

Center Stage: Incorporating Role Play in Class Assignments Enriches Active Learning and Critical Thinking

Annette E. Redmon
University of Cincinnati – UC Blue Ash
USA

Abstract

In this research paper, the author sought to determine if role play could be used as an effective teaching tool to illustrate decision-making in a business environment by simulating the role of a company's human resource manager examining both legal and ethical issues. Moreover, this paper highlights the value of an assignment using role playing, but also how attaching a "price" for student surveys as part of the assignment, elicits additional feedback and thus more meaningful results.

1. Introduction

Innovative techniques engage students in their learning environment, whether virtual or in the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the implementation of a specific educational technique – utilizing role playing to deepen and expand understanding of legal and ethical considerations in a business' decision-making process. Further, this paper will highlight the increase in student feedback for an assignment significantly by incorporating that feedback as a portion of the students' overall score for that assignment.

2. Literature Review

Active learning strategies are a valuable teaching tool in undergraduate education. "When students tackle real world issues, the learning becomes more tangible." [1]. The challenge for an educator is to identify an appropriate method to encourage students to acquire an active knowledge of the requisite course material and to be able to apply the concepts in accordance with the course goals and objectives.

A strategy for engagement is to ask students to consider how the concepts would be used in a real-world context. One interesting approach is to incorporate role-playing activities in assignments, allowing for students to simulate real world scenarios. Critical thinking is an essential tool for a student's intellectual development [2]. Role-play has the potential to enhance critical thinking skills like fairness, open mindedness, and empathy among students [3]. This paper supports how this approach

to active engagement can facilitate the students' development of their critical thinking skills using an assignment incorporating role-play linked to a current event.

The coronavirus pandemic affected local, state, national and international economies in ways that are yet to be fully understood. Moreover, many businesses continue to recover from the effects of the pandemic. Academic communities were not immune to this disruption, requiring the academic community to increase efforts to actively engage students in an unprecedentedly fluid environment. Active learning strategies require "students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing" [4].

A real-world problem facing firms was how to handle the issue of vaccinations in the workplace as work and public activities resumed in the aftermath of the pandemic. The Covid pandemic ignited both government and business efforts to combat the physical and economic impacts. There were regulatory approvals of a Pfizer Covid vaccine [5] and the U.S. President issued an executive order implementing a vaccine mandate [6]. The U.S. President's actions sparked many legal challenges regarding the executive order and other vaccine mandates. These real-world challenges impacting business issues provide an opportunity for an activity for students in an undergraduate law class to use role play as an active learning strategy.

Role play "... is the practice of having students take on specific roles - usually ones in which they are not familiar - and act them out ... for the purpose of learning course content or understanding "complex or ambiguous concepts" [7]. "Role-play pedagogy has been shown to be effective in reaching learning outcomes in three major learning domains: affective, cognitive, and behavioral" [8,9and10]. Role play strategy can provide a productive environment to develop critical thinking skills [11].

This paper demonstrates how integrating role play in the context of the pandemic provides students an assignment using this active learning strategy. Further, it shows how students achieve a better understanding of a business' decision-making processes based on contemporary legal and ethical issues. Moreover, this paper discusses the importance

of student feedback for continuous improvement and documents the results of a strategy to increase in student feedback for the assignment.

3. Assignment Description and Assessment

As described in the author’s earlier paper [12], the assignment was introduced in one class section of an undergraduate law class in the 2021 Fall semester and then repeated again in another undergraduate law class section in Fall 2022. For the assignment, each student took on the role of Human Resources Manager of XYZ Company with approximately 90 employees. The CEO of XYZ Company is thinking about mandating a Covid vaccine for all employees. The CEO asks the Human Resource Manager to create a new company policy. However, the CEO first asks the Human Resource Manager to identify the top three justifications for mandating the Covid vaccine and the top three justification for NOT mandating the Covid vaccine.

The CEO also asks the Human Resource Manager to provide the justifications, empirical evidence and all sources and citations supporting those justifications. Accordingly, the CEO asks the Human Resource Manager to also include a recommendation for or against the mandate based upon the information provided. The recommendation should be limited no more than five typewritten pages (double-spaced/Times Roman 11-point font and one-inch margins in an MS Word document file). The following resources were shared with students:

- Jacobsen v. Massachusetts, 197 U.S. 11 (1905) – a US Supreme Court case upholding a state’s authority to enforce compulsory vaccine laws [13].
- U.S. President Executive Order on Vaccine Mandate [6]
- FDA News Release Approving First Covid-19 Vaccine [5].
- CDC Covid-19 Website [14].

The learning objectives were provided to students at the beginning of the project. Upon completion of the assignment, each student was expected to employ critical thinking skills by:

- Reviewing and summarizing various laws (including, but not limited to caselaw, regulations, executive orders).
- Analyzing data supporting and arguing against vaccine mandates, respectively.
- Evaluating the impact of a vaccine mandate (or lack thereof) on business activity, including legal and ethical issues.

- Preparing a recommendation incorporating a business’ decision on whether to implement a vaccine mandate.

Table 1 provided the basis for assessing the student submissions in Fall 2021.

Table 1. Assessment Rubric – Fall 2021

Provide detailed justification for mandating the Covid vaccine and provide sources and citations (legal and other) supporting those justifications accordingly	30%
Provide detailed justification for NOT mandating the Covid vaccine and provide sources and citations (legal and other) supporting those justifications accordingly	30%
Recommendation based on evaluated information provided	25%
Organization and Writing Quality	15%
Total	100%

Table 2 provided the basis for assessing the student submissions in Fall 2022.

Table 2. Assessment Rubric – Fall 2022

Provide detailed justification for mandating the Covid vaccine and provide sources and citations (legal and other) supporting those justifications accordingly	30%
Provide detailed justification for NOT mandating the Covid vaccine and provide sources and citations (legal and other) supporting those justifications accordingly	30%
Recommendation based on evaluated information provided and Organization and Writing Quality	23%
Complete Survey	17%
Total	100%

The assessment rubrics differed between the two classes to accommodate different treatment of the student survey in the course. While student feedback is integral to successful implementation of educational strategies over time, survey participation in the first use of the role play assignment was low. To encourage participation, completion of the survey was incorporated into the course assessment as an assignment with points allocated for submission. The revised rubric reflects a new allocation of course points to encourage student feedback. Students were advised that points were allocated for a completed survey, not for the specific content of the survey.

4. Pedagogical Progression and Results

The student assignments were submitted online via an assignment link in the learning management system. The professor provided the student feedback based on the above assessment rubric in Table 1 and

Table 2 for the Fall 2021 class and the Fall 2022 class, respectively. The cycle of the assignments ended with a non-graded private survey to the students collecting both qualitative and quantitative data for student feedback regarding the efficacy of the assignment as follows:

- Q1. Did this assignment help you understand various laws regarding the Covid Vaccine Mandate? Answer Yes or No
- Q2. Was it helpful to read about the medical, legal, and ethical arguments for and against the Covid Vaccine Mandate before making your recommendation? Answer Yes or No
- Q3. Did your role playing as a human resource manager of a company help you to understand the complexities of a business' decision-making for policies impacting employees? Answer Yes or No
- Q4. Did you feel more informed about this particular issue after completing this assignment? Answer Yes or No
- Q5. What aspect of the assignment did you find most valuable?
- Q6. What, if any, exemptions should there be to a Covid Vaccine Mandate?

The survey was not a graded point-valued part of the assignment in Fall 2021. Out of twenty students surveyed, only five students completed and submitted the survey. Table 3 below represents the student survey results:

Table 3. Student Survey Results – Fall 2021

Student	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

As noted above, only five students completed the survey, which limits any kind of generalization about assignment outcomes assessed. In the author's earlier paper [12], it was noted that "modifications should be made for yielding meaningful data for making any important conclusions about the efficacy of this assignment. However, the preliminary positive student responses suggest that the assignment is a promising active learning strategy for future use in this and in other classes."

In Fall 2022, the survey was a graded point-valued part of the assignment. Out of twenty-two students surveyed, twenty students completed and submitted the survey. Table 4 represents the student survey results. As noted below, 91% of students completed the Fall 2022 survey when there was a "price"

attached to the survey component in the form of course points.

Table 4. Student Survey Results – Fall 2022

Student	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
11	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
12	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
14	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
15	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
16	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
18	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
19	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
20	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

While this is still a relatively small survey, the positive student responses in both classes suggest that the assignment is a promising active learning strategy for future use in this and in other classes.

The short answer responses for Question 5, the samples of students' responses and comments from both the 2021 and 2022 classes after completing their respective recommendations are to "What aspect of the assignment did you find most valuable?"

Fall 2021 Student 1 comment:

I felt the most valuable aspect of the assignment is the duty of a human resource representative who must balance employee concerns with the guidelines of the organization they represent. Ultimately it is the responsibility of the organization itself to provide a safe workplace

An [e]ffective HR rep MUST protect the organization first and create policies that comply to OSHA regulations especially during an active pandemic. In addition, the EEOC has determined that COVID-19 meets the definition of a "direct threat"...

In conclusion it was interesting to see the various factors an HR Rep must consider before making a decision regarding vaccine mandates.

Fall 2021 Student 2 comment:

It was valuable for me to educate myself on both sides of that argument and the reasons behind it ...

I did learn about the ethics from both perspectives, and I would want to be put in that position so I could

make the right decision that would benefit the most people and keep others safe. After doing this assignment I do feel as if I have an informed and educated opinion on how that situation should be handled in the workplace.

Fall 2021 Student 3 comment:

I think that this assignment's most valuable point for me was the research itself ...

That is something that will be valuable for a long time because Covid isn't going away anytime soon, and this helps me better understand what is happening around me.

The above Fall 2021 Student comments were shared in the author's prior paper [12]. The student comments below are from the Fall 2022 survey.

Fall 2022 Student 1 comment:

The aspect of this assignment I found most valuable was putting myself in a real-world position. Many times, assignments do not have the most practical applications in real life, but I felt that this one was certainly not one of those.

Fall 2022 Student 2 comment:

I found this assignment helpful mostly because I was able to analyze a situation from the perspective of a manager rather than just myself. It was a challenge because I had to think for everyone's sake and not go off my own thoughts and beliefs on the case. I found that learning how to be unbiased for the greater good is an important thing to learn how to do, especially if you want to become a manager.

Fall 2022 Student 3 comment:

I thought the fact that we had to look up information for and against the mandate valuable because we were able to see both points of view and not just one.

Several comments in the extended responses included the need for exemptions due to an employee's medical condition and/or an employee's religious beliefs. As a result, this assignment introduced students to diversity issues in the workplace and recognize equitable practices in an organization. Moreover, many students recognized the need to understand various viewpoints and perspectives in the decision-making process in creating and implementing policy in a business.

The overall theme of the comments was the value of simulating the experience that a Human Resource Manager faces when confronted with the real time challenges of a controversial time sensitive issue

facing businesses. Further, students noted the integration of not only economic impacts, but legal and ethical challenges as well [12].

By attaching a "price" for student surveys as part of the assignment in Fall 2022, this change elicited an increase in participation from 25% response rate in 2021 to a 91% response rate in 2022, and thus more meaningful results.

5. Conclusion

The author designed this assignment in Fall 2021 as an active learning strategy for student engagement in an undergraduate law class. The author revised the Fall 2022 assignment to include the student survey as a graded portion of the assignment, which yielded a significant increase in student responses. Educators who use role play as an active learning strategy have an opportunity to create a positive learning environment that will also benefit students by enriching their critical thinking skills.

6. Future Research

This paper reflects results of the second iteration of this assignment as a strategy to introduce the practical implementation of legal and ethical issues. Plans are to continue to execute this project with modifications as warranted based on the awareness of the changing needs of students and current business environment along with student feedback regarding the assignment's efficacy. As noted above, the original survey was not part of the original assignment (or its assessment), and not all students who completed the assignment participated in the survey. Incorporating the survey section into the assignment assessment (and total points) to attach a price (points) to the overall grade represented the first innovation in the delivery of the assignment. The purpose of a broader survey that was required of the students was to elicit a more robust response for student feedback for those who participating in the assignment, and the effort was successful.

The commitment to deliver a student-centered experience that focuses on innovative, effective, meaningful, and creative learning experiences is at the heart of this project. The author will look to modify this project to keep the content current and to recognize student input for improvements that could be made in the assignment description, requirements, and scope. The author will also seek opportunities to incorporate role play in other assignments with diverse and inclusive practices, and moreover, will look for opportunities to share the assignment experiences within the academic community.

7. References

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