

– online learning in action series –

using role play to support active learning on discussion boards

Online discussion boards in duo allow students to post and respond to comments over a period of time which allows flexibility to fit around their schedules, time zones and other commitments. Since they are not happening in real time, students are able to spend more time considering what they want to say and reflecting on what others have said before responding. However, a frequent challenge using asynchronous online discussion boards is participation. One way to generate discussion is to design an activity that sets students up to present different pieces of information or viewpoints via the acting out of roles. This also gives increased licence for students to express disagreement with one another, which some may otherwise find difficult where there is a lack of facial cues, intonation and immediacy to help mediate the message.

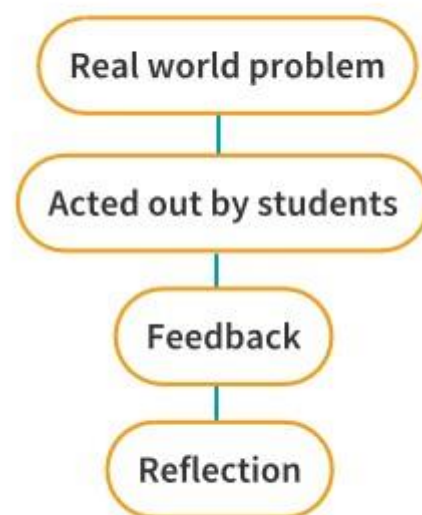
approach

We wanted students to be able to critically evaluate the role of stakeholders in strategy and decided to give them license to advocate for the different stakeholders in relation to a specific strategy case study. The organisation of this activity needed to be simple so we asked students to self-organise using their month of birth to decide which stakeholder group they would represent. So, for example, if they were born between January-March they took the role of an investor. The other roles were: employee, customer and supplier.

Students read the case study for the company and then, to start the discussion, were asked from their allocated point of

view, what they would expect from the strategy. The activity was designed to bring out real world problems experienced via differences of opinion and competing interests. The tutor then would facilitate this to draw out and examine particular aspects that reinforced the learning points and probe/challenge students further. Drawing the discussion to a close, the tutor would ask the students to consider how – or if – all the different expectations could be reconciled and what they would do next if they were the company director.

Finally, to help consolidate the experience, students were asked to write a reflection of the challenges they encountered and what they learned as a result.



This idea could be applied to many areas of study using open ended questions or case studies. Depending on the level of

study you can create the specific roles or allow groups to create the roles themselves from a relevant perspective. Using it in online discussion boards can allow students time to discuss and develop responses over a set period of time – such as week. This can also be done on a webinar or face to face if a reading or case study is given beforehand to allow the students to look critically at the realistic case centred around the topic they are studying and could be staged as a debate using role play.

outcome

This activity received higher engagement (in terms of number of posts) relative to the other discussion-based activity for the study week across all four tutor groups – in fact generating on average just under twice as many posts. Students frequently replied to other students to ask clarifying questions, express a difference of opinion, provide examples from personal experience and also to offer praise for points they felt were well made. Tutor interventions varied between groups but common across all groups was the volume of student-student debate this generated. Some students took on a self-appointed role of mediator, attempting to reconcile different viewpoints and seek consensus.

“.. I agree that customers, could be worry about the expansion of [Company X] if they do not see the firm as a strategic partner. As [Student A] said, [Company X] could gain bargaining power, and demand higher prices for example. On the other hand, if they have a business relationship, the customer could be benefited from the merger, by concentrating on fewer suppliers and reducing costs and waste in its supply chain.”
[Extract from a student post]

further resources

[Blackboard guidance on discussion boards](#)

Darabi, A., Arrastia, M.C., Nelson, D.W., Cornille, T., & Liang, X. (2010). Cognitive presence in asynchronous online learning: A comparison of four discussion strategies. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27, 216-227.

Stevens, R. (2015). Role-play and student engagement: Reflections from the classroom. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20, 481-492.

tell us about your experience

If you've used discussion boards, or have other examples of how you've developed online learning activities, we'd love to hear from you – please get in touch with [a member of the Educational Development Unit](#).