Intercollegiate Role-Play: Creating a Sense of Reality and Uncertainty in the Sales Classroom

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Purpose: The authors propose a role-playing exercise where students from different universities engage using videoconferencing technology. This type of role-playing exposes students to an increased level of uncertainty, similar to what they may encounter in their early professional lives. Doing so enhances the development of skills that are in demand in the modern job market, without requiring significant additional resources in the classroom, while reducing instructor time in conducting the exercises.

Method Design and Sample: Sales classes from two universities matched students for two different role-play scenario assignments. The students recorded the role-play in real time, using videoconferencing technology, and submitted their recording, along with self- and peer-evaluations as the deliverables in the assignments.

Results: Students reported increased confidence and improved communication skills, along with a perception of better career preparedness. While they struggled with using the videoconferencing technology platform and had reservations about working with a student they did not know, they perceived the outcomes as positive. Instructors observed student improvement in these and other areas.

Value to Marketing Educators: Marketing educators may utilize this format, in whole or in part, to introduce an additional layer of uncertainty and realism into role-play assignments. Instructors needing to serve more students in less time may also find this format valuable when resources are limited.

Keywords: Role-play, sales exercise, videoconference, sales technology, communication skills, confidence

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BACKGROUND

Role-play exercises are a form of experiential learning designed to help students develop valuable skills in a sales curriculum (Inks & Avila 2008; Knight, Mich & Manion 2014; Maher & Hughner 2005). Sales role-plays are viewed as one of the most effective teaching methods in basic and upper-level sales courses around the world (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy 2011). Role-play exercises allow students to engage in an interactive environment to develop their communication and critical thinking skills in real time while also allowing for the ability to identify and experience differences between theory and practice (Alvarez, Taylor & Rauseo 2015; Widmier, Loe, & Selden 2007). Video-recorded role-plays increased student confidence and performance in job interviews (Castleberry, 1989) and decreased training costs for newly-hired salespeople (Ingram, LaForge & Lee 2002). For Generation Y students, semi-structured role-play exercises lead to enhanced learning and increased levels of enjoyment in the classroom (Sojka & Fish 2008).

In most sales courses, role-plays include two classmates in the roles of buyer and seller, or one student playing the seller role and either the instructor or an outsider professional playing the part of the buyer. However, recent sales-based experiential learning exercises have shown the benefits that can exist by having two different classes engage with each other in differing roles (Chapman, Schetzsle & Whalers 2016). When the players are familiar with one another, as in the case of classmates, the role-play does not always offer an authentic experience to accomplish what is necessary for students to be successful. Because of this familiarity, role-plays can sometimes be more performance art than a sales-focused learning tool, effectively eliminating the factors of listening and adapting which have been identified as gaps between sales theory and sales practice (Pullins, Timonen, Kaski, & Holopainen 2017).

With the current popularity of sales courses, some educators find themselves struggling to keep up with the time demands of playing a part in role-plays for an increasing number of students. Moreover, while including professionals in the role-play enhances community engagement and increases the value of the role-play for the students as a networking opportunity, the recruiting, scheduling, and creating consistency with the feedback of those professionals can pose challenges for some schools.

Another reality of modern sales careers is that many companies are augmenting many of their face-to-face interactions between salespeople and clients with virtual communication and videoconferencing technology (HR Blog 2015). In addition to

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communication skills, problem-solving, and self-management, the use of new technologies is one of the most important skills necessary for students to gain in a marketing education that prepares them to be "work ready" (Rundle-Thiele, Bennett, & Dann 2005). The effective use of presentation skills on videoconferencing platforms is becoming a mainstay in sales careers. While traditional face-to-face role-play exercises will continue to be a valuable tool for sales educators, we propose that adding videoconferencing technology and unfamiliar role-play partners can introduce layers of ambiguity and adaptiveness that are found in modern-day sales situations.

THE INNOVATION

Given the above concerns, instructors from two medium-sized regional state universities developed an exercise that not only reduces the familiarity between students but also increases the need for the seller to listen to the buyer and adapt to his or her concerns. Sales students can practice elements common in the professional selling environment and do so in a space that allows for students to make mistakes and learn from them. Consequently, students from one university act as buyers and students from another as sellers to complete a sales-call role-play exercise using video conferencing technology. Acting as the buyer would allow sales students to empathize with the buyer role, an ability that has been shown to lead to increased trust and satisfaction with the salesperson (Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour & Shepherd 2005). This role-play exercise limits some of the challenges of traditional role-play exercises described above, while also introducing the use of new technology and a sense of unfamiliarity between the buyer and the seller, and uncertainty of response from the other party. We believe that, when combined with a traditional role-play exercise, the students from both universities could experience sales situations that more closely resemble pressures and realities present in modern-day sales calls.

In order to implement this exercise, personal selling classes from two universities of similar size and level within the curriculum partnered in the role-play. Both classes used the same 9th edition *Selling: Building Partnerships* textbook by Stephen Castleberry and John Tanner (ISBN:9780077861001). This textbook was ideal as there are multiple role-play exercises throughout the chapters and two in-depth role-play scenarios in the appendix of the textbook. During the semester, students were assigned one practice and two complete role-play assignments.

The practice role-play assignment would be for regular class credit, similar to an in-class exercise, and would be completed by student partners within their class. The two in-depth role-play assignments carried significant weight in the grading scale and were to be carried out by appointment within a videoconferencing platform with a student from the other university. Each student would play the role of buyer in one scenario and seller in the other. Because the classes were two different sizes (32 in one and 34 in another), the larger

class had one pair of students perform the assignment between themselves.

First, as practice, students were paired with their classmates to record video of a brief role-play exercise. This practice assignment had multiple purposes. First, the students could become familiar with the rubric used for grading. The rubric for the in-class exercise was the same used in the partnered exercise. Second, the students could understand the flow of how an in-class sales call should go before attempting the more elaborate, technology-dependent role-play exercises. This exercise would be useful in eliminating some of the nerves stemming from doing an exercise of this type for the first time. Finally, the students would have a reference point to compare the effectiveness of the intercollegiate role-play exercise to provide the instructors with feedback.

In the practice, students recorded their interaction, and then uploaded the video to YouTube. They then posted a link to their unlisted YouTube video on the class online discussion board, along with a brief self-critique. Posting on YouTube allows for technology to still be used and for the assignment to work on both the Blackboard and Desire2Learn class management systems that were used in the universities. Once all of the video links had been posted, each student pair was charged with critiquing at least one other group in the comments on the class message board. To prevent a quid-pro-quo grading situation, no two groups were allowed to review each other. Following the posting of these reviews, instructors held a debriefing during a regular class period, in which they introduced the format and requirements of the partnered role-play exercises.

Role-Play 1 was based on a selling situation for Stubb's BBQ sauce, while Role-Play 2 was based on a selling situation for NetSuite CRM software. While, conceivably, the seller for Role-Play 2 may have an advantage over the seller from Role-Play 1 due to the familiarity of the exercise, there were some key differences in the role-play scenarios that limited this advantage. Role-Play 2 was slightly more advanced than the first exercise as the students were selling a non-tangible service, the provided objections from the buyer were more skeptical and adversarial towards the seller, and more negotiation was possible as the selling options were more complex regarding discounts for contract length. Because of these differences, Role-play 2 sellers faced a more uncertain situation.

PROCEDURES

Several months before the semester began, the instructors compared syllabi and developed the calendar for the assignments, being careful to include adequate content delivery prior to the assignment and comparable in-class exercises that prepared students for the different aspects of the sales presentation. The instructors compared progress often to ensure that both classes were on the same track in terms of timing of the material. The role-play assignment description was listed in the syllabi with limited details, noting that more information would be forthcoming as the assignment

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dates approached. While students in both classes expressed excitement about the opportunity to participate, there was some anxiety among students in both classes that a large percentage of their grade would be reliant on interaction with someone that they did not know at a different university. To minimize the effect of these concerns, the instructors took care to be consistent in their approach to the assignment and outlined the basis of grading. The assignment grade was based solely on each student's overall performance, the completeness and clarity of self- and peer-evaluations, and a written reflection on the exercise.

To create the videoconferencing environment, the instructors chose the Adobe Connect platform on the advice of the IT staff at both universities and based on the availability of software licenses at both institutions. Using an online scheduling program (Signup.com), students signed up for one-hour time slots. Those in the seller role signed up first, after which those in the buyer role were instructed to sign up only in time slots where a seller was listed. Once a time slot was complete with a buyer and a seller, the instructors assigned specific scenarios for the interaction. As the instructors were the only ones who had the buyer scenarios (they are only present in the instructor's copy of the textbook), sellers we unable to see the buyer scenarios. Each participant was instructed to learn their scenario and do any research they deemed necessary to play their part effectively. Any schedule changes on the students' part became their responsibility, making it necessary to communicate with their partner, decide on an alternative time, find an available time slot on the scheduling system, and hold a meeting at the new time. For the second role-play assignment, students were allowed to partner with the same person. However, the sellers would have to seek them out on the online sign-up form and partner with them.

After finishing the assignment, students completed an evaluation of their performance and the performance of their counterparts at the other university. The instructors made the ultimate evaluation of the holistic assignment, but this allowed the students to reflect on and revisit their assignments with a skeptical eye. Evaluations for sellers were made using a rubric based on presentation, asking appropriate questions, and handling objections. This rubric is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Grading Rubric

Approach	**15**
(Effectively gains attention and build rapport)	
• Professional introduction: Full Name and Company	
• Effectively builds rapport	
Needs Identification	**20**
(Obtain a clear understanding of customer's situation in order to prepare a customized presentation)	
• Effectively determined relevant facts about company and/or buyer	
• Effectively uncovered needs of the buyer: Restate Problems and Hidden Concerns	
• Asked effective questions that brought to the buyers' attention what happens to company or the buyer when problems continue (helped convert implied needs to explicit needs)	
Gained pre-commitment to consider the product/service and smooth transition to presentation	
Product/Service Presentation	**20**
(Persuasively match your product's benefits to meet needs of the buyer)	
• Did you build sufficient credibility?	
• Presented benefits based upon needs of buyer instead of only features	
• Used appropriate/professional visual aids	
• Effectively involves the buyer in the demonstration	
• Effective use of trial closes (follow-up questions to determine where buyer is in decision process)	
Overcoming Objections	**20**
(Eliminate concerns or questions to customer's satisfaction)	
• Initially gains better understanding of objection	
• Sufficient probing	
• Effectively answers the objection	
• Confirms that the objection is no longer a concern of the buyer	
Close	**15**
(Take initiative to understand where you stand with buyer now and for the future)	
• Persuasive in presenting a reason to buy	
• Appropriate commitment from the buyer, given the nature of this particular sales call	
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	**10**
Effective verbal communication skills	
Total Points	**100**

SOURCE: Baker & Delpechitre (2016)

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For buyers, the evaluations were based on the perception of whether the scenario was followed appropriately by the buyer and whether the buyer's objections and negotiation techniques were realistic and relevant. These in-depth self-evaluations were useful not only for the students to understand their own development but also for the instructors as they could be shared and used in grading and to identify areas for improvement.

IMPLEMENTATION AND RESPONSE

Following the assignments, students at both institutions responded to an open-ended questionnaire about their experience. The four questions asked and select responses appear in Table 2.

Table 2: Questions Asked and Select Student Responses

Q1: "Three things I gained …"	Q2: "The most challenging thing…"	Q3: Did you improve from RP 1 to RP 2?	Q4: What did you like LEAST?
Better communication skills, experience in sales pitches, and experience in online meetings/communicating with someone I haven't met before.	Potential to not know someone and therefore risking having an awful partner	Yes, I felt way more comfortable this time since I knew what to expect.	Adobe was complicated but not as bad (as in RP1)
Adobe Connect knowledge, buying & selling knowledge (how to prepare), Communicated with a stranger in a selling situation.	Me signing up for the wrong time slot and having to go into panic mode to fix it.	Yes, I was much more confident. My eye contact was stronger, and our communication remained effective with one another.	awkward silences so we weren't talking over each other.
I learned that you need to be prepared being both the buyer and seller. I learned there are different moods a buyer could have and I was to be stern and not willing to budge in my scenario. Sales calls aren't as bad as I thought they would be.	For me I'd much rather like to do role-plays in person due to dealing with technology. At first, it was difficult getting everything worked. Also, in the end, the link was hard to copy the link.	Role-Play 1 Everything was bad. The scenario, setup, partner, prep time, my voice, communication, nervousness, and the list goes on. Role-Play 2 everything went extremely well.	It was harder to be the buyer and not have control of the scenario
Conference call experience. Buying experience. A sense of how personal selling can be applied effectively, even in a buying situation.	I didn't like not knowing what to expect or who was going to pop-up, but I guess that makes it more lifelike.	Yes. I was more aware of what information I needed to have before going into the role-play.	The time constraints (an hour almost wasn't enough time to set up) – Time Crunch
An understanding of the amount of research involved in selling, Dealing with difficult circumstances, and careful scheduling.	It was harder to be the buyer and not really have control of the scenario.	Being the buyer seemed easier, so I was less nervous. That helped with the flow, I think.	Scenarios had too little (1) or too much (1) information, scenarios were similar to the ones we used in practice
1. Better understanding of video selling and buying. 2. Don't always assume someone else is prepared. 3. Being prepared makes the job so much easier.	I still didn't like the fact that we didn't have a clue what the other person was going to ask. Also, I still didn't like the fact that we didn't know the other person.	Yes, because being a buyer is easy. All I had to do was poke holes in a sales pitch.	My role-play had me to be assertive and borderline rude and the person I was working with was extremely nice, so it was hard to be mean

A total of 62 students responded in writing to the questionnaire during class time. The student responses were content analyzed, first by establishing categories of similar responses and then by utilizing two external raters in order to validate the responses' representation of the categories and calculate Cohen's Kappa (Cohen 1960) as verification of interrater reliability. One common theme emerged, which encompassed the uncertainties of communication in an unfamiliar setting. Analysis of the 62 responses by external raters generated a Cohen's Kappa of .65, indicating

substantial agreement that the responses were representative of this theme. Three categories emerged from the item, "What did you gain from these assignments?" First, 28 of the responses listed increased confidence in their preparation and presentation skills (Cohen's Kappa 1.00), 37 listed increased awareness of what it takes to interact in an online professional environment (Cohen's Kappa 0.64), and 33 listed improved communication skills (Cohen's Kappa 1.00). All of the identified categories that emerged were elements of the intended sources of

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uncertainty from which the lessons of the exercise would be learned.

While the same unknowns existed relative to the scenarios, students said they felt better prepared and less nervous the second time around, noting that they built confidence by taking charge of the parts of the meeting that they could control.

Improvements for the assignments suggested by students in some cases revolved around making the assignment easier for them. However, many of the suggestions were quite constructive and included instructing students more on ways to control the variables they could control while maintaining the challenge of working with unfamiliar people and having to think on their feet in a simulated scenario.

Technology aside, the students completed the exercise with skills they learned in the classroom paired with their level of preparation of the scenarios. While the experience of being live online and interacting with an unfamiliar counterpart produced valuable pressure, the students gained additional insights by viewing and evaluating the video recordings of their own and their peers' role-plays. Most students expressed detailed, constructive critiques of the exercise participants, often complimenting their role-play partners, but also pointing out verbal and nonverbal behavior, which illustrated different levels of professionalism. The valuable feedback provided by peers and the instructors appears to have stimulated a fair level of self-awareness among the students, as evidenced by comments about their abilities.

TAKEAWAYS

The essentials of this cooperative exercise include a partnership between similar classes and institutions, careful coordination of technology, and significant work with reflection and self-evaluation after the fact. The distance and technology elements add significant relevance over a traditional sales role-play exercise with minimal time and effort. In addition to the positive feedback from students, when the instructors shared details about the assignment with colleagues,

administration, and industry partners, this method was met with interest and praise for taking steps to improve student preparedness for entry-level sales positions and beyond. In the future, it would be interesting to perform a longitudinal version of this exercise in order to explore how perceptions changed over time. Also, it would be interesting to see if any of the students kept in contact with each other, as the opportunity to develop peer relationships could be a possible benefit of this exercise.

While the authors of this innovation are friendly with each other and were allowed leeway in initially setting up the exercise, this exercise could be easily replicated by other instructors. The keys to success are communication, planning, and making sure that students understand and practice the technology used for the assignment. In addition, the universities should be relatively similar in terms of schedule and class size. Even if the classes are of different sizes, rotating some students into the intercollegiate role-play should be effective. We would note that it is the sense of uncertainty for students that makes this a unique exercise. However, the more the student can know about, and experiment with, the technology used for the assignment, the smoother it will be for all parties involved. If a cloud-based video conferencing solution is not available, there are many software programs that allow for students to record a video conference call. While this may introduce an additional step into the process, there are many free online tools that are both available and familiar to students. YouTube has excellent tutorials available for converting and posting videos. Programs like Zoom! or WebEx (Cisco) are other options instructors might consider in the future. Whatever the platform, the instructors suggest holding a hands-on technology lesson prior to launching the role-play assignments so students have hands-on experience and guidance using the technology.

It is important to note that while this exercise may not replace traditional role-play exercises, we present an alternative for those educators who are experiencing challenges when conducting role-plays personally, or in recruiting professionals to role-play with students.

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