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**USE OF ONLINE ROLE-PLAY/CASE-STUDY METHOD  
IN STUDENTS' LEADERSHIP SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

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Case studies and role-plays are examples of active collaborative teaching techniques. Online collaborative learning encourages students to learn together in teams using Internet communication technologies. However, online collaborative learning space is not only encouraging but also challenging for both instructors and students. In this article, the authors investigated the application of an online case study method that involves role-play approach (RP/CS) in solving the cases.

Due to the shift to online education during the last two years in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, this research study explored the application of online RP/CS in the development of students' leadership skills, which are of significance for all professions. The purpose of this research study is to investigate if/how the instructors use RP/CS tools in order to aid students in their leadership skills development and how students perceive the application of RP/CS activities introduced in online courses.

Course instructors across the West Ukrainian National University were surveyed to identify the courses where the instructors used online RP/CS activities. The focus was on the application of RP/CS in teaching leadership skills. Nine course instructors were interviewed to identify the features around the courses and the use of RP/CS (the aim of the course, the purpose of using RP/CS, and the expected outcomes). 22 second-year students who participated in online RP/CS activities were surveyed online. Seven students were interviewed online. The research purpose was to explore students' perceived learning, participation, and satisfaction. According to the analysis of students' surveys and interviews, the participants were satisfied with their online learning experience and felt increased motivation and interest in RP/CS. Thus, the difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and other current challenges should not negatively affect the educational process in universities. The creation of a new educational space for interactive learning and the use of active collaborative methods online are of particular significance.

*Key words:* online education, case study method, role play, leadership skills, collaborative learning.

**ВИКОРИСТАННЯ ОНЛАЙН-МЕТОДУ КОНКРЕТНИХ СИТУАЦІЙ З ЕЛЕМЕНТАМИ  
РОЛЬОВИХ ІГОР З МЕТОЮ РОЗВИТКУ ЛІДЕРСЬКИХ НАВИЧОК СТУДЕНТІВ**

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Методи конкретних ситуацій (case study) та рольові ігри належать до активних колаборативних технологій навчання. Інтерактивне спільне навчання заохочує студентів навчатися разом у командах



з використанням технологій Інтернет-комунікацій. Протягом останніх двох років у відповідь на пандемію Covid-19 відбувся перехід до онлайн-навчання. Однак спільний навчальний простір в Інтернеті є складним завданням як для викладачів, так і для студентів. У статті автори розглянули застосування методу конкретних ситуацій (кейс-стаді), який передбачає використання методу рольової гри (РГ) у розв'язанні кейсів з метою розвитку лідерських навичок студентів, які є важливими для всіх професій. Завдання дослідження полягає у вивченні того, як викладачі використовують онлайн РГ/КС та як студенти сприймають застосування РГ/КС на онлайн-курсах.

Проведено опитування викладачів Західноукраїнського національного університету для того, щоб визначити курси, на яких викладачі використовували онлайн РГ/КС. Основна увага приділена застосуванню РГ/КС з метою розвитку лідерських навичок. Було проведено інтерв'ю дев'яти викладачів курсів, щоб визначити особливості курсів та використання РГ/КС (цілі курсу, причини використання РГ/КС та результати). Також 22 студенти другого курсу, які брали участь в онлайн РГ/КС під час онлайн-курсу *Командна робота та лідерство*, взяли участь і в опитуванні. Аналіз даних опитувань та інтерв'ю студентів показав, що вони позитивно сприймають активну спільну навчальну діяльність, задоволені досвідом навчання онлайн, мали підвищену мотивацію та інтерес до РГ/КС. Отже, труднощі, спричинені пандемією Covid-19, та інші сучасні виклики не повинні негативно впливати на навчальний процес в університеті. Особливої важливості набуває створення нового освітнього простору інтерактивного навчання і використання активних колаборативних методів онлайн.

**Ключові слова:** *онлайн-навчання, метод конкретних ситуацій (кейс-стаді), рольова гра, лідерські якості, колаборативне навчання.*

## Introduction

There are many effective methods that higher education teachers use to engage students in the active learning process. For example, the use of case studies in business, law, medical, and other schools proved to be an effective technique. The method can be used in teaching any discipline that is aimed to develop student's analytical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. However, role-play pedagogy has also been shown to be effective in reaching learning outcomes in three major learning domains: affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Rao & Stupans, 2012). Students put into practice skills they have learned in theory creating a deeper cognitive link to the material. Case studies and role-plays are examples of active and collaborative teaching techniques. In the article, the authors focused on the use of cases specifically when a role-play (RP) approach is used to discuss the case study (RP/CS). Due to the shift to online education during the last two years in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, this research study explores the application of online RP/CS in the development of students' leadership skills. The demands for a focus on leadership skills are important for several reasons. According to Mumford and Champion (2007), "a focus on leadership skill requirements emphasizes that leaders can become better leaders, in part because skills represent capabilities that can be developed" (p.154). By exploring leadership skill requirements, the research area is shifted from the person holding the job (i.e., the leader) to the job itself.

### 1. Theoretical substantiation of the problem

University instructors in Ukraine and abroad have been widely using RP/CS technologies to aid students in developing their leadership skills. However, it is not known if university

instructors were successfully applying RP/CS in online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic delivering the courses in lockdown. Particularly, it is important to be aware that online education has several disadvantages in developing practical skills and help students develop their leadership skills. To be successful and effective in the future, leaders need an emerging set of skills uniquely suited to dealing with modern challenges (Joharsen, 2012).

The purpose of this research study is to investigate if/how the instructors use online RP/CS tools in order to assist students in their leadership skills development and how students perceive the application of RP/CS activities introduced in online courses.

Harvard Business School established the case study method in the 1920s, therefore, it cannot be considered as an innovative teaching method. However, it is still effectively used in most business schools. Herreid wrote that "having struggled with that very topic for many years early in the game, I believe it is important to get to the heart of the matter right from the start. It took me some time to reach my present broad definition, which is: "A case study is a story with an educational message" (Herreid, 2006: 27). The application of the case method is very extensive and diverse being applied in teaching different disciplines. For example, researchers investigated its application in teaching college physics (Burko, 2016), chemistry (Ozdilek, 2014), or biology (Bonney, 2015). Case studies are "more effective than classroom discussions and textbook reading at promoting learning of key biological concepts, development of written and oral communication skills, and comprehension of the relevance of biological concepts to everyday life" (Bonney, 2015: 846). Asquith and Weiss (2019) analyzed the use of the case



study approach to financial tools, financial policies, and evaluation. Thus, despite the long history, the case study method is still popular in recent research.

For the last two decades, the case study method has been intensively researched in Ukraine. A case study is a problem-solving method that is based on specific examples or situations. It helps students to use their theoretical knowledge to solving practical problems. The case is a real situation that is aimed to make a teacher and students work together to find a solution (Tulska, 2003: 28). The need for application of this method in education is urgent due to the generalization of educational processes and lack of focus on the development of skills and abilities, such as the ability to learn, process huge amounts of information, think critically (Surmin, 2015: 28). The case study method is “one of the active learning approaches considered as a more effective way to develop professional skills and achieve learning outcomes than traditional teaching methods” (Stepurko & Ignashchuk, 2017: 71).

Usually, a case study includes the situation/problem and analysis of the case, in discussion with other participants. RP/CS differs in that “it involves observing actions as an outsider and vicariously attempting to understand the process, decisions, values and strategies as presented by the case” (Wills, 2010). Role-plays have been used in diverse applications across many disciplines as well. Nestel and Tierney (2007) explored the application of role-play for medical students learning about communication. The students imagine themselves in a particular situation and then they are asked to behave exactly as they feel they would perform in that situation. The rest of the students observe and also learn about the person’s behavior and/or situation Nestel and Tierney, 207).

Guillaume and Apodaca (2020) investigated the use of role-playing in classroom debates. Students were assigned a role to play based on a topic (e.g. the role of employer, employee, co-worker, CEO, etc.) Students needed to prepare for the debate by researching the information that would support the point-of-view of their assigned role and to debate as that person. Germain-Thomas et al. (2019) explored collaborative role-play design in developing negotiation skills. According to Vizeshfar et al (2019), “the advantages of role-play, including development of communication skills and active listening, resulted in the learners’ enthusiasm and motivation” (Vizeshvar, Zare, & Keshtkaran, 2019: 175).

Blanchard and Buchs (2015) assessed the effectiveness of a role-play in exploring the concept of sustainable development. The

assessment showed that “role-play is highly praised by the players as it not only brings them foundational knowledge but also allows them to enhance many skills” (Blanchard & Buchs, 2015: 697). Joyner and Young stated that “engaging students in role play promotes active learning” (Joyner & Young, 2006: 225). However, the authors emphasized that role plays are effective if learning objectives are clearly defined and the cases are challenging. Ip, Linser and Naidu (2001) stated that the move from traditional lectures, seminars, tutorials, paper-based exams, essay writing and reliance on printed books and articles to role-playing significantly transformed the learning and teaching processes. Students played an active rather than passive role and emphasis was transferred from individual activities to communication and collaboration, which allowed flexibility in the delivery of material in terms of the number of participants, the timing and the spatial location of the teaching and learning process and also how participants were taught new skills and competencies.

Due to the Covid 19, instructors all over the world try to adapt their courses to online education and find out the best ways to apply interactive methods in online teaching. However, the effective use of online RP/CS tools has been in the research focus of educators long before the lockdowns. According to Dracup (2012), online role plays are an increasingly popular teaching and learning technique used in higher education throughout the world because they involve students taking on the role of another person in a particular scenario and interacting with other role-playing students to explore an issue from the point of view of an insider (p.13).

Hrastiski and Watson (2009) investigated designing and evaluating online role play in conflict management. Silberg and Lennon (2006) explored developing leadership skills online versus face-to-face. The authors concluded that there was a little difference in perception between face-to-face groups of students and little difference in perception between online groups of students. The authors stated that “online students are far more positive in their views of the effectiveness of mediated online learning environments in developing leadership skills” (p. 498).

Thus, specific areas of training are considered important in developing leadership skills. It is a particularly critical area of focus for all leaders to work on and continually improve. Today’s employees and leaders and tomorrow’s future leaders want training and personal and professional development and “the organizations that have the best



leaders in the future are likely to be those that invest in their people, and help employees to develop the much coveted leadership skills needed for success“ (Newton, 2019).

## 2. Methodology and methods

Course instructors across the West Ukrainian National University were contacted by email to identify the courses where role-play case study (RP/CS) was being used. The focus was on the application of RP/CS in teaching leadership skills. Most instructors (90%) shared that they use active learning methods including the case studies; however, only 45% of respondents mentioned RP/CS. Obviously, the method cannot be effectively used in all the courses, but some instructors often use RP/CS due to the content of their courses (e.g. Organizational Behavior, Management of Personnel, Self-management, Teamwork and Leadership). Nine course instructors were interviewed to identify the features around the courses and the use of RP/CS (the aims of the course, the purpose of using RP/CS, in particular, whether the purpose was students' leadership skills development). The interviews were transcribed, and key themes from the interviews were analyzed.

## 3. Results and discussions

The second-year students who had been delivered the course Teamwork and Leadership (22 students) were surveyed online. During the course, the instructor used case studies as well as RP/CS so that the students were confident about the questions they were asked and the differences between the methods. The course has been delivered online due to the pandemic, therefore, the students were aware that they were involved in online RP/CS. 92% of students stated that they prefer active methods of learning and feel comfortable discussing case studies online. However, only 58% feel comfortable to role-play online. The students admitted that they prefer short RP/CS. For example, instruction: Imagine you are a manager in a company. One day an employer came to your office and informed you about the unethical behavior of his colleague stating that he was selling some secret information to the competitors. Two students role-play the situation.

To evaluate the online role-play, the method used by Hrastingki and Watson (2009) was applied. The authors investigated the use of RP/CS in conflict management. In this study, the research focus was on the use of RP/CS in teaching leadership skills. Therefore, there were changes in formulating the basic statements. 22 students agreed to participate in the study (mean age of 20 years). There were five role play groups with four or five students in each group. Data were

collected through a questionnaire distributed when the role-play was finished. The research purpose was to explore students' perceived learning (Table 1), participation (Table 2) and satisfaction (Table 3) that were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

Table 1  
Students' perceived learning in RP/CS

	Perceived learning in RP/CS	Mean
1	I felt I was learning more while preparing for RL/CS	4.2
2	I felt that I was learning a lot during RP/CS	3.8
3	RP/CS aroused my motivation to learning	4.3
4	RP/CS aroused my interest and curiosity	3.6
5	I felt that RP/CS assisted in my leadership (decision-making ) skills development	3.5

Overall, the students were satisfied with their learning process and shared that they felt both before (preparation for RP/CS) and during (RP) activities were rewarding. The students felt that their attention was maintained and that they learned more during the role play. They agreed that RP/CS assisted them in the development of their leadership/decision-making skills. Several students mentioned that they prefer online RP/CS because it can be more anonymous. They find face-to-face RP/CS more demanding and challenging. It is important that the students felt more motivated and interested in the activity they participated in.

Table 2  
Students' perceived participation in RP/LC

	Perceived participation in RP/LC	Mean
1	I felt like the participants in the role play worked together	4.3
2	I felt that others acknowledged my point of view in the role play	3.4
3	I felt that students in the role play cared about each other's opinions	3.9
4	I felt connected to the others in the role play	4.1

A majority of students felt that they actively participated in the online RP/CS, their points of view were acknowledged and most of them cared about each other's opinions. They felt that they invested well their efforts by introducing their own opinion and also by listening to others. It is important that RP/CS method makes the students actively participate in the activity. In the interviews, the students mentioned that participation of all the case players made them feel motivated



and connected to each other; they felt acknowledgement and acceptance and were not afraid of criticism.

Table 3  
Students' perceived satisfaction

	Perceived satisfaction	Mean
1	I found RP/CS an interesting and challenging experience	4.4
2	I found RP/CS was fun and felt like the participants enjoyed this learning process	4.0
3	I felt connected to other participants	4.0
4	I would like to participate in another role play in the future	4.1

Thus, the students felt satisfied, motivated and encouraged with their RP/CS experience. They felt that their RP/CS experience was fun. Most of the students admitted they would like to take part in another role play in the future.

### Conclusion

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, online active collaborative teaching methods have become in the research focus of many educators. It has been discovered that university instructors in Ukraine and abroad have been using online RP/CS technologies to aid students in developing their leadership skills and the students positively perceive the use of RP/CS activities. We surveyed and interviewed both the university instructors and students. According to data analysis, the instructors have actively used RP/CS before the Covid-19 lockdown but during the pandemic, some RP/CS became not appropriate to apply. However, there are courses in which the application of online RP/CS can be effective in achieving a broad range of learning outcomes. Therefore, we hope the research will be encouraging for university instructors to apply online interactive collaborative methods in their online courses.

According to the analysis of students' surveys and interviews, the participants were satisfied with their online learning experience. Online RP/CS can be used in diverse applications in many courses. Data analysis of students' surveys and interviews showed that they positively perceived active collaborative learning activities, felt more motivated and connected to each other, and enjoyed the process. Disadvantages that were brought by the Covid-19 pandemics should not negatively influence the educational process and university instructors should create an active collaborative learning space that can be implemented online. Students positively perceive online RP/CS. Therefore, further research areas can be focused on the development of new online RP/CS aimed

at the development of diverse professional skills (leadership, communication, decision-making, etc.).

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