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From Role Play to Gamification as Educational Methods

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Abstract

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The aim of the paper is to underline the importance of role play as a method of teaching, especially in social sciences. We try to stress upon the role and clarify the relevance of this method firstly in teaching students how to approach clients as professionals (e.g. therapists, social-workers) and also for personal self-discovery and development. We can consider role play as a special type of a case study were students are analyzing specific life situations. However, we can enhance students' abilities in relying with different clients through role play in face-to-face interactions. Remains the question: what about distance learning students? How can we contribute to their training in an efficient way? We offer them written materials and sometimes face-to-face interactions that are not compensating the close, daily-basis activities that we are carrying out with the other students. Here comes, from our point of view, a rather new educational method which is gamification, mainly digital games.

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1. Introduction

One of the most frequently asked question in social sciences education is how to offer students not only accurate information - from modern theories to most recent research result- but also opportunities to develop necessary skills for those who will be involved in helping professions.

As Egan underlined when he proposed his Standard Problem Management Model, we have to take into consideration <skills, methods, and themes of successful helping>. He was emphasizing the fact that his model is more a contextual cognitive-behavioral-emotive approach, a tool of psychotherapy integration, than a debate on modern theories or latest fads (Egan, 2014).

If we agree that we need to stress upon skills development in the educational process we have to

find proper teaching methods for this approach.

From this perspective, role play seems a valuable method that provides a unique opportunity for the students to assume different roles and solve real life problems that have been replicated in the classrooms.

2. Role play as a teaching method

We can consider role play as a special type of a case study where students are analyzing specific life situations. In a regular case study students have to read the information, imagine the situation and think about appropriate solutions. Role play involves not only case evaluation, solution proposal but also experiencing the problem their “character” has to face. As Nickerson said, the power of role play consists in placing oneself in another’s shoes, providing learning opportunities both to develop their emotional intelligence as well as develop opportunities in the cognitive domain where those experiences are analyzed (Nickerson, 2007). This perspective is consistent to Jacob Moreno’s idea of the aim of role playing in psychodrama who contended that people could gain more from acting out their problems than from talking about them.

Role playing method, as Moreno designed it, requires a protagonist – the client whose problem is acted out at that moment-, other egos –group members who assume roles of a number of significant people in protagonist’s life, related to his particular problem, an audience – other group members that are acting as observers, and also the therapist. We can implement this method in education using class as a group, teacher assuming the role that therapist has in Moreno’s psychodrama group therapy.

2.1. The importance of role play in teaching social sciences

Although role play, as an active learning method, is not enough used in the teaching process because teachers moved away from students-centered methods -such as case study, role play, cooperative learning- to a teacher-centered instruction practice (e.g. lectures) in their urge to deliver enough “facts” that can be measured on the evaluation process, there are study fields, professions that need both cognitive approaches and skills development processes.

On the other hand, universities tend to focus on pedagogical strategies based on learning outcomes of the students, including creativity, problem solving skills, decision making skills, communication skills, leadership skills (Bhattacharjee, Ghosh, 2013).

University study fields, such as psychology, social work, etc. cannot fulfil students training without active learning methods such as case study and role play. In school, there is almost the same situation, role playing being used as teaching method more often in the humanities and social sciences subjects (van Ments, 1999). This does not suggest that role play can and should be used only in these fields of study, teaching guides on student-active methods pointing out advantages of using this method also on science classes (Marks & Eilks, 2010). Although there are no studies to provide more accurate data on what extent the role playing teaching method is used, it is a fact that this is considered a common pedagogical tool in social sciences (Belova et.al, 2015:165).

From a superficial perspective role play can be seen as a method that is considered basically a fun

activity, a way of breaking up the lesson, an opportunity for students' interaction and bonding. To limit the roles of this teaching method at those listed above means to miss opportunities. Role play can offer to students realistic professional challenges on complex, credible life situations.

Among other aims of role playing there is one related to empathy skill development. If we consider empathy the capacity of viewing someone's experience "as if you were" that person but not confounding yourself with him/her, we can understand better the role playing importance.

As a very important asset in learning is not only the role play itself but also the feed-back that someone gets after interpreting a role, mainly from his/her partner but also from observers (if there were any students designated with this role) and teacher.

Through role play students can analyze, evaluate their knowledges on that matter/problem, their abilities to cope with that type of professional challenge- professional and personal strengths- and also their lack in information, not enough developed skills that we can sum as professional and personal weaknesses. Starting from there they can design particular aims on their both professional and personal development.

2.2. Limitations of the method

Sometimes students, interpreting a client in need, are acting politely, with assertiveness, not providing a context as close to real as that type of situation can be, and this can give a false image, a false "feel" of the interaction. Teachers have to remind them that they have to try to feel, understand the role and act consequently, for everyone's learning benefit. From our experience, there were sometimes obvious role playing far from reality, students confronted to this problem recognizing that they were trying to be "nice" and "helpful" with their fellow student who had to play the role of the practitioner (in a client- helper role play).

There were also situations when students refused to interpret a "difficult" role (as we observed, usually there was about the most blamed by the society clients, like prostitutes, criminals, child molesters etc.). Therefore, in casting the characters, teacher will try to accept volunteers rather than assign roles. Also, the message for the students has to be that acting ability is not at stake there but rather the spontaneity, authenticity that can be brought into the situation.

Another aspect that can influence the roles that students willingly assumes, is that the observers are just as much involved in the learning situation as the other actors are. Although they are not involved in the acting situation, they have an important role in the analysis and discussion time, so there aren't "easy roles" and "hard ones" (there were learning situations in which students replied "today I want to be just an observer, I cannot do more than that cause I'm tired" so we had to remember them what each of the roles presumes).

Another limitation comes from the fact that there are students refusing to recognize the objectivity or, at least, honesty of their colleagues feed-back. The role of the teacher is here a very sensitive and important one, consisting in supporting, encouraging students, offering feed-back in a constructive manner. An important contribution here can be made by video-recording the role playing session that can provide material for a more consistent, thorough feed-back and a better self-evaluation. The only limitation here can come from the students refuse to be recorded.

In all cases taken into discussion above, the role play benefits diminishes considerably if the

situation is not well managed by the teacher. It is obvious that through the entire process we can deal with certain problems which commonly arise in role playing situations, but, creating a secure atmosphere where students are unafraid to share ideas, confident that no one will laugh at his/her contribution or criticize his ideas, conclusions, attenuate the shortcomings of the method.

As a final consideration, a wishful situation is that universities will afford to pay professionals for the clients role-playing along with the students interpreting the role of a specialist in a specific field.

2.3. Proposed role play exercises

A. Role play exercise for social work students at Child Protection class

Role playing situation

In city X there are two schools in the same neighborhood: school A with 85% of students from the majority ethnic group, and school B where they are enrolled especially students from a poor minority. School A has very good school performances but school B obtains very poor school results. School Inspectorate proposed as solution for school B problems: an exchange/mixture of students and teachers between school A and school B.

Roles: school A teachers, school B teachers, children`s parents from school A, children`s parents from school B, social worker of an NGO interested in stopping school drop of ethnic minorities.

Working tasks: Each group will provide an opinion related to the situation, their perspective of solving it- which measures can be taken, what changes are acceptable and to which extent (pros and cons)-. Solutions have to be discussed first into groups (e.g. school A teachers etc.) then presented to all the other participants.

B. Role play exercise for social work students at Community Development class

Role playing situation

There is an NGO, which has community development aims, that needs funding for its projects concerning neighborhood X. In the same town there is also a flourishing ABC business that has the main building nearby that NGO and the community taken into consideration.

Roles:

Social worker specialized in fundraising from the NGO, financial manager of the ABC.

Working tasks:

Social worker – has to prepare a short written presentation of the NGO; make an appointment with the financial manager of ABC; prepare and present a verbal solicitation for funding for the manager

Manager – consider their solicitation, ask questions about the NGO, decide if giving money or not and let the social worker know about what you think of his request.

C. Short role play exercise for communication skills development (mainly assertiveness)

Role play situation

The location is a student dorm where they are two roommates. One of them is listening music and it is loudly turned on.

Roles:

Student A, who wants to prepare an assignment for a tomorrow class, and student B who wants to

relax and listen music.

Working task

Student A has to tell/convince student B to solve the music volume problem.

3. From role playing to gamification

As distance learning programs are growing in number nowadays, it is important for the tutors to explore a variety of teaching techniques that engage students in active learning and enhance learning at a profound level. If we are willing to look at a distance learning program not as a limitative one but as an opportunity to be discovered, we can develop appropriate methods that can bring to the learning process enthusiastic interactions, collaboration and engaged dialogue among the students and with their tutor not only on the face to face interactions but also in online ones. We are talking here about educational games and project based learning (PBL).

The gamification of learning represent an educational approach used in order to motivate students to learn by using video game design and game elements in learning environments (Shatz, 2015). The goal of the educational interventions generic called “gamification” is to maximize engagement through capturing the interest of learners and inspiring them to continue learning (Huang, Soman, 2013).

3.1. Development of the concept

Over the years, simulation and gaming have moved from loosely directed activities based on fun interactions toward a more academic and analytical approach (van Ments, 2011). The 70`s and 80`s are relevant due to the fact that Society for the Advancement of Games and Simulation in Education and Training (SAGEST) was founded and further developed. Year 1982 was an important one for games and simulation as learning methods because the conference held at Portsmouth brought a number of important innovations. As van Ments (2011) underlined, probably the most relevant simulation played in the mid`80s period was the one presented by Dave Andrews and Stoke Mandeville on the subject of homelessness, the aim being to cope to the bureaucracy of social welfare system of that years.

Games and simulations developed over the years due to the technology evolution. From face-to face games to online games, computer simulations, we think that there is a huge opportunity for educators to enhance their methods. From the teaching methods perspective, we embraced the new (for our educational system) methods of role paly and games in early 90s but nowadays there is a strong trend towards paper assignments and even students conferences participation, namely we moved toward a more academic perspective.

3.2. Further considerations

Games and gamification has to take it`s important place in the learning process. Although learning by playing is not as structured as didactic instruction and it may be more unpredictable, his outcomes are more profound and life oriented. It is common knowledge that motivation and engagement constitute prerequisites for the successful fulfilment of a task or for the encouragement of a specific, desirable behavior. In education, one of the reasons of school failure and drop out is the lack of interest

and commitment of the students. In an era of smartphones and internet, our digital new generation can be stimulated to focus on learning through gamification. Therefore, it has to be a focus on developing educational digital games in a large variety of subjects of interest, aiming students and professionals willing to learn throughout new methods.

4. Conclusions

Discovering and using new methods of motivating, inspiring students is a worthy teaching aim. Role play method provides an alternative of exploring and understanding “the other one’s perspective” - empathy skill development-, can also create a secure environment of practicing assertiveness, active listening and other necessary skills for professionals working directly with clients. It also motivates student to learn by giving the “a sense of reality” a proof of the usefulness of the educational process. Gamification, as a set of learning methods – mainly digital games-, can provide alternatives for the role playing method. Games can be successfully used for all students but mostly for those involved in distance learning programs.

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