

VIDEOTAPED ROLE PLAY EXERCISES IN LARGE SALES MANAGEMENT CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

To overcome the pedagogical limitations imposed by large undergraduate sales classes this paper describes how students use videotaped role play exercises to simulate sales calls. By giving students an opportunity to practice questioning, listening, presenting, and negotiating with prospects, these exercises help in the development of the interpersonal skills important to successful performance in personal selling. Through vicarious learning, students experience the social complexities that are characteristic of sales careers. The innovation allows the professor to provide direct, and private feedback to students without using already limited class time. It also reduces student anxiety, stage fright, and class boredom, problems associated with traditional role play methods.

INTRODUCTION

Calls from professional managers and academics to (1) prepare students for the complexities of sales careers, and (2) to develop the interpersonal skills necessary for the successful undertaking of those careers, have been answered by the introduction of role-playing exercises into the marketing curriculum (Bowers and Summey 1983; Frevert 1975). This active learning pedagogy allows the students to initiate learning by participation in simulated sales calls, while the instructor facilitates the learning process (Troppe 1996). Such experiential learning can create the environment necessary for students to develop professional skills and creatively explore course material (Hawes 2004; Hunt and Laverie 2004; Stutts and West 2005). The vicarious learning that occurs in the process is an effective and efficient way to learn the complex social tasks involved in personal selling (Leigh 1987).

In these exercises, one student plays the role of a salesperson, while another student or business professional acts as a customer or prospect. Typically, the professor, along with the other students in the class, gives feedback on the performance. Often, these exercises are videotaped to allow for post hoc analysis and critique (Castleberry 1989; Moncrief 1991; Tanner and Chonko 1991). Using videotape allows for repeated viewing of the exercise, and enables the instructor to make comments without interrupting the flow of the role play. In addition to the need for technical facilities for videotaping and playback, these role-playing exercises require a great deal of class time (Calcich and Weilbaker 1992). Tanner and Chonko (1991) suggest roughly seven weeks of class time, nearly half of the semester, should be set aside for three role-playing exercises for a class of 25 students.

THE CHALLENGE OF LARGE CLASSES

The pedagogical value of role-playing exercises is

evident as they have been widely adopted as an essential component of personal selling courses (Castleberry 1989; Moncrief 1991). However important these exercises may be, they cannot be conducted in large classes in the same manner as in a class of 25. A typical role play exercise, along with feedback, can take 15 to 30 minutes of class time. In large classes, those with more than 50 students, it is difficult to set aside enough time in the semester for each student to participate in even a single exercise. Yet, it is incumbent on the professor to utilize interactive pedagogy, even in large classes (Hawes 2004), and the role play is a powerful experiential learning tool.

Additional problems associated with the role play exercise include student anxiety and "stage fright" (Castleberry 1989; Jones and Javie 1996; Moncrief 1991; Tanner and Chonko 1991), as well as complaints of boredom by students who watch countless role play exercises by classmates (McBane and Knowles 1994). These problems are exacerbated by very large classes. Universities, and particularly business schools, are experiencing increasing enrollments (Gose 2005). Where faculty resources are unable to keep up with increased demand, class sizes are growing. In many sales classes, the number of students enrolled is so large that it precludes the typical role play exercises.

Using the simultaneous, "triad" approach of McBane and Knowles (1994) would reduce the time requirement, and mitigate the anxiety and boredom associated with weeks of role play exercises. However, the cacophony created by a large number of simultaneous role plays would be disruptive to other classes, and would likely distract many of the participants from their tasks. Furthermore, because of their size, these classes are often held in tiered lecture halls with fixed desks, where it is physically impractical to conduct so many exercises at once. Another concern with this approach in large classes is the limited amount of feedback that the instructor could give when there are so many groups to monitor.

Moncrief (1991) offers an alternative method. He has

students videotape the role play exercises outside of the classroom. Each exercise is then played in class, allowing the professor to stop the tape for comments and discussion. This method also allows students to perform multiple “takes” before completing the final version to be submitted for a grade. This process mitigates students’ stage fright, however, the possibility of a “guillotine effect” often associated with the in-class critiques is still present (Tanner and Chonko 1991). While this process promises benefits over live, in-class exercises, there is still insufficient time and student attention to watch and comment on all of the videos in a large class.

APPLICATION

Faced with this challenge of very large sales management classes, it is difficult to find a teaching tool that will engage students in active learning, develop their interpersonal skills, and acquaint them with the complexities of the sales process. This paper describes the modification of existing techniques to fit the conditions of large sales management classes at a large, public university with approximately 5,000 business students. Following the recommendation of Moncrief (1991), students are assigned the task of producing a videotaped role play according to instructions given in the classroom. They are also required to write scripts for the exercise, setting the scene and identifying major tasks and goals of the exercise. Rather than provide in-class critiques, the professor reviews each videotape outside of the classroom and provides private, written feedback. This method frees classroom time for lecture and cases, allows for multiple performance “takes,” and greatly reduces student anxiety. The private nature of the feedback also minimizes the potential for the guillotine effect.

Since most students are unfamiliar with the process of role play, this assignment should be accompanied by extensive preparation, including a detailed description of the requirements and the assessment criteria. Written instructions are complemented by an in-class lecture that gives details about the exercise, including tips on product choices, scenarios, and technical issues. Students can download the lecture slides for reference. The students are also given written instructions for the script and even a sample script. Several class periods are devoted to personal selling topics like the sales process, sales presentations, overcoming objections and closing. Following Leigh (1987), who states that students may learn through observation, several role plays are performed in class for the students to use as exemplars.

College recruiters often ask to speak to the class while visiting the campus. Rather than have the recruiter, who is typically a salesperson or manager, lecture for thirty minutes about the benefits of working for her or his firm, in this class, the recruiters are asked to teach from their own experience. This often includes role play exercises.

For example, salespeople from Black and Decker simulate sales calls to an existing customer. One creative recruiter from Ferguson involves the students in role play situations where they have to deal with dissatisfied and even angry customers. These activities provide excellent vicarious learning opportunities.

While vicarious learning will occur through the observation of professional sales people, peer-to-peer learning, that obtained by observing classmates’ work, is a unique characteristic of the traditional, student-to-student role play exercises. Therefore, it is important to demonstrate what students are capable of accomplishing. With the permission of former students, several examples of good role play exercises from past classes are shown in the current class. Videos that earned low grades are never shown as examples. However, with the students’ permission, several videos that had technical difficulties have been shown to caution students about common mistakes. Additionally, there have been some limited role play exercises in class among students, and the professor has even performed a few role plays with students.

In order to minimize the grading burden and yet give the students the role play experience, the exercises are limited to ten minutes. While ten minutes is shorter than most exercises described in the literature, it provides some experience and it seems to be quite effective. Few students (< 0.5%) have had trouble adhering to this limit. Students are encouraged to be creative and to have fun. They are given the freedom to choose the product that they sell, the selling situation (new sale, existing customer, dissatisfied customer), and the kinds of objections raised.

RESULTS

Whether students perform serious or humorous videos, they are told that the exercises have to be *fairly realistic* in that they must cover all of the steps of a sales call that are outlined in the instructions, from developing rapport to closing the sale. Although the exercises are not performed or critiqued in class, nearly all of the students diligently follow the instructions. In fact, most students put a great deal of effort into the exercise, some a disproportionately high effort compared to the value of the grade. Despite the extensive preparation, there are usually a dozen or so minor questions each semester. Roughly half of the questions pertain to the suitability of the proposed product rather than process clarification.

Most of the exercises simulate straight forward sales calls to a new or existing customer. The products sold range from the mundane (automobile insurance, apartment leasing, and clothing) to the unusual (a robot, and a dog training service that specializes in teaching your dog to retrieve beer from the refrigerator). Typically classmates, room mates, beaus and family members fill the role of prospect/customer. Most students use props such as golf clubs, shampoo bottles, cars, and even airplanes.

Many students utilize a bit of humor and each semester, several videos are “over the top.” For example, one student fed peanut butter to her dogs so that they would move their mouths for several minutes, licking their lips. She then overdubbed a dialogue to simulate one dog selling a membership to a new dog park. Some students create outlandish costumes and others outlandish products. Several students have demonstrated their mastery of the process by performing “don’t” videos, where they purposely did everything wrong. As reported by others, students often invoke the professor’s name and character in their videos. The humorous and clever videos help alleviate the inevitable boredom associated with watching and grading the videos.

The professor evaluates all of the exercises outside of the classroom, the assistance of a teaching assistant. This gives the instructor a better sense of how well the students understand the material. Feedback includes comments about content, style, language, gestures, dress, script quality, energy level, realism, creativity, and effort. Much of the student’s grade is based on their success in following the guidelines for a sales call. Comments and grades are written on the students’ scripts, which are returned to the students with their tapes. Given the limited nature of the role play exercise, the syllabus assigns relatively little weight to the performance. The value of the exercise has varied from 10 to 15 percent of the semester grade. Grade distribution is fairly normal, with a mean that is slightly higher than examination grades.

This videotaped role play exercise has been used in six sections of an undergraduate, sales management course from Fall 2002 through Spring 2004. Class sizes ranged from 61 to 149, with an average of 106 students per section. Seven other sections of this same course were taught without assigning the exercise, starting in Fall 2001 through Summer 2005. In order to compare student learning between the classes with the role play exercise and those without, an evaluation of the students’ performance on objective examinations was compared.

Each class was given a series of objective, multiple choice examinations. Questions are comparable, from semester to semester. In fact, exam questions are typically variations of, and even duplications of, questions from previous exams. Analysis of more than 4,000 examinations indicates a significant difference in the average exam grade between the sections with the exercise and those without. The students who did the exercise averaged 82.93 percent correct answers on the objective exams, while their counterparts who did not have the exercise averaged 81.49 percent. This difference is statistically significant, $t = -3.215$, $df = 1349$, $p < .001$. The higher test scores during the semesters where the students also performed the role play exercise may result from increased learning associated with the experiential learning component. Through the application, the subject material may become more salient and intuitive. An alternative expla-

nation is that student involvement with the course increases as a result of their efforts, and perhaps enjoyment, in performing the role play. That is, the student may study harder. Regardless of the actual learning mechanism, students do in fact appear to learn better when they perform the role play exercise.

Student reaction is also an important assessment tool. Typically, the students are asked to reflect on their role play experience and report something that they learned from it. This reflection takes the form of an in-class exercise, but a brief reflective paper could be required along with the video and the script. Feedback is also requested from students as part of the end of semester teacher evaluations. Although most (358) of the teacher evaluations during the semesters with the role play were silent on the exercise, 86 students expressed positive comments and 17 expressed negative comments. Of the 17 negative comments, 16 simply said that they did not like the exercise. Among the positive comments, there were a few insightful ones that pointed to an appreciation of how difficult sales can be, and an appreciation of their own ability to apply the course material in an exercise. Students also offer many unsolicited comments in person and via email. These have been unanimously positive.

Several recruiters have reported that they have been impressed by the students’ descriptions of the exercises during job interviews. Several students reportedly pointed to the exercise as an accomplishment, or as a valuable learning tool that prepared them for an entry level sales job. The recruiters encouraged me to continue the practice. One student who earned the lowest grade in the class one semester, emailed the professor several months later to say that her sales career was starting well, and that she attributed that success in large part to what she had learned performing the role play exercise. The Table lists the strengths and weaknesses of the role play exercise described in this paper versus the more traditional, in-class, live exercise.

LOGISTICAL ISSUES

A problem that arose during the first semester of implementing this innovation was a lack of access to video equipment. Students were responsible for obtaining a video camera. Unfortunately, there was only one camera available in the college, and its use was restricted to the managerial communications laboratory. Most students had video cameras, but many of those were digital. Playback capability was limited to standard VHS, VHS-C, and 8 mm. CDs and DVDs could not be viewed during the first three semesters of this assignment because of antiquated computer equipment. As a result of these problems and restrictions, students who did not have cameras that would record in the necessary format were forced to borrow cameras. Many students teamed up with classmates who had access to cameras, or borrowed cameras from friends

TABLE
COMPARISON OF ROLE PLAY METHODOLOGIES

	Characteristics In-Class Method	Traditional Videotaped Method
Experiential and vicarious learning	Yes	Yes
Interpersonal skill development	Yes	Yes
Immediate feedback	Yes	No
Detailed instructor feedback	Yes	Yes
Peer feedback	Yes	No
Post hoc analysis with repeated viewing	No	Yes
Minimize stage fright	No	Yes
Avoid guillotine effect	No	Yes
Free up class time for lecture and other exercise	No	Yes
Can use in large classes	No	Yes
Post hoc review of exercise by student	No	Yes
Script preparation	Professor	Student
Grading	In class	Out of class

or parents. One resourceful student purchased a camera and returned it to the store for a refund after the assignment.

Rather than encourage such unethical behavior, and to facilitate the exercise, the department purchased a VHS-C video camera for this exercise. The camera is available for use in the departmental conference room by appointment. The price of the camera and tripod was less than \$400. Students provide their own tapes. Even with the availability of the camera, some students record in the wrong format each semester, using their own cameras. This typically results in a coordination challenge at the end of each semester to borrow their cameras to play back the tapes. However, with the recent purchase of new computers for our faculty, CD and DVD formats are no longer a problem.

There were other technical difficulties during the first semester that were easy to address. One video involved the demonstration of a mailing machine. The machine noise was so loud that it drowned out the dialogue. Other noisy demonstrations included the demonstrations of automobiles, trucks, scooters, ATVs, and airplanes. Videos that were taped outside were susceptible to wind noise. Other videos had loud background noise, often from radios, telephones, and even televisions. An unanticipated

procedural error that several students made was to spend too much time on the ice breaking and rapport development, and too little time on the actual sale. A brief instruction to the students to avoid these hazards and to watch their tapes before submission prevents most of these problems.

The single biggest problem with this innovation has been an administrative one, i.e., the amount of time that the instructor must spend grading the exercises. While much of the feedback can be written while watching the video, it is often necessary to rerun tapes and to write detailed comments. Watching and grading a tape takes 15 to 20 minutes, so the grading for a class of 60 students takes 15 to 20 hours. Classes of 150 can take up to 50 hours to grade. Fortunately, the grading can be done anywhere with access to a video player or computer. Typically, the professor in this class grades the exercises at home in small batches of 10 to 20, taking frequent breaks. To spread out the workload, the syllabus offers bonus points (5%) for videos that are turned in a week or two before the deadline. About ten percent of the students take advantage of this opportunity.

Beyond the time spent in actual grading, another concern is how much time passes before grades are complete. In the very large classes, those with more than

100 students, it is not unusual to return the graded videos and scripts several weeks after submission. This creates a temporal gap between performance and feedback, and this gap may affect the learning that takes place as a result of performing the exercises. A more positive effect of this delay is that it may lessen the guillotine effect because the students' emotional attachment to the work decreases. Allowing the teaching assistant to grade some of the exercises, or hiring multiple teaching assistants to do all of the grading, would alleviate this delay.

APPLICATION SUGGESTIONS

This paper describes how this exercise has been used successfully for large, undergraduate sales classes. As suggested by Moncrief (1991), this technique can be used in smaller classes, with in-class review and feedback. It can also be applied to the first role play exercise of the semester, enabling the professor to give the student private feedback, without input from the entire class. This might help alleviate performance anxiety and the guillotine effect that are especially problematic with the first role play. The exercise could easily be adapted for use in a graduate level class.

The videotaped role play exercise can also be used in situations other than sales calls. For example, sales management classes typically cover the hiring process, so videotaped role play could be used to simulate job interviews' as well sales calls. Videotaped assignments could be useful in other marketing classes as well. They could be used in promotions classes to record a television or radio commercial for review and critique in class. Videotape can also be used as part of a capstone class for term project reports, product descriptions, plant tours, and other aspects of a report that cannot be easily conveyed in class or on paper.

The pedagogy could be expanded to enhance the students' learning experience. By digitizing the videos

and posting them online for download, students can compare their own work to that of their classmates. Furthermore, a sample of videos could be shown in class to provide a stronger, vicarious learning experience, and to replace another valuable component of the live role play, the peer feedback. One way to reduce the burden of grading from the instructor is to recruit professional salespeople to evaluate the video role plays as they currently do with live exercises in some courses. Students could also be asked to evaluate their classmates' work. To increase student involvement, awards can be given to the best role play, the most dramatic, best comedy, and best supporting role.

CONCLUSION

Role play exercises have long been used in sales classes to prepare students for the complexities of sales careers, and to help them to develop the interpersonal skills that are so necessary for success in those careers. The vicarious learning that takes place during the role play has made this a popular teaching tool. However, large enrollments in sales classes make it impractical to conduct these exercises in class. By using videotape technology, students can participate in role play exercises while using a minimum of class time. This allows for experiential learning that would otherwise be missing from the course. Videotape enables the students to make multiple attempts before the final, graded exercise, and to retain a record of their performance. It also greatly reduces the performance anxiety for even the shyest students and the guillotine effect common with in-class critiques. The use of the role play exercise in this manner may be more difficult to administer and may lose some of the benefits of live, in-class exercises. However, it provides a vehicle for learning that would otherwise be absent because of the class size. Furthermore, it offers many advantages over the traditional methods.

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