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What educators think and students want —‘virtually’ worlds apart?
Web-based role-plays as a challenge to contemporary approaches to teaching

Abstract
This study explores what many language educators believe makes an ideal learning environment (theory and practice) and how this is perceived by students (implementation and evaluation). When reviewing relevant literature, concepts such as peer-assisted and authentic learning emerge as best practice. Student-centred approaches are also favoured by educators, along with those that encourage reflective practice and the development of independent learning skills. Both educational researchers and practitioners seem to agree on this, as we found in our own sampling. This snapshot of educators’ beliefs was compared with students’ perceptions of them. In order to investigate the students’ perception, these concepts were translated into the design of a web-based blended online role-play. Surprisingly, feedback gained from students on their learning in this role-play suggests that even a well-designed web-based role-play does not necessarily meet their requirements. What educators think and students want or need, can be ‘virtually’ worlds apart.

1. Background
The attributes that graduates should acquire during their university education are often very ambitious, seeking to address the needs of future employers, communities, the university and the graduates themselves (see for example the graduate attributes listed at University of Melbourne 2012; Curtin University of Technology 2013). The search for an ‘ideal’ learning environment, which encourages and enables students to achieve these attributes, often attempts to combine subject-related knowledge and skills as well as ‘living and learning skills’, including proficiency in independent learning, social interaction, critical thinking and research (Partnership for 21st century skills 2011). The design of an ideal learning environment is driven by aspects of contemporary theories on teaching and learning, aiming to create a student-centred, safe and inspiring environment through authentic, peer-assisted and problem-based learning (Biggs and Tang 2011), to name but a few. Language studies programmes are no different and have also embraced these concepts (Dekhinet and Topping 2010; Neville and Britt 2007).
This study seeks to evaluate ‘beliefs’ concerning these learning and teaching concepts held by colleagues (n=38) and students (n=47). Together with colleagues we collected data on whether teaching and learning should: ideally be student-centred, allow for peer-assisted learning, foster independent learning skills, encourage reflective practice and model real-world learning scenarios. To contextualise these beliefs/concepts, we put one of our own teaching innovations—a role-play scenario—to the test, seeking to compare responses from peers with that of our students. The positive endorsement from colleagues contrasted starkly with the feedback received from students participating in one such ‘ideal’ scenario—a blended (part face-to-face, part online) role-play. The following analysis of our findings explains this disjuncture between theory and practice.

Firstly, however, a clear definition of the terminology used in this case study is provided.

2. Student-centred education

The definition of student-centred education varies according to the degree of student involvement or the relationship between student and teacher. The most common approach to student-centred education focuses on the student, meaning the student can make choices within a framework that is provided by the teacher but is not involved in designing the framework itself (Neumann 2013).

Student-centred teaching places the individual student at the centre of attention. McCombs and Whisler (1997) suggest that a student-centred activity focuses on the students’ needs and interests, allows for different levels of progress and caters for different learning styles. Furthermore, students should be provided with the opportunity to work together on a variety of activities, allowing each to form an opinion. Student-centred learning environments enable students to become actively involved in the learning progress, requiring the development of independent learning skills (Cubukcu 2008).

3. Independent learning skills

In order to be an active learner, certain independent learning skills are required. The definition of these skills varies in educational literature but can be reduced to the following common descriptors: critical thinking, independent thought and autonomy (Zutshi, Mitchell and Weaver 2011). Independent learning skills in this context are skills that allow for autonomous learning that enables life-long learning, including organisation, time-management, motivation, preparation, making choices and reflection (Baird 1988; see also the skills listed at University of Sydney 2012; Monash University 2013).

Zutshi et al. (2011: 14) believed their third year students were lacking these skills and suggested that an environment, which encourages the development of independent learning skills, would need to allow for “substantial autonomy”, provide
“frequent feedback” and create “opportunities for creativity and social learning”. Feedback from peers is also encouraged in order to achieve sustained learning.

3.1 Peer-assisted learning

Peer-assisted learning requires the tutor or lecturer to hand over control to the students who learn through collaborating, exchanging ideas and developing concepts. The ‘teacher’-tutor moves into the background in order to create a less intimidating learning experience. While the tutor might have less input, a great deal of trust in the students’ knowledge and skills is required (Dekhinet 2008; Schallié and Thorson 2012). Depending on the chosen approach the ‘student’ or ‘peer’-tutor might be one of the best students or only slightly better than their peers as this achieves better results (Topping and Ehly 1998). While peer-assisted learning (PAL) or peer-assisted study sessions (PASS) are programs commonly offered in higher education, Schallié and Thorson (2012) observe a reservation towards this form of learning in language studies, assuming that fluency and grammatical correctness seem to be a pre-condition for tutoring.

3.2 Reflective practice

Reflective learning prepares students to evaluate their (language) learning progress, helps them to identify learning problems and manifest strategies on how to learn to the best of their ability. Students not only reflect on the content-related learning but also on the learning process itself—in other words: what did or did not work and what are the consequences of this evaluation. Reflection is thus seen as an indicator for effective learning (Boyd and Fales 1983: 100): “Reflective learning is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective.”

3.3 Authentic learning


In language classes, real-world learning experiences may be created by developing scenarios from a context that is relevant to the target language, enables exchange with native speakers and uses real life language (Nikitina 2011). This might be done face-to-face with native speakers or through excursions and student exchanges but is more frequently achieved by taking advantage of communication technology, such as video-conferencing, email projects or social networking projects that utilise tandem-learning (Ludewig and Vogt 2010).
4. Snapshot: How important are these concepts for the educators’ practice?

In order to ascertain whether these educational concepts propagated in research are accepted and practised by our colleagues in academia, three snapshots were taken at three different gatherings with peers:

- a presentation at the Teaching and Learning Forum at Murdoch University in January 2013 attended by 12 tertiary educators from a variety of disciplines across campus;
- a seminar attended solely by 15 tertiary educators from various language departments at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in May 2013; and
- a presentation to 11 participants at the Languages and Cultures Network of Australian Universities (LCNAU) conference in Canberra in July 2013.

An interactive survey of tertiary educators and early adopters of innovative teaching and learning methods at these three conferences provided data about their beliefs regarding an ideal teaching and learning environment. During our presentations, we split the venue into halves, with each half allocated a value: either ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’. In order to express agreement or disagreement with certain teaching philosophies and principles, participants were required to move to the corresponding side of the venue, and to write down an explanatory statement with regard to their position. This exercise—combining visual survey methods and discussion techniques—provided an insight into what educators felt, at that particular time, to be important aspects in their teaching. The respective ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ sides were frequently swapped in order to remove the apathy bias of ‘too lazy to move’. Participants were also asked to briefly explain their choice, orally and in writing, and responses were collected.

The questions posed were: ‘Would you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. An ideal learning environment should be student-centred.
2. An ideal learning environment should foster independent learning skills in order to promote learner autonomy.
3. An ideal learning environment should allow for peer-assisted learning.
4. An ideal learning environment should encourage reflective practice.
5. An ideal learning environment should model real-world learning scenarios.’

Overall the educators (n=38) overwhelmingly agreed with these statements. However, significant concerns were raised that the underlying concepts cannot be applied exclusively and that any teaching environment requires a balance of student-centredness and teacher-input. In relation to peer-assisted learning and real-world
learning scenarios, there was some disagreement regarding the extent to which they should be part of the learning program.

The detailed results of this survey will be compared to the students’ perceptions of those pedagogical concepts in the discussion section.

The snapshot, which documents generally affirmative responses from the 38 educators, confirmed our assumptions. This, in turn, gave credence to the design of our teaching and learning environment: a role-play, which—we believed—combined the above-mentioned five teaching and learning concepts. The following briefly describes our evaluation of this role-play and interprets the data collected with regard to the students’ perception of these pedagogical concepts.

5. A case study: web-based blended role-play as an application of popular pedagogical concepts

The student data evaluated in this study concerns a role-play, designed and conducted in 2012 at UWA with students enrolled in intermediate and advanced level German units (n=47). The role-play was called The enemy is whoever thinks differently!, taking the students back to cold-war Germany between the years of 1966 and 1976, when the country was divided into East and West. Thematically, the simulation is linked to a number of interactive cultural lectures and forms part of a series of learning and assessment tools, including written grammar tests and oral interviews. Further details on the role-play design can be found in Ludewig and Ludewig-Rohwer (2012, 2013).

5.1 How are those educational principles translated into practice in our role-play?

For over a decade online role-play simulations have been extolled by educators as providing an environment that allows for reflective, deep and significant learning (Wills 2012). Wills, Leigh and Ip (2011: 12) state that role-based e-learning “provides opportunities to address all the principles of quality learning design”. By promoting communication and encouraging creativity, role-plays and simulations have also been shown to help develop the interpersonal and communicative skills of students and to allow them to learn about each other in a safe environment (Geurts, Duke and Vermeulen 2007; Pivec, Dziabenko and Schinnerl 2003). Siemens and Tittenberger (2009: 9) indicate that role-based learning allows for social, situated, reflective and multi-faceted learning.

According to Pendegraft (2011), introducing technology into learning processes by utilising simulation and role-play activities helps to create a student-centred teaching approach given that it affords greater flexibility. Freeman and Capper (1999) found web-based platforms for role-play scenarios increased freedom and ease of participation, as they allow for more flexibility with regard to time and place and
encourage independent learning skills. To some degree, the blended modes on offer, along with the assessable aspects of the role-play simulation, tend to preference different learner types at different times. In addition, the concept of role-play facilitates creativity and social learning as demanded by Zutshi et al. (2011).

By mixing the intermediate and advanced level students in our role-play we sought to create a reciprocal peer-assisted learning environment similar to Schallié and Thorson (2012). The participating students (n=47) were in their first, second or third year of German studies and displayed a variety of language and study skills. Furthermore, one of the participant-researchers and a language tutor also participated incognito in playing roles to stimulate activity and to introduce exemplary language to assist with the linguistic learning outcomes.

Reflective practice was encouraged with the use of feedback surveys. Students were required to reflect on their German language skills before, during and after the role-play, by describing strengths and weaknesses, rating their ability in several role-play relevant skills—such as reading/writing short texts—and commenting on their confidence and understanding of German history. They were also urged to reflect on the learning environment and how it affected their learning progress.

Simulations/role-plays have, as noted above, been highlighted as an example for authentic learning. While in this role-play design it can be argued that the authenticity of context (Cold War) and tasks (acting as politicians, terrorists and artists) is not given, the online communication itself is very much a representation of authentic learning; communication needed to be timely, responsive, empathetic and culturally sensitive.

5.2 The evaluation of the students’ perception of the pedagogy behind the role-play

In order to answer the question ‘How is the pedagogy behind web-based role-plays perceived by students?’, both qualitative and quantitative data were obtained through the student surveys. The participating 47 students were encouraged to reflect in writing on their learning at the beginning, middle and end of the role-play. Using open and closed questions, the survey allowed for students to critically reflect on their learning progress and their participation in the role-play and finally to evaluate the role-play. Not all 47 participants completed the questionnaires; Q1 n=42, Q2 n=35, Q3 n=42.

5.3 Contrasting the educators’ and students’ point of view

In the following discussion the educators’ beliefs will be evaluated against the students’ perceptions of the web-based role-play.

5.3.1. An ideal learning environment should be student-centred

All surveyed educators, including some postgraduate students, agreed that an ideal learning environment should be student-centred. Comments such as “If students are
not the focus then what’s the point?” and “Because they [the students] are paying for it” made it clear that students are seen as customers and that their needs should be the driving force behind the design of teaching environments. Furthermore, educators predicted more involvement and a higher level of motivation in a student-centred setting, especially if individual learning styles were taken into consideration as well.

Feedback taken from student surveys confirmed this customer service attitude. The students appreciated flexibility and felt that their needs were not being met in learning scenarios where this was not sufficiently provided. When reflecting on their role-play experience, many disliked the compulsory synchronous online meetings that had been scheduled for a specific time (Q2: 14/35, Q3: 19/42). It should be noted that meeting times had been determined and agreed upon by most students beforehand. Due to many being time-poor, this requirement conflicted with other study commitments and work. While they were allowed and encouraged to post beforehand and afterwards, the requirement of ongoing online attendance was criticised for not being student-centred. This shows that democratically arrived at ‘agreements’ among students, such as meeting times outside of class, cannot serve all students equally well and may not be perceived as ‘student-centred’ by every individual student. One size does not fit all and the credo of student-centeredness will raise expectations that are bound to disappoint some.

5.3.2. An ideal learning environment should foster independent learning skills

All 38 educators felt strongly that an ideal learning environment should encourage the acquisition of independent learning skills. Reasons provided in their written responses included: “because this is the minimum you should learn at uni[versity]” and “[s]tudents need to take responsibility for their own learning.” Independent learning skills were not only seen as an essential requirement for university study but also as a preparation for the ‘real world’.

However, the level of independency, the degree of responsibility and the decision making-processes which were encouraged and slowly increased in our role-play were not what students expected from an ‘ideal’ learning environment. From the beginning, some students felt anxious about, and were reluctant to tackle, the assessment task, due mainly to the alienating factor of technology. This made them focus on the technological aspects rather than on the learning experience itself. In their reflective feedback on the assessment task, one third of the students raised issues about their preoccupation with “dealing with the unknown”. In the focus interviews, when questioned about how this problem had emerged, many stated that writing an essay would be more straightforward by comparison and would have caused them “less confusion”, in contrast to the online tasks which forced them to “use an unfamiliar format”. While some used the advantages of the flexibility and open-endedness of this learning environment, worked independently and creatively in research (as well as participation) and tested boundaries, others found it much
harder to work autonomously in an unknown environment. Rather than appreciating
the freedom provided by such an online role-play, relying on their independent
learning skills and utilising a variety of sources, many sought re-assurance on their
progress. As a result, for 18 of the 42 students who responded to this survey the
open-endedness of the task was daunting, as they did not have the time to dedicate
“hours and hours” to the role-play and were conscious that this type of learning
and assessment would interfere with their time-management. Their need for clear
boundaries (“How long do you expect me to be online?”, “How many words do I
need to write?”), as well as instant feedback (to the effect that something was done
to a satisfactory level, corresponding to a grade x or y) was evident. These concerns
about passing or failing a task distracted from immersing themselves in the learning
experience for its own sake. It can be argued that part of becoming an independent
learner is requesting information in order to being able to make informed choices
but the level of detail was perceived as counter-productive with the creativity in this
project.

5.3.3. An ideal learning environment should allow for peer-assisted
learning

In our survey, the educators’ opinions differed on this principle. While there was
overwhelming agreement expressed, the reasons provided cautioned against
generalisations and highlighted ambivalences.

On the one hand, there was a preference expressed for peer-assisted learning
as “students learn better from each other at times” and such a set-up is “less
intimidating”. The pool of ideas, knowledge and skills between the students grows
through their interaction, allowing each to excel at a greater level than the sum of their
individual thoughts. With regard to foreign language learning, the point was made
that language relies on the exchange of thoughts and ideas. Newly acquired words
and phrases need to be repeatedly used and practised and therefore communication
with peers provides more opportunities for practice.

On the other hand, especially among the surveyed language specialists,
educators feared the risk of wrong information being passed on, especially incorrect
language unknowingly used and copied in the learner community. “Peers don’t know
all the right answers.” While acknowledging the benefits of peer-assisted learning,
it was felt that an ideal learning environment should only partially rely on peer-
assistance and include guidance by the tutor or lecturer.

Our role-play catered for peer-assisted learning, including having tutors act
in the guise of peers, as they participated in-role. Students communicated freely,
some of them more than they ever did in class. Noticeably, discussions would evolve
naturally around prescribed topics and become more sustained than in class. The
‘staged withdrawal’ of the teaching staff (participant teachers) as an authoritative
and guiding voice was deliberately designed to facilitate a student-centred and self-
directed learning experience. Nevertheless, student feedback indicated that many

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did not like the tutors acting in-role. Feedback that they thought they could interpret as a tutor’s comment seemed to carry more weight and was responded to more promptly. Some students also demanded more feedback on the correctness of their language; in Q2: three, in Q3: four. 15 rated the feedback of the language tutor as not or less helpful, while 13 stated that it did not make a difference for them and only 14 found the feedback helpful or very helpful. The flow of communication, the feeling of successfully getting their message across and receiving feedback through responses by peers were not seen as vital indicators for their learning. The (re)modelling of language by tutor posts was also not considered helpful, because the higher level of correctness of these contributions was not obvious to all and it was felt that the tutors should have been identifiable. Educators and students seem to agree that peer-assisted learning is beneficial and less intimidating but at the same time the teacher/tutor, rather than the peer, is seen as an essential authority for guidance and corrections.

5.3.4. An ideal learning environment should encourage reflective practice

Educators across all disciplines felt strongly about the inclusion of reflective practice in an ideal learning environment. Reflection was described as an essential component of the learning process, one that enables “deeper learning [as] students can engage and apply skills, leading to critical thinking”. Students also learn to evaluate the learning process and to judge what type of activity best suits their learning style. “Student should know what works for them and what doesn’t – how they learn best.”

In our role-play, students were asked to reflect on their learning progress via surveys and during assessments, in which they had to reflect on vocabulary and their role-play character. Students were able to form clear opinions on which components of the role-play, instructions, the assessment structure and software worked for them and which did not, e.g. in the final survey, 19 criticised the timing, 21 suggested improvements with technology and eight bemoaned the lack of interaction. Their initial self-assessment, compared with that undertaken at the end of the role-play sequence, was contrasted with data obtained from their role-play contributions in the target language, from grammar and vocabulary tests conducted every fortnight in their face to face language classes.

With regard to reflective learning, the educators’ ideal and the students’ reality clashed. Among the students there developed a survey fatigue and an unwillingness to ‘reflect’ frequently throughout the role-play. This was evident from the diminishing quality and decreasing length of responses from the 47 participating students. The invitation to be a ‘critical observer’ of their own and others’ performances also set a tone that was increasingly counter-productive to a positive learning environment.
Table 1. Which feature(s) of the role-play did you find helpful to improve your German language skills? (Q3, n = 42)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Research of your character</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Discussion boards</th>
<th>Regular course meetings online</th>
<th>Interaction with other character(s)</th>
<th>Feedback by role-play tutor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - not helpful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - rather unhelpful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - neither/nor</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - a bit helpful</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - very helpful</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.5. An ideal learning environment should model real-world learning scenarios

Educators agreed that real-world learning scenarios would be “more relevant”, as “otherwise learning is not tied to practice.” This is particularly the case in regard to language learning as it would be “beneficial to take it away from the artificiality of textbooks”. In their justifications, educators emphasised the idea that real-world scenarios would enable students to communicate in the foreign language in real-life situations, with real-life also referring to the inclusion of native speakers. Nevertheless, some educators believed that learning in higher education is not only concerned with the real-world learning but also with understanding and developing abstract theories and thoughts.

Authentic aspects of our role-play included talking about historical events, communicating among others with native-speakers (tutors and teachers), using real-life language in online discussions and operating online communication software. Students felt they had a better grasp of history by ‘living’ through these events. They also had to deal with the reality that once something was posted it could not be taken back.

The fact that the medium for the assessment was more akin to social networking and private engagements than to academic essay writing may have also resulted in rather worrying ‘authentic/real-life’ behaviour: the use of non-academic sources, such as relying on Wikipedia to research an identity. As such, the transparent involvement of experiential and real-world learning was short-circuited and far removed from the deep learning anticipated. The online setting may have tempted many students to treat the material as something ‘online’ and ‘remote’, not realising that they should learn the new material for out of context recall.
6. Limits of this study

The method used to investigate the educators’ point of view lacked differentiation. Although there was some clarity with regard to the pedagogical concepts behind terms such as ‘reflective practice’, the implementation was open to individual interpretation, with everyone being able to refer back to their own practice and discipline context. As such, ultimate agreement or disagreement related not to the role-play the presenters had in mind, but to a myriad of different concepts. During the activity it became obvious that each of the educational concepts that was put up for discussion conjured up different ideas with regard to professional practice. Furthermore, the dichotomy of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ forced educators to take a position, which did not leave room for “sometimes” and therefore could not represent ambivalent and considered opinions. By taking a physical position in the room, this mini-survey also was not anonymous and peer-pressure might have influenced responses. Lastly, we did not ask the educators if they not only believed in these concepts but also put them into practice.

While the data from the educators, despite all attempts to define the terminology effectively, referred to individual ideas, the student data presented the opposite problem. The students’ reflections on the role-play provide the only information that can be used to assess their preferences for particular pedagogical concepts. It might well be that, notwithstanding our best efforts and several trials over many years, the design of the role-play failed to implement those concepts effectively or that we failed to put together the correct mixture of methods. Nevertheless, this study was able to test some key pedagogical assumptions and approaches using innovative practice.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to elicit representative views from educators and students on educational principles; it does not claim to present a complete picture of the educators’ and students’ perception of contemporary educational practices and beliefs.

Effectively, the study provides a tonic examination of perceived ‘ideals’ in contemporary pedagogical discourse, namely ‘student-centredness’, ‘peer-assistance’, ‘independent learning’ and ‘reflective practice’, by putting theory and practice to the test with colleagues and students. The findings caution against the promises of student-centredness by showing that ultimately one size has to fit all, as fairness requires transparency and equity and therefore student-centredness cannot cater for endless individuality. The degree to which reflective practice was embraced by educators and students also differed markedly, with students being much less enthusiastic about this exercise. The results also warn against the overreliance on independent learning skills, as the feedback-loop corrects the students’ sense of autonomy and highlights dependencies. Most language practitioners rejected the peer-assisted learning model, often lauded in the literature, as both educators and
students value the presence of an authoritative voice in the teaching and learning context, thus weakening the enthusiasm for peer-assistance greatly.

Overall, the study succeeded in showing clearly that well-intentioned educators and their students can view the same tasks very differently. This apparent confrontation of teacher-opinion and student reception can serve as a healthy warning about the dubious value of expecting that students will automatically respond positively to approaches that are supposed to be the most effective. Even the most carefully laid out plans don’t always satisfy students, certainly not every single one.

Ultimately, the study hopes to raise an awareness in the teaching profession that what literature suggests to implement into practice and what subsequently guides the educators’ beliefs to some extent, does not necessarily lead to an effective learning environment that students appreciate as appealing and valuable. In other words, what educators think and students want can be ‘virtually’ worlds apart.

References


