practices.

Moreover, McNiff (2002) highlights AR's combination of diagnosis, action, and reflection, which empowers educators to challenge ineffective practices and improve outcomes. By engaging in ongoing cycles of action and reflection, practitioners can address issues of immediate concern while enhancing their competencies. Reflexivity is a crucial aspect of AR, requiring practitioners to continuously reflect on how their biases and actions influence the research, ultimately leading to more authentic teaching and learning experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Newby, 2010). In educational settings, AR empowers educators to simultaneously take on the roles of teacher and researcher, driving improvements in student outcomes. As Stewart (2024) explains, the cyclical nature of AR allows for constant refinement of educational practices, making it an essential approach for authentic engagement in HE. Models such as those of Lewin (1946) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) emphasise the importance of planning, acting, and reflecting to ensure continuous improvement, while Stringer's (2008) participatory action research highlights the value of community involvement and social justice, which are key to fostering authenticity in educational contexts.

Action research model chosen for this intervention

This research adopted Kurt Lewin's AR model as it allows a comprehensive and cyclical approach to the inquiry in various stages:

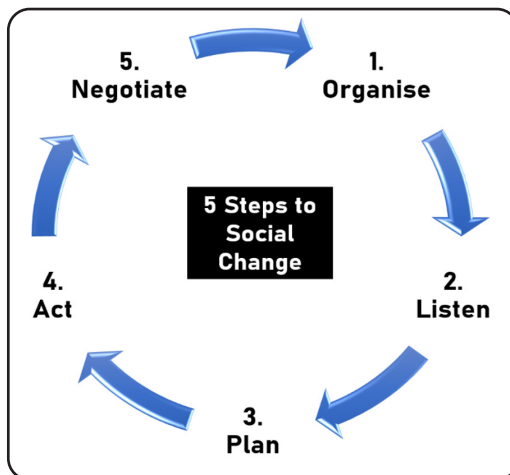


Figure 1. Five steps to social change (Citizens UK, 2024)

Throughout this process, it is expected that researchers engage in reflexivity to critically examine their assumptions, biases, and different perspectives to promote transparency, self-awareness, and ethical conduct, and the development of contextually grounded research findings (Clark and Johnson, 2019). Although this process allows practitioners to find solutions to pertinent issues/problems in their practice, it can present myriad complexities and challenges. Navigating through 'multiple roles, power dynamics, and ethical considerations throughout the research process' is one of many challenges that may arise, requiring the researcher's continuous focus and attention (Clark and Johnson, 2019, p. 289).

The intervention

The SG7001 module, a core component of the MBA programme, had developed an intimidating reputation amongst students, often being perceived as challenging and arduous, with a pass rate of 64.9% in 2022/2023. Student disengagement and feedback highlighted the overly theoretical content and delivery issues associated with the module, which further exacerbated the need for change. To tackle this challenge, a practice-based role-play intervention was designed to deepen the exploration of role-play as an instructional strategy, aiming to transform the learner engagement paradigm, enhance active participation, and drive

better student outcomes.

The 'in-class' role-play consulting and internship AR project took place in Semester A of 2024, and the activities spanned from Week 2 to Week 10 of teaching and involved students from two seminar groups of the SG7001 module, respectively named Groups 7 and 12. Each week, a number of students (on a rotational basis, in their respective seminar groups) had the opportunity to share knowledge and experience with the opposing consulting team, allowing them to observe, develop new skills, and present their findings to the entire class (referred to as the 'client panel'). Each student had the opportunity to rotate as CEO, leading the team and honing strategic skills aligned with the module outcomes. The activities included business-oriented case studies aligned with the module's learning outcomes and adapted from the proposed seminar activities. This required learners to actively engage with the learning material to propose solutions to real business issues within their consulting teams. Internship role-playing activities were introduced as competitive elements to further engage learners, with high performing teams being able to lead on projects and make key decisions that impacted both groups.

Literature review

Crookall and Hart (1982) underscored role-play as a powerful educational tool that stimulates active learning, builds social connections, and nurtures both personal and professional growth. Bonwell and Eison (1991) added that when students are actively involved, they develop deeper understanding and sharpen their critical thinking skills. However, a persistent challenge in HE, identified by Bligh (2000), is the disconnect between theory and practice, with students often finding it difficult to see the practical relevance of abstract concepts.

When teaching large cohorts, particularly in complex subjects that demand critical thinking and active participation, traditional, teacher-centred approaches, often passive and minimally engaging, may yield limited effectiveness. This challenge is especially evident in business education, where learners are expected to cultivate a solutions-oriented mindset (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Freeman and Dobbins, 2013). Research shows that role-play enhances students' ability to remember and apply what they have learned (Li and Lo, 2019) while also increasing engagement and motivation (Koppitz and Dresel, 2019), improving communication and social skills (Wang and Chen, 2018), and

fostering empathy and cultural competence (Smith *et al.*, 2017). Although there is extensive discourse on the benefits of role-play as a pedagogical device, the literature lacks support from empirical studies – especially within HE settings (Forbes, 2021) – and often highlights significant implementation challenges. For instance, time constraints can hinder role-playing integration, particularly in content-heavy courses (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). Training inefficiencies, as well as learners' resistance to the adoption of this approach are outlined as some of the key challenges for educators attempting to create an engaging environment (Smith and Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, the application of role-play through constructive alignment in HE remains complex. As such, aligning teaching with learning outcomes—a core principle of Biggs' (1999) constructive alignment theory—can be particularly challenging in highly theoretical modules. Nevertheless, constructivist learning theories, grounded in the writings of Piaget (1980) and Vygotsky (1978), position learners as active agents in their learning experience, integrating new knowledge with prior understanding. This reinforces the value of role-play as a teaching strategy, as it fosters collaboration and facilitates experiential learning.

Methodology

A participatory action research (PAR) approach was deployed, focused on collective participation including the researcher (seminar tutor) and students. As outlined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 349), PAR recognises the researcher 'as a facilitator, guide, formulator and summariser of knowledge' – a role embodied by the practitioner throughout this process. Further, the notion of PAR is not only distinguished by its methodology, which is focused on collective participation and outcomes pinned on principles of democracy, voice, and emancipation but also on the overall prospect of facilitation of positive change. In the context of this research, student engagement is the primary area of focus. By following Lewin's (1946) AR model, this project addressed different cycles of planning, action, and observation.

Research sample

This project engaged 58 students (30 students from Seminar Group 7 and 28 from Group 12). Before initiating the research, students were informed about the aim of the project being included in each cycle of the experiment. Principles of inclusion criteria were adopted to ensure that all participants were open to participatory learning approaches and fully understood their roles within this

experiment. For instance, these principles ensured that participants selected for the study understood that they were directly relevant to the research question under analysis. Furthermore, establishing well-defined eligibility parameters enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings, as a carefully chosen sample improves the likelihood that the results accurately reflect the broader population under analysis with the possibility of the applicability of the findings being considered beyond the immediate study sample (Creswell, 2017).

Data Collection

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used to gather the relevant data for this intervention. The chosen qualitative data collection methods for this research included observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in Weeks 5 and 10 of the study, which enabled the gathering of insightful data relating to students' experiences throughout this experiment. Additionally, a blend of quantitative and qualitative data was gathered via anonymous surveys.² Further insights into the data collection methodology applied to this study can be explored in the notes.¹

Survey design

The survey comprised eight questions, including two open-ended items aimed at assessing student engagement, satisfaction levels, and skill development, while also soliciting students' constructive feedback to enhance the overall process. Surveys were administered using Mentimeter, an online platform that facilitates real-time, interactive, and anonymous responses, thereby streamlining the overall data collection process. The platform's engaging and user-friendly interface was also an advantage to the study, encouraging higher responses rates in comparison to traditional survey methods (Johnson and Christensen, 2014). However, some limitations of this data collection method can be found in the notes.³

Addressing common method bias

To strengthen the validity of the study and reduce common method bias (CMB), this research employed methodological triangulation, incorporating quantitative survey data alongside qualitative observations and interviews (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Using multiple data collection techniques allowed for cross-validation of findings,

mitigating potential biases linked to a single method (Denzin, 2012; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The survey responses provided quantifiable insights into student engagement, while observations captured real-time behavioural interactions, and interviews offered in-depth perspectives on students' learning experiences. By integrating these methods, the study ensured a more comprehensive, reliable, and credible assessment of the effectiveness of role-play as an educational tool for enhancing student engagement.

Furthermore, reflexivity was upheld throughout the study, enabling the researcher to critically evaluate their potential influence and biases at every stage of the research process (Malterud, 2001).

Ethical considerations

This study followed the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2018) with ethical approval granted by the university's ethical board, before the start of the intervention. Additionally, an ethical research checklist was submitted and approved by both the course module leader and the SG7001 module leader, in alignment with the BERA guidelines (2024). The data collection methods, particularly the surveys, were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality, thereby fostering trust and encouraging higher response rates (Dillman *et al.*, 2014).

To ensure ethical conduct, all participants were informed of the project's aims and objectives before the start of the study. Due to the nature of qualitative research, where participant identities may be identifiable, the researcher strictly adhered to the ethical principle of *primum non nocere* – which ensures that no harm or risk were inflicted upon participants (Cohen, Manion and Morriso, 2011).

Data analysis

Survey data analysis

Given the small research sample and time constraints, descriptive statistics were not employed, as the focus was on extracting insightful trends rather than statistical generalisability. The quantitative data obtained from Mentimeter enabled an exploratory analysis of student perceptions regarding role-play's effectiveness in enhancing engagement, comprehension, and practical skill development.

Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data from student interviews and open-ended survey responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. This process involved familiarisation with the data, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and final reporting.

Results and evaluation

The role-play activities commenced in Week 2 and continued until Week 10 as part of the module's seminar sessions. During this period, rather than engaging in the pre-set traditional group activities outlined in the seminar activity guide, students participated in immersive role-playing exercises, working within two simulated 'in-class' consulting firms and assuming various professional roles.

Survey results

The results of the surveys indicate a strong positive reception to the use of role-play as a pedagogical tool in the seminar setting (see Appendix, Figure 2). The high percentages of students from both Group 7 (90% 'very much' and 10% 'yes') and Group 12 (94% 'very much' and 6% 'yes') enjoying the role-playing exercises reflect a clear engagement and enthusiasm toward the activity. Such findings are significant in the context of experiential learning, where active participation and immersion are crucial for developing practical skills and deeper understanding.

Crookal and Hart (1982) and Bligh (2000) suggest that the degree to which this activity was enjoyed by students is, potentially, linked to its ability to not only provide learners with an interactive space where they could take on the role of CEOs, and lead different projects and teams, but also, explore different areas of their employability skills and abilities. This data, aligned with observations from in-class interactions (especially from Week 10), shows that learners were able to progressively feel more confident as the weeks passed, acquiring a sense of 'more dominance' towards the concept of role-playing, which could, at least partly, explain why most of the learners enjoyed this concept. It is acknowledged, however, that the variance between learners who opted for 'very much' and 'yes', does not present significant data to suggest contradicting results regarding the acceptance of this

approach amongst learners.

The degree to which learners feel confident to work as part of a team after this experiment – results from Groups 7 and 12

Both groups responded that the role-playing activities supported them to feel more confident working as part of a team (100% of learners from both groups stated 'yes' to the proposed question).

These results are also aligned with the observations gathered throughout the research. Students from both groups became progressively more comfortable working as part of the team as the weeks passed, building a supportive relationship to ensure a positive performance from their team. Instead of working in group 'silos', students embraced the challenge and started to act in a competitive manner towards the other team, which increased their engagement towards the activities.

Although not expected in the beginning, it was observed that when competitive elements were added to the role-playing, students would become more eager to participate and work to outperform the other team, especially during the internship activities. It was observed that when introduced in a different environment, working with a different team, interns were more likely to assume an active role and demonstrate that they were adequately 'trained' by their original teams to deliver a reliable performance. Team loyalty was particularly present, outlining that these activities enabled students to get to know each other better, and essentially, create significant team bonds.

Role-play and employability skills – results from survey

The results from this survey show that 61% of students from Group 7 responded that working as part of a consulting firm enabled them to improve their employability skills 'very much', whilst 39% of students responded that it helped them 'to some extent'. On the other hand, 73% of students from Group 12 stated that working as part of a consulting firm enabled them to improve their employability skills 'very much', whilst 27% stated that it helped them 'to some extent'.

As expected, most students from both groups outlined that the role-playing activities also supported them to work on their employability skills, with 66% overall stating that the activities helped them 'to some extent'. By acting as an active participant on this research

project, the researcher also provided feedforward to all students, focusing especially on their employability skills and consultancy proficiency. Interview findings from Week 5 shows that when asked about how confident students felt regarding their employability skills (communication, teamwork, problem solving, self-management, organisation, and planning) the most recurrent theme on their responses was of a positive and enthusiastic tone stating that they felt that these activities really supported them to work on areas that they needed to further develop and to some extent, overcome, and/or work towards, overcoming the fear of public speaking.

Final module results and links to the research

The high pass rates observed in both groups after this experiment serve as a strong indicator that student engagement, facilitated through role-playing activities, was a key driver of academic success. Engagement in active learning methods has been widely recognised as a critical factor in student achievement, with research demonstrating that experiential learning approaches, such as role-play, enhance comprehension and retention by fostering active participation in the learning process (Kolb, 2014). Additionally, role-play and other interactive learning strategies have been shown to deepen cognitive engagement, leading to improved academic performance when compared with traditional, lecture-based teaching methods (Prince, 2004). The positive outcomes in this study further support existing literature, which highlights that experiential activities not only boost engagement and academic success but also contribute to the development of essential soft skills, such as teamwork and communication, which are increasingly valued in professional settings (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

However, the slight difference in pass rates between Group 7 (96.5%) and Group 12 (88.9%) suggests that factors such as group dynamics, consistency in implementation, and individual student characteristics may influence the effectiveness of role-playing interventions. These differences merit further investigation to fully understand the conditions that maximise the benefits of role-playing as a pedagogical tool.

Implications for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Previous research on the topic of active learning (Freeman *et al.*, 2014; Prince, 2004; Hmelo-Silver, 2004) and role-play as a pedagogical tool have demonstrated that this approach showed significant results on improving students' development

of practical skills (Rao and Stupans, 2012), enhancement of communication and teamwork (Matwiejczuk, 1997; Roubidoux *et al.*, 2017), and building confidence and engagement (Anderson, Krathwohl and Bloom, 2001; Lean *et al.*, 2006). Similarly, this AR project's findings demonstrate the value of role-play in the development of key employability skills as well as in the improvement of academic outcomes for postgraduate business students. The findings suggest that the integration of real-world simulations and case studies through role-play activities are beneficial not only for students' academic proficiency and results but also for their professional readiness. Throughout this project, students have demonstrated improved problem-solving abilities, enhanced collaborative skills, and higher levels of adaptability – competencies that are highly valued in contemporary workplaces. Also, the high pass rates observed for both groups are another mark of the success of this experiment, underscoring a crucial consideration for business educators in HE, that is, that interactivity plays a pivotal role in student success. Moreover, the findings of this study support the adoption of interactive, technology-enhanced classrooms, where digital tools and experiential learning strategies create environments that closely resemble real-world professional settings, preparing students for leadership roles in dynamic, team-based industries (Beetham and Sharpe, 2013; Biggs and Tang, 2011). While implementing innovative pedagogical strategies presents challenges, HE educators must also act as agents of change. With institutional support and faculty commitment, teaching and learning can be transformed into a more student-centred, interactive, and dynamic experience, equipping learners with the adaptive skills required to thrive in an evolving global workforce.

Conclusion

Overall, the data analysis shows that this intervention was positively received by the students, and although the survey participation rate was below the expected due to student attendance (the survey was shared in Week 9 before the Easter break), insights gathered through the thematic analysis of interviews and observations align with the initial statement. Most students enjoyed the role-play activities (90% of students in Group 7 and 94% of students in Group 12) and stated that they were able to develop and/or enhance their consulting and employability skills. It was also interesting to note that when introducing elements of competition, students were more excited to engage, with a clear 'team belonging' sentiment being established, drawing, therefore, a positive relationship between gamification and learning.

On the other hand, time constraints, especially when providing feedback and feedforward to students, limited a more thorough influence on students' engagement. Criticism and pressure to complete activities were the most recurring themes that diminished students' enjoyment of the intervention, as expected. Although the intention of the AR was to provide students with an opportunity to improve their business technical and transferable skills, it is understandable that, at points, receiving critical feedback can foster feelings of failure amongst learners (Fong *et al.*, 2018). Despite all measures being taken to decrease this, and support learners with clear action steps to improve their skills, the results show that this sentiment remained amongst some learners, which provides future actionable steps for further improvement and investigation.

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Notes:

1 Questionnaires are useful for collection of survey information since they are often easy to administer and straightforward to analyse. However, they require considerable time to be developed and refined (Wilson and McLean, 1994). Another data collection method that is primarily used for the purpose of gathering qualitative information is interviews. Interviews are grounded in social constructivism and phenomenology, helping researchers to gather in-depth insights into participants' perspectives and experiences. Although interviews are flexible tools for data collection as they support the integration of open-ended questions, it is important to note first, that they are open to interviewer bias, and second, issues of inconvenience and anonymity may arise, which, if not addressed appropriately, may negatively impact the findings of the research (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 409).

2 As outlined by Bryman (2016), surveys enable the collection of substantial amounts of data in a short amount of time, and their anonymisation encourages honest responses, which is a key aspect of ensuring the validity of findings. These findings will be able to support the understanding of the relationship between the independent variable (role play integration) and the dependent variable (student engagement).

3 Although surveys are valuable tools for data collection, their self-reported nature can be subject to bias, and although the incorporation of anonymity can enhance student participation and honesty, data collected cannot be linked back to individual students for the purposes of following on the feedback received, and/or deeper analysis on findings (Creswell, 2017).

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