Original Paper

Rethinking Role-play and Simulation in Negotiation Pedagogy

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Abstract

Though there are not unified research findings in the effectiveness of role-play and simulation as experiential learning tools, they have been widely applied in negotiation pedagogical practices. This article aims to reexamine role-play and simulation in negotiation pedagogy. It discusses the current challenges with role-play and simulation in achieving the desired learning outcomes, authenticity, and dynamics. It also outlines the approaches and experiments with role-play and simulation for a better pedagogical model to address these challenges.

Keywords

role-play, simulation, negotiation pedagogy

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, role-play and simulation have been wildly applied in a variety of negotiation courses in order to achieve better learning outcomes in terms of immediate application of knowledge and skills and skill transferability (Ebner & Kovach, 2010). As Kolb's (1984, 2014) put forward the concept of experiential learning, role-play and simulation are considered effective teaching methods in its toolbox, and have become one of the most important, recognized, and effective methods in negotiation pedagogy in a lot of countries (Ebner & Kovach, 2010; Alexander & LeBaron, 2010; Bell &Valley, 2020). In a study of negotiation teaching methods, researchers conducted a multi-disciplinary comparison across the fields of business, law, public policy and planning, and international relations, and found that role-play and simulation was the only one method most frequently used in all fields (Fortgang, 2000). Simulated negotiation was also used by all instructors in 10 negotiation courses offered by the United Association of Law Schools from 2003 to 2012 (Druckman & Ebner, 2013). In a survey of teachers attending the 2009 Mediated Negotiation Conference at Harvard University, 96% of all 130 teachers regularly taught with role-play and simulation, and 82.7% considered it to be very important pedagogical practice (Corsi, 2010).

Early researchers divided in their opinions as how well role-play and simulation could increase the learning outcomes (Randel et al., 1992; Bredemeier, 1981; Pierfy, 1977; Greenblat, 1973). Most studies found that through a role-play in classroom, there are observable improvement in students' interest and motivation in learning negotiation (Randel et al., 1992; Bredemeier, 1981, Cherryholmes, 1966; Greenblat, 1973). However, many studies have warned the overuse of role-play and simulation without thoroughly understanding its risks. As tools of experiential learning, role-play and simulation often restructure the teaching process to achieve increase the experience. Consequently, unmanageable risks of a decentralized experience and minimal output are foreseeable (Kolb, 2014; Keeton & Tate, 1978). Secondly, compared to traditional lectures, simulations rely more on the engagement of students for a desirable result. Uncertainty in students' performance or even the temporary absence of one student could sabotage a entire class plan (Druckman & Ebner, 2013). Another common demonstration of this uncertainty is the downplay or escalation of conflicts in negotiation due to students' over- or under-identification of the negotiation roles provided, leading to intense emotional stress in teachers and students (Druckman & Ebner, 2013; Bernard, 2009). This method is also demanding and time-consuming, with teachers designing the scenario and students preparing for it before the class. The heavily invested practices for both parties dictate a bigger interest and motivation in students, and could, however, generate higher level of frustration once they fail (Alexander & LeBaron, 2010).

Research and practice in teaching negotiations as discussed above have been piloted with more perspectives and dimensions recently. However, there is still an empirical gap in research in China. Some studies focused on the experiment of experiential learning, in teaching negotiation, with case method, role-play and simulation, and a hybrid of teaching methods (Zhao, 2021; Ling & Huang, 2018; Li & Deng, 2018; He & Xu, 2017; Xiang, 2016; Wang, 2015). But these researches aimed at complementing traditional lectures rather than a curriculum and teaching pedagogy centering around experiential learning. Coupled with a limited time and student participation, they did not provide an in-depth understanding of how role-play and simulation was executed in negotiation classrooms in Chinese universities, as well as the risks and challenges unique to Chinese classrooms. Furthermore, students participated in the piloted classes include students enrolled in three-year programs in vocational schools and undergraduates in universities. The different setting of programs and levels of students lead to polarized teaching methods and learning outcomes, which requires separate and specialized research. The research gap could be bridged with more empirical evidence with breadth and depth to establish role-play and simulation as important assets in teacher's tool box. Therefore, this study aims at answering the question: how could the reexamination and reflection of role-play and simulation in recent years in other countries could provide a future pathway for teachers in Chinese negotiation classes.

2. Pedagogical Challenges

Early researchers mostly aimed at verifying the advantages of role-play and simulation versus traditional teaching methods in teaching negotiation. Greenblat (1973) claimed that the efficacy of using role-play and simulation in classrooms could contribute to the learning outcomes of students in the following six categories: 1) heighten motivation and interest; 2) promote concept learning; 3) enhance decision-making and analytical skills; 4) raise students' empathy; 5) increase students' self-awareness and self-confidence; 6) harmonize student-student and teacher-student relationships. Researchers later advocated that role-play and simulation is able to improve students' motivation and interest and greatly prolongs their memory of knowledge (Cherryholmes, 1966; Bredemeier, 1981; Randel et al., 1992). However, the claims that they would enhance students' abilities in concept learning, cognition, critical thinking, and decision-making were not validated (Cherryholmes, 1966; Pierfy, 1977; Bredemeier, 1981; Randel et al., 1992). Besides the limited advantages agreed, Alexander and LeBaron (2010) categorized another three potential risks teachers need to address in using role-play and simulation: 1) cultural conflict of using others' identities; 2) possibility of reinforcing stereotypes; 3) exaggeration of skill transferability. This critique is embedded in a deeper concern that questions the feasibility and impact of pedagogical practice in negotiation teaching and training. This concern entails a doubt that the effect of role-play and simulation is anecdotal, neither theory-based nor scientific-grounded (Ebner & Kovach, 2010). However, Patton (2009) responded that this concern is raised early when many pedagogical practices in negotiation teaching are considered pioneering and lack empirical evidence, and could be addressed better now with new or revised practices to retain the advantages and improve the downsides (Ebner & Kovach, 2010).

Secondly, the authenticity challenge long exists in using role-play and simulation due to the impossibility of reproducing a real negotiation in terms of scenarios, people, processes, and outcomes in the classrooms (Raiffa, 1982; Coben, 2012; Fuller, 2012). Poitras et al. (2013) defined it as ecological validity in negotiation classrooms and explained how a successful establishment of it could contribute to an effective engagement of students. Ecological validity involves mundane, experimental, and psychological realism for students in negotiation simulations, which jointly decide to which extent the simulation gets close to a reality and to which extent students identify with real negotiators. Authenticity is also implicated by other studies as a major determinant of student engagement and learning outcomes (Marks, 2000), and effective reproduction of real negotiation situations is believed to promote active participation from students (Blumenfeld et al., 2006). However, due to the complexity of real negotiations and limited time and resources, most teachers and schools could not afford to replicate the real negotiation scenarios. Under- or over-identification of negotiation roles, enhanced level of stress, tension and anger in students, downplay or scalation of conflicts, as discussed earlier, are found to be the consequences of lack of authenticity (Bernard, 2009). If a negotiation simulation is reduced to empty talks, students could hardly endeavor for a mutually satisfying result (Poitras et al., 2013). Furthermore, the unreal experience would likely to arouse emotional responses far away from those of real negotiators, which could give rise to

difficulty in understanding the complexity and feasibility of negotiation strategies (Druckman & Olekalns, 2008).

The third pedagogical challenge is the static architecture (Watkins, 2007). A usual practice of role-play and simulation begins with a case designed by the teacher and given to the students to prepare ahead of time. Though the students are often left without interventions during the bargain and concession, the scenario, parties, issue, interest, and scope of a negotiation simulation is predefined. Because of lack of dialogue in case design, students' influence of the case is minimized. Babcock (2007) warned that a fixed negotiation simulation is highly likely to generate an isolated understanding and experience of negotiation against the complexity and dynamics in real negotiations. Ebner and Efron (2011) also illustrated how the solutions of authenticity could stifle the dynamics of a simulation exercise. In addressing the authenticity challenge, many teachers design a reality-based simulation aiming at factual proximity and situational familiarity. But the precise fidelity to reality could solidify the architecture of simulation and kill the creativity and learning potential of students. However, Watkins (2007) claimed that by incorporating the concept of "manageable dynamics", students could influence in a way that yields advantages with a stable basis, where teachers and students could jointly orient, confront and evaluate the risks and outcomes.

3. Rethinking Role-play and Simulation

3.1 Creating a Pseudo-reality

Authenticity, or reality-proximity, has been recognized as a central issue in advancing the learning experience and outcome in negotiation simulations (Ebner & Efron, 2011). Therefore, to create an exercise, which is close to real negotiations in terms of scenarios, issues, and roles which students find comfortable to fit in and identify and capable to play, continues to be essential in the argument.

3.1.1 Establishing Partnership with Corporations and Practitioners

Hartley et al. (2017) introduced a corporation partner, CACI International, in the negotiation simulations, with managers assuming the roles of suppliers to negotiate with students. In their survey later, a majority of participating students affirmed the authenticity in their experience and attributed the progress in their learning to the involvement of CACI in the actual negotiation simulation and preparation. However, having one company to participate in the simulation is beyond the time and resources for most universities and teachers. A modification of this partnership was suggested by Groth and Glevoll (2007) to invite a practitioner as guest lecturer to attend the simulation. Practitioner volunteer recruitment on a long-term basis or a remote attendance via phone call, email, and video conference could contribute to the future viability of this method (Hartley et al., 2017; Mozahem, 2019). Scenarios or story lines could be accordingly designed to incorporate a geographic distance in order to attain realism for students (Ebner, 2011; Ebner & Kovach, 2010). Lastly, real cases could be used in simulations. Contrasting the simulated result to the real one helps students understand and explore variables in real negotiations (Dias & Navarro, 2018).

3.1.2 Adding Elements from the Real World

A more realistic negotiation environment and negotiation process could be created to approximate the daily reality of simulated negotiations, such as having simulations in business conference rooms, using company document templates, adopting business dress code, introducing business rituals like self-introductions, handshakes, exchange of business cards and small talks in networking (Poitras et al., 2013). In terms of negotiation roles, there are two polarized approaches, to closely match students' actual personalities or design new identities with no familiarity and similarity for students (Poitras et al., 2013; Ebner & Kovach, 2010). The former is argued to elicit comfortable identification of roles and thus better engagement; the latter is believed to stimulate a self-study of roles assigned and creativity in playing the roles (Ebner & Kovach, 2010). As to the process, simulations could be upgraded to a multi-issue and multi-party negotiation (Lande, 2012), or include details, contingencies, and new parties halfway in order to increase the urgency and emotional charges (Ebner & Efron, 2005). Weiss (2008) proposed the concept of Mega-simulation based on his fifteen years of negotiation teaching experience. He used real-life cases of large international business negotiations, set up multi-session, multi-party simulations with 9 to 16 participants, and designed complete role profiles for each student to better enhance students' understanding and problem-solving skills in a multicultural context. Volkema (2007) demonstrated that adding real interests or stakes of students could facilitate their engagement and outcomes. Money, scores, and peer evaluations are common elements to urge for an agreement. Studies also showed that a written agreement is better stimuli for students, with terms which could be added or subtracted by both parties on the spot (Coben, 2012; Ebner et al., 2012). A hybrid of all these approaches is well executed in a simulation designed by Klaw (2016), who left the students to clarify their BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) and choose a contract template online and adapt it. The attempt was highly thought of by the students, who reported engaging experience and fruitful learning results in the evaluation.

3.1.3 Adventure Learning

Cohn and Ebner (2010) argued that the concept of adventure learning can be incorporated, such as organizing students to negotiate in the local market, with the aim of adding real-world negotiation elements to enhance students' experience. Alexander and LeBaron (2011) advocated the use of adventure learning through a successful manifestation in an international outward-bound program. Unlike usual assumptions about adventure learning, the application in negotiation simulation is not time-consuming and could be easy to execute. Simple games like trust circle and human knot are proposed. Nevertheless, researchers also warned the perceived risks of outdoor adventures like physical injuries and stresses and suggested a thoughtful precaution taken before the adventures (Alexander & LeBaron, 2011; Cohn & Ebner, 2010).

3.2 Managing Dynamics

The concept of manageable dynamics proposed by Watkins (2007) implicates a reverse power relation against that in a traditional classroom which prescribes a teacher in the center to control and influence, and breaks a linear teaching and learning pattern. For example, students could design simulations from their previous intern experiences or with the help of practitioners invited from the companies. Other students then conduct the simulation with the case designed. In this experiment, students reported a higher level of concept learning, which is suggested with no observable improvement compare with other methods by early studies (Germain-Thomas et al., 2011). Students also had more realistic experience and satisfying engagement with this approach, and students in the design group showed significant increases in conceptual learning, relational understanding, retention time, and satisfaction (Druckman & Ebner, 2013). A study showed that this design reduces students' doubts about realism and actively reorders the linear process of negotiation by adding contradictions and interlocking factors, which all contribute to an enhanced experience (Olekalns & Druckman, 2014). Another experiment in enriching dynamism is to teach with videos. Bordone and Carr (2013) started Critical Decision in Negotiation Project and worked closely with a lot of professionals to finalize a series of videos on teaching negotiation. These videos focused on three themes—openings and process, tactics, and communication skills in negotiation. Students could watch and analyze videos to acquire a big picture of negotiations (Ebner & Kovach, 2010). Stokoe (2014) proposed to use video footages of real negotiations, pausing at key points to allow students to improvise with the roles and complete the rest of the negotiation. Then their immediate reactions are compared with the real endings in the video to prompt self-reflections. Furthermore, with the maturation of artificial intelligence, human-computer negotiation is underway. Software and websites have aided negotiation simulations in a more sophisticated and dynamic way (Khan & Baldini, 2020; Eisencraft, 2017; Urlancher, 2014; Wilkenfeld, 2004).

3.3 Reshaping the Outcomes

Debrief is researched and adopted by many researchers and teachers as an effective approach to promote the learning outcomes of negotiation simulations. Immediate feedback by the instructor, practitioner and audience helps to form an in-depth understanding of negotiation concepts (Patton, 2009; Coben, 2012; Deason et al., 2013). Curhan et al. (2006) suggested a questionnaire and follow-up interview to understand the subjective value of students' participation—that is, students' self-evaluation of their negotiation performance, in order to promote instructional and individual progress. More importantly, these evaluations could be introduced into the metrics of measuring a negotiation simulation or individual performance. Early studies tended to compare role-play and simulation with traditional teaching methods. However, if these methods are acknowledged as progressive attempts to bridge the gap of traditional classrooms, new metrics should be integrated in line to increase the efficacy. A second recommended approach to shape the outcome is to design the negotiation simulation on independent concepts and evaluate based on the scope and extent of how students perform in line with these concepts (Beenen & Barbuto, 2014; Schnurr et al., 2014).

3.4 Blending with Creativity

Some scholars argue that there is no need for a major reform of negotiation simulations and traditional simulations can be applied in a new way to achieve teaching objectives. However, more researches on negotiation simulations find significance in cooperation with artists and communities to draw on creative pedagogies and technological tools (Harding, 2020, 2004; Dias & Navarro, 2018; Wallace, 2017; Macduff, 2012; Alexander & LeBaron, 2011; Patton, 2009). Macduff (2012) illustrated with an early experiment to teach with blogs and discussed a possible inclusion of social media, to address the gap between technology access and skill training among students. Harding (2004) explored improvisational theater in negotiation simulation and discussed how active listening and reading the cues given by performers could influence critical moments in a negotiation. He re-examined his research years later and further explained the problem of misconception of answers in negotiations (Harding, 2020). This attempt with theater performers, as well as other artists as dancers, writers, and musicians, is recommended to stimulate creativity in helping to cultivate communication, conflict-solving and relational abilities of students. With visual, audio, or kinesthetic effects jointly to produce a desirable outcome, students will learn in a way that could not be achieved through role-plays or simulations alone (Alexander & LeBaron, 2011).

4. Conclusion

These experimented approaches are intended for an optimized student engagement and emotional experience proximate to the reality (Olekalns & Druckman, 2014). However, such practices could not be applied without thoughtful and deliberate design and monitoring. For example, Poitras et al. (2013) pointed out that during such simulations, teachers need to actively help to establish and maintain a positive negotiation climate and care for the emotional security of students, otherwise students' motivation and self-confidence may be disproportionately damaged if they perform poorly or the negotiation does not turn out as expected. Culturally, studies showed that to assume an identity provided in role-play and simulation could be considered an impolite and irrational act in a lot of non-western cultures. Students in these cultures need a creative way to participate, in order to deal with this fake reality. Teachers also must face the potential danger of strengthened stereotypes, if identities are designed with fixed cultural backgrounds, professions, and positions (Alexander & LeBaron, 2010). The tendency to complicate the design of negotiation simulations have raised concerns among some researchers since a single focus on reality may affect negatively students' creativity and potential in self-learning (Crampton & Manwaring, 2008, as cited in Druckman & Ebner, 2013). Besides, using creative methods in negotiation classroom could promote creativity, but they require legitimacy in using these non-mainstream methods (Alexander & LeBaron, 2011). Though teachers and researchers constantly and inevitably confront these challenges and doubts, further experiment and research could help to justify role-play and simulation t in a wider social context. When Kolb's (2014) initiated the concept of experiential learning, it was at the critical moment in higher education in the United States, featuring an

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increased enrollment in higher education and the compelling demands of developing adult education and vocational education. Role-play and simulation was inspired by adult education to create a self-directing learning experience to sustain life-long learning for adults and prepare university graduates for a quicker fit-in in job vacancies (Ebner & Kovach, 2010; Patton, 2009). Currently, similar problems are faced with universities and their students in China. The research and practice on creative manifestation of experiential learning, in particular role-play and simulation, could provide a unique pathway for teachers and students to establish skill repertoires and achieving better learning outcomes. They could also offer clues in rethinking about ecological sustainability in higher education and industries and help to build a pipeline of talent to realize this target.

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