Beyond the Script: Assessing the Effectiveness of Sales Role-Plays in Developing Selling Skills

By Howard F. Dover, Ryan E. Freling, and Lukas P. Forbes

Role-play exercises have been a vital component of sales education for decades. Role-play exercises allow students the opportunity to gain practice, refine skills, and gain feedback while also allowing them to experience a trial run of their potential career. Sales educators have used role-play exercises as a key element of both entry level and advanced sales classes, while corporations often use role-play activities as a way to evaluate and train potential employees. However, there is a concern that while role-play activities (e.g., internal sales competitions) enhance skills at selling, they might not be the best indicator of success at actual selling activities. This research examines the relationship between a student's role-play performance and live-selling results and provides some small-sample evidence that student performance in competitive role-play events—such as an intra-university role-play competition—does not predict, nor correlate with, student performance in live-selling activities that are assigned as part of an academic sales curriculum. In addition, this study presents a pedagogical alternative for sales educators that *de-emphasizes* the weight of competitive role-play on student evaluation in favor of a more comprehensive set of advanced sales metrics that could provide better assessment of student's sales skills. Managerial implications and future research directions are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Sales education and sales programs continue to grow at universities across the globe. Over the last decade, the largest alliance of certified university sales programs has grown from approximately 15 schools to over 70 (UniversitySalesCenterAlliance.com) and currently includes schools in the United States, Canada and Europe. Within each of these programs, sales educators have routinely used sales role-play activities—training exercises in which sales students act out various scenarios to develop their sales skills—as a way to assess students' sales performance. In fact, to be a fully certified member of the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA), a member school must have an advanced selling course that includes video recorded role-plays as part of the curriculum.

For most advanced sales courses, students will conduct a role-play exercise at least once in order to demonstrate sales skills learned in their classes. In addition to the role-play activities integrated into sales courses and used for skill development, some member schools of the USCA host their own intra-university role-play competitions in which students' role-play performances are judged by actual sales representatives. These events provide students with an opportunity to showcase the skills developed in their sales courses and to network with potential future employers. In some cases, these intra-university competitions determine which students get the opportunity to compete in national (inter-university) role-play competitions such as the National Collegiate Sales Competition hosted by Kennesaw State University each year.

A robust literature on role-play in the context of experiential learning exists and includes numerous research studies specifically analyzing sales role-plays in sales education. Sales educators have consistently regarded role-play activities as an essential activity and necessary to prepare students for success in a sales career (Deeter-Schmelz, 2015). Role-play exercises have been shown to be an excellent example of experiential learning (Inks and Avila, 2008) that allows participants to incorporate necessary skills and techniques for deeper learning (Young et. Al., 2008). Experiential learning like sales role-plays develops critical thinking skills (Alvarez et al., 2015) and problem-solving techniques

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(Barr and McNeilly, 2002) while providing opportunity to apply those skills and techniques to a real client or person (Ardley and Taylor, 2010).

Despite the extensive sales role-play literature, there is a lack of research examining the correlation between student performance in role-play centered curricula and student performance in live-selling tasks (e.g., selling a sponsorship). To the extent that one of the goals of university sales centers is to produce sales ready job candidates, understanding the relationship between student performance in intra-university role-play competitions and live-selling tasks is an important endeavor. In addition, if there is a lack of correlation between these activities, how might traditional academic courses focused on role-plays be enhanced? The purpose of this research, therefore, is two-fold. First, we assess the correlation between student performance in an intra-university role-play competition activity and measures of student success in live-selling activities within a class setting. Second, we present a pedagogical change that lessens the importance of competitive role-play as a means of student assessment in advanced selling courses by focusing on a more holistic set of measures centered on live-selling activities with two-tiered goal attainment objectives. Finally, we discuss research implications, limitations and directions for future research.

ROLE-PLAY IN SALES TRAINING AND EDUCATION

At the corporate level, presentation training and different forms of role-play exercises have been part of the sales training world since the late 19th century. John Henry Patterson, the owner of the National Cash Registry Company (NCR), was among the first to pioneer sales training techniques that are still in use today. In the late 1880's, Patterson instituted the first known use of a sales training primer, developed sales scripts, and mandated training on sales presentations. In essence, his sales force participated in the first documented use of role-play where salespersons observed and practiced techniques they would use in the field with real clients (Over A Century of Innovation, 2023). Given the absence of recording capability at that time, some of the earliest forms of role-play exercises at places like NCR involved the sale force observing techniques of successful sales representatives and then practicing those techniques in their own sales pitches. With the rapid improvement in technology (e.g., recording devices; video equipment) sales role-play exercises have become a key element of sales training both in the corporate world and in sales education at the collegiate level.

Documentation of sales education at the university level occurred as early as the 1940's (Kellerman and Hekmat, 1989). As universities began to implement sales education at a greater scale towards the end of the 20th Century, the need for some form of accrediting body or agency was required. Given that need, the first university sales association—the University Sales Center Alliance—was formed in 2002 (University Sales Center Alliance, 2023). This alliance began with nine founding members that established bylaws, guidelines for sales education and a process for certification and accreditation. Part of that process included the need for all certified sales programs to have the ability to conduct and record role-play sales presentations as part of their advanced sales course (Forbes et al., 2014). This role-play requirement by the governing USCA body, plus the obvious benefits of role-play training within sales education, made the sales role-play a foundation of most sales curricula. For many schools, a main grading element of advanced sales classes is the role-play exercise.

The growth of university-based sales programs led to a corresponding growth in the number of intra- and inter-university sales competitions held by those programs (Forbes et. al, 2014). In such competitions, role-play is used as the primary (and often only) mechanism for determining competition scoring and subsequent results. For example, at the National Collegiate Sales Competition event (National Collegiate Sales Competition, 2023), the largest university sales competition in the world, the only grading mechanism to assess student performance is the role-play. In essence, if a student excels at role-play, they are likely to be very competitive at university sales competitions which can lead to employment opportunities. In fact, in their article describing the very first National Collegiate Sales Competition held in April 1999, Loe and Chonko (2000) quote one gushing representative of a sponsoring corporation, "Of the students I have seen during this sales competition, I would hire 50% of them." (p. 12)

Given the perceived importance of role-plays from both the practitioner and academic perspective, organizations and educators alike have sought to refine this much-supported technique and more comprehensively understand its value. At its roots, role-play in sales education is experiential learning. Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as the "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). In sales role-plays, students are able to learn the techniques and assess their knowledge simply by practicing sales calls with clients who are typically following a scripted buyer plan (Carroll, 2006; Avila and Chapman, 1991). This not only allows students to gain experience and understanding but, more importantly, it enables them to practice skills directly related to the day-to-day job requirements of a salesperson (Carver, 1996). In this light, role-play allows students to experience "sales jobs" before actually pursuing sales as a career (Mich, Conners and Feldman, 2014).

However, as sales training evolves, there is a concern among some practitioners and sales educators that role-plays, particularly in competition type settings, can become too theatrical and scripted and are no longer as valid at assessing actual sales acumen (Kempa, 2021). In other words, as decades of usage have made educators experts at teaching successful role-play techniques, there is a concern that students might be learning more of a script or an act, rather than a set of selling skills and traits. If true, the concern is that students who perform well in these competitive role-play activities might not translate that success into actual selling environments. For those university sales centers whose intra-university role-play competitions double as networking events for their students and potential future employers, understanding the relationship between role-play competition performance and professional selling competence is a worthwhile objective.

Therefore, our research first seeks to understand the relationship between intra-university role-play competition results and students' live-selling (albeit in a classroom setting) results. Does success in intra-university role-play competitions mean that the student will do well in actual selling activities? The following section describes an analysis of data collected from a USCA certified sales program in the southern United States to provide an initial examination of the relationship between student role-play performance and student achievement of actual selling objectives.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

To assess the relationship between student performance in intra-university role-play competition and actual selling success, data was obtained over three consecutive semesters from students enrolled in an advanced selling course at a large, public university in the southern United States with a certified sales program. The sample includes role-play performance scores (and rankings) and several different measures of live-selling objectives for students (n=56). Descriptive statistics are presented for the complete dataset and by individual semester in Table I. To enroll in the advanced selling course, students were required to complete an introductory selling course. Aside from participating in an intra-university role-play competition, students in the advanced selling course were also required to sell sponsorship opportunities (of the university sales center) to corporations in the local metropolitan area. The following variables in the data set capture students' performance in intra-university sales role-play activities and actual external selling activities on-behalf of the university sales center.

Variables

Students' role-play performance (*Role-Play*) is captured on a scale of 0 – 100 and represents the weighted sum of ratings on several dimensions related to a student's selling techniques and communication skills. The ratings are collected from sales representatives of corporate partners invited to observe and evaluate students' role-play performances. The judges' ratings are averaged before a weighted sum is calculated for the students' role-play scores. These ratings also provide the basis for the *Rank* variable that indicates the student's rank order finish in the role-play competition.

Three variables are metrics of students' performance on live-selling objectives.

Meetings (#): The measure captures students' ability to obtain and set a meeting. This measure does not distinguish whether the meetings are with a decision maker or even with an Ideal Customer Profile.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for role-play and classroom selling measures (overall and by semester).

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Complete Data Set					
Role-Play Rating	52	81.7	101.2	91.9	5.07
Role-Play Rank	52	1	20	9.46	5.44
# of Meetings	52	1.0	16.0	7.8	3.81
Open Sales ($)	53	0.0	27000.0	2990.6	4670.38
Close Sales ($)	53	0.0	3300.0	692.5	865.27
Fall 2021 Semester					
Role-Play Rating	14	81.7	101.2	92.6	6.38
Role-Play Rank	14	1	16	7.93	4.83
# of Meetings	15	2.0	13.0	6.6	3.09
Open Sales ($)	15	0.0	27000.0	5466.7	8087.62
Close Sales ($)	15	0.0	3000.0	1033.3	1097.35
Spring 2022 Semester					
Role-Play Rating	18	85.2	99.8	93.7	4.84
Role-Play Rank	18	1	18	9.5	5.34
# of Meetings	17	1.0	14.0	7.5	4.23
Open Sales ($)	18	0.0	3000.0	1138.9	1210.32
Close Sales ($)	18	0.0	1000.0	277.8	410.24
Fall 2022 Semester					
Role-Play Rating	20	84.3	96.7	89.8	3.49
Role-Play Rank	20	1	20	10.5	5.92
# of Meetings	20	2.0	16.0	8.8	3.82
Open Sales ($)	20	1000.0	5000.0	2800.0	1436.37
Close Sales ($)	20	0.0	3300.0	810.0	861.39

Open Sales ($): The dollar value of a student's complex deal opportunities. Corporate sponsorship opportunities more often involve multiple meetings and several decision makers and are considered 'complex' (Miller, et al. 2004). Corporate sponsorships are different from individual level sponsorships, which are more transactional in nature. Therefore, opening a complex opportunity is more challenging and a higher-level skill than just closing a simple transaction or obtaining a meeting with an individual. This variable is a proxy measure of the student's ability to set a meeting with the Ideal Customer Profile and to complete an appropriate needs assessment and sales call to obtain a commitment to consider the offering with additional meetings.

Closed Sales ($): The dollar value of a student's closed sponsorship deals. This measure includes both individual sponsorships and corporate sponsorships. This variable measures the student's ability to obtain a commitment by closing sponsorship deals. Most closed deals are from individual sponsorships.

Correlation Measure

The non-parametric statistic Spearman rank-order correlation (Spearman's *Rho*) is used to assess the degree to which student performance in intra-university role-play activities is related to actual selling performance. The Spearman rank-order correlation calculates whether a pair of variables are monotonically related by converting scores to ranks before correlation is assessed (Warner 2021). It is used in place of Pearson's Product Moment Correlation when data violate the assumptions of Pearson's r. An example of the statistic being applied in research includes Peterson and Devlin (1994), who measured the correlation between importance ratings of a list of job attributes as evaluated by graduating marketing students and employment recruiters. Krishna and Orhun (2022) used Spearman's *Rho* to find a relationship between rankings of business courses based on the gender performance differences determined by empirical estimates and by students' beliefs.

Examination of the bivariate relationships via scatter plots indicate the presence of outliers for many of these variables and the absence of a strictly linear relationship. In addition, the value of university sales center sponsorships is offered to corporate partners at fixed increments so the measurement scale of the variables *Open Sales* and *Closed Sales* exhibit properties more indicative of ordinal or interval data than ratio-scaled data. These data characteristics along with the small sample size for each semester suggest the use of the Spearman rank-order correlation is preferable to the more commonly used Pearson's Product Moment Correlation to avoid violating the distributional assumptions of the latter statistic.

Examination of the correlations presented in Table 2 for the full data set indicate that there are no significant correlations between students' role-play performance (or between students' role-play ranking) and actual selling data performance at the $p = 0.05$ level. There does appear to be a significant, positive correlation between *Open Sales* and *Closed Sales* ($r_s = 0.367$; $p < 0.01$) and there is a strong, nearly perfect correlation between *Role-play* and *Rank* as expected.

Even though role-play performance measures are of the same scale, the idiosyncratic nature of role-play scenarios and the corresponding corporate judges' ratings in intra-university role-play competitions from one semester to the next suggests examining the relationship between role-play performance and sales performance on a per-semester basis. The bottom three sections of Table 2 present the Spearman rank-order correlations between role-play performance and actual selling measures on a per semester basis. Regardless, role-play performance still does not exhibit a significant correlation with any of the actual sales measures. The only significant correlation is between *Meetings* and *Closed Sales* ($r_s = 0.515$; $p < 0.05$) in the Spring 2022 semester.

Surprisingly, the correlation between *Meetings* and *Closed Sales* is not significant for any other semester nor is it significant for the aggregate data. It is possible that these results are due to the variations across our small sample (e.g., students were able to set more meetings on average in Spring 2022 than Fall of 2021, but those meetings led to a smaller average Closed Sales). It is also possible that students are able to obtain meetings but not with decision makers in the organization. Each of these live-selling measures were iteratively developed and ultimately designed to capture different skills. It is also possible they are distinct enough measures that there is no significant relationship between them.

Binary Logistic Model

Characteristics of the values in the *Open Sales* and *Closed Sales* variables led to violations of distributional assumptions underlying regression analysis so, a binary logistic model was employed to examine the relationship between role-play competition rank and whether or not student opened (or closed) any sponsorship deals. *Open Sales* and *Closed Sales* were converted to binary indicator variables *Opened_Deals* and *Closed_Deals* where: 0 = No sponsorship deals were opened (closed) and; 1 = at least one sponsorship deal was opened (closed). Results presented in Table 3 show that student's finishing rank in competitive role-play events did not predict their ability to open (or close) sponsorship deals in a significant way (for *Opened_Deals*, $\beta_{rank} = 0.033$, sig.= 0.620; and for *Closed_Deals*, $\beta_{rank} = -0.011$, sig.= 0.842).

Table 2: Spearman's Rank-order correlations for role-play and classroom selling measures (overall and by semester).

Spearman Rank-order Correlations

	Complete Data Set				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Role-Play Rating	--				
(2) Role-Play Rank	**-0.920****	--			
(3) # of Meetings	-0.094	0.086	--		
(4) Open Sales ($)	-0.203	0.042	0.075	--	
(5) Close Sales ($)	-0.026	-0.072	0.253	**.367****	--
	Fall 21 Semester				
(1) Role-Play Rating	--				
(2) Role-Play Rank	**-0.999****	--			
(3) # of Meetings	0.129	-0.117	--		
(4) Open Sales ($)	-0.313	0.320	0.135	--	
(5) Close Sales ($)	0.21	-0.224	0.219	0.368	--
	Spring 2022 Semester				
(1) Role-Play Rating	--				
(2) Role-Play Rank	**-1.000****	--			
(3) # of Meetings	-0.26	0.260	--		
(4) Open Sales ($)	0.122	-0.122	-0.146	--	
(5) Close Sales ($)	0.057	-0.057	**.517***	0.326	--
	Fall 2022 Semester				
(1) Role-Play Rating	--				
(2) Role-Play Rank	**-0.999****	--			
(3) # of Meetings	0.042	-0.036	--		
(4) Open Sales ($)	0.109	-0.124	0.203	--	
(5) Close Sales ($)	-0.099	0.093	-0.006	0.066	--

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Binary Logisitic Regression Estimates Predicting *Closed_Deals* and *Opened_Deals* by Role-play Competition *Rank* (all data).

	β	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(β)
DV =	*Closed Deals*					
Constant	0.739	0.594	1.548	1	0.213	2.094
Rank	-0.011	0.054	0.040	1	0.842	0.989
DV =	*Opened Deals*					
Constant	1.133	0.687	2.722	1	0.099	3.105
Rank	0.033	0.066	0.246	1	0.620	1.033

Discussion of Analysis Results

There is a lack of clear relationship—based on analysis of this limited sample—between student performance in intra-university role-play competitions and student performance on actual selling objectives. These results give rise to the following questions: Why isn't competition performance an indication of live selling success? Will the corporate partners who get to observe these intra-university competitions over-estimate the sales ability of competition high performers? In light of these concerns, a second research objective emerges seeking to answer the question: Is there a better, more comprehensive method to assess the professional selling readiness of the students in advanced selling courses other than their performance in intra-university role-play competitions? To address this question, the next section describes the changes made to the course curriculum at one university to improve the overall robustness of their advanced sales class by implementing a more comprehensive student assessment focused on live-selling objectives.

AN ADVANCED SALES CURRICULUM FOCUSED ON LIVE-SELLING

To address our second objective, we present the comprehensive pedagogical approach being implemented at a leading university sales center in the southern United States. Besides the lack of correlation between intra-university role-play competition performance presented in the previous section, anecdotal evidence suggested that university trained sales representatives had difficulty adapting to live-selling environments. Such evidence caused this university to overhaul its advanced selling curriculum and to re-assess how its intra-university role-play competition is incorporated as a tool in the advanced sales course. What follows is a template to establish and format an advanced sales curriculum to provide a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of a students' job readiness. In particular, role-play performance is de-emphasized while increasing emphasis on skills and activities that relate to sales success such as attainment of sales quotas, capturing the number of customer touches, and evaluating time management skills.

Historically, the advanced sales curriculum focused on preparing students for compulsory participation in an intra-university role-play competition. At the beginning of the semester, course time was dedicated to skill building—often through classroom role-play activities—in anticipation of the intra-university competition, which was typically scheduled towards the latter half of the semester. A second part of the curriculum included a live-selling exercise, where students attempted to sell corporate and individual sponsorships of the sales center to companies and sales individuals in the local market. The live-selling tasks did not begin until the latter part of the semester even though 30% of the course grade was based on achieving live selling goals. A student's competition role-play performance made up another 30% of their course grade. See the bottom of Figure 1 for a depiction of how this curriculum rolled out during a typical semester.

In order to better assess the live-selling ability of students in the advanced sales course, changes were made to the curriculum in three distinct phases. First, emphasis on the intra-university role-play competition was reduced to help students focus on live-selling objectives. Second, new measures were implemented to better capture students' live-selling efforts. Third, a novel performance structure was developed for the advanced selling course in response to stakeholder inputs.

Three Changes to the Advanced Sales Curriculum

The first phase of changes to the advanced sales curriculum focused on reducing the importance of the intra-university role-play competition during the semester. Student participation in the intra-university role-play competition was expected—but no longer compelled—and so it was removed as a grade component for the advanced sales course. Furthermore, preparation time for the intra-university role-play competition was removed from the classroom completely. Students still had access to training labs and exercises, but classroom time was focused on elite skill development and live-selling execution strategies. Ultimately, the intra-university role-play competition was moved to an earlier date in the semester to further reduce the time students' spent focusing on the event.

The second phase of changes focused on increasing the importance of live-selling objectives in the advanced selling course. Removing the intra-university role-play competition from the advanced selling course curriculum enabled the live-selling process to be the sole focus of the course from the first day of the semester. Students attended training workshops for the assessment calls they conducted in the first several weeks of class. In addition, students were required to complete two role-plays each week to prepare for calls with live clients. Live calls and all role-plays were uploaded to a conversation intelligence platform for credit. To more comprehensively capture students' live selling efforts, measures capturing coachability, prospecting competency, sales meeting competency and quota attainment were implemented as the graded course assessments.

Coachability (30% of course grade): Coachability is determined by timely completion of a series of personalized training tasks and coaching experiences on sales enablement software by students.

Prospecting Competency (20%): Prospecting competency is determined by a combination of *Social Selling Index (SSI)* score and *Meetings*. SSI is a metric developed by LinkedIn that provides users with a measure of how well individuals build relationships and generate leads using the professional social media platform. The Meetings variable was described previously and captures the number of meetings set by the student.

Sales Meeting Competency (20%): The number and quality of the role-play and meeting recordings uploaded to a conversation intelligence platform for assessment determines sales meeting competency.

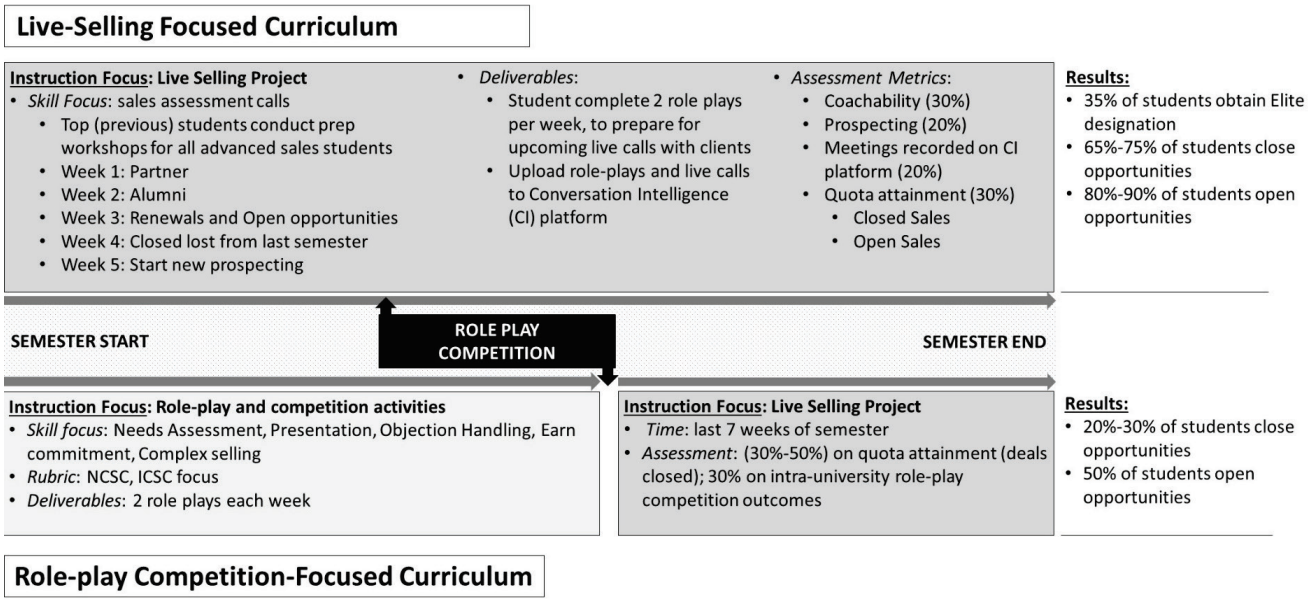
Quota Attainment (30%): Quota attainment is assessed as the students' ability to meet both *Open Sales* and *Closed Sales* goals.

The final phase of changes were initiated in response to stakeholder critiques of the grading changes introduced in the first two phases. First, high achieving students wanted more deterministic assessment targets in place to reward effort and diligence and to preserve student grade-point-averages. Second, Advisory Board Partners to the university sales center wanted a designation to identify high performing sales students who achieved performance goals along the following dimensions: *Coachability*, *SSI, Meetings*, *Open Sales*, and *Closed Sales*. These stakeholder inputs led to the establishment of two performance levels for each of the five dimensions. Students can earn an "A" in the course and a High Performance designation for meeting certain criteria for each dimension. To achieve Elite Status, students are required meet goals in each of the five dimensions that are 25% to 100% higher than those set for the High Performer status. Figure 1 depicts the change in focus from competition-focused curriculum to the new curriculum (see top of Figure 1) that emphasizes live-selling skill development and execution.

Feedback on Pedagogical Changes

Both anecdotal beliefs and student evaluation comments suggest this pedagogical change has strengthened the advanced sales course. First, adding actual selling outcomes like *Meetings*, *Open Sales*, *Closed Sales*, *Coachability* and *SSI* allows for a much more robust advanced sales curriculum. These changes have strengthened the centers' alignment with the live-selling course objectives. In doing so, there has been no drop-off in participation in intra-university role-play competitions, nor has there been a decrease in competition scores. Second, moving the role-play competition event to early in the semester enabled students to engage in live-selling functions earlier by reducing the preparation period for role-play competitions. Instead, role-plays became a tool to help prepare for actual sales meetings set by students as part of their live-selling objectives. Students augmented their role-play experience with call recording analysis tools and conversation intelligence capabilities that allows students and faculty to evaluate meeting performance and deconstruct both successful and unsuccessful sales meetings. Third, students experienced less anxiety about their course grade with the establishment of the High Performance designation. Even while 80% of students in advanced selling courses achieve the High Performance designation, nearly 35% of the students attained Elite Level status by reaching the higher goals on the live-selling functions. Finally, there is some anecdotal evidence that by focusing on live-selling functions, students achieving Elite Level status also performed better at national (i.e., inter-university) sales competitions.

Figure 1: Comparison of live selling (new) vs. role-play focused (old) advanced selling curricula



Comments from course evaluation surveys suggest the course changes were well received by students and corporate partners. Table IV provides a summary set of quotes from each stakeholder group regarding their perceptions of the changes to the advanced sales curriculum.

DISCUSSION

It is critical to note that the implication of this research is not that role-play exercises are unimportant within the sales pedagogy. Sales role-plays are an essential developmental tool that allows students to practice selling, learn from their mistakes, and gain greater confidence with their sales skills (Carroll, 2006; Avila and Chapman, 1991). Research also shows that role-plays enable students to develop a level of comfort in selling situations (Jackowski, Sherwood and Schofield, 2018) and that exposure to experiential learning like role-plays makes students more attractive to potential employers (Wurdinger and Allison, 2017). Rather, these findings serve as a pedagogical warning to sales educators and sales recruiters to potentially reconsider their possible over-reliance on role-play evaluations—or at least role-play competitions—to gauge the market readiness of their sales students. At the very least, these findings suggest that sales educators reflect on what constitutes best practice in sales pedagogy and how sales curriculums, might incorporate other activities to better gauge preparedness for a career in sales. Nonetheless, this research has implications for both sales managers looking to hire university trained sales representatives and for the faculty and administrators in charge of sales education at schools with university sales centers and at schools with a more limited offering of sales courses.

Implications for Sales Managers

For sales managers looking to hire new sales representatives from university programs, this research provides a note of caution. Many intra-university sales competitions are sponsored by corporations whose representatives judge the role-play performance of students. The opportunity to observe students in this setting can serve as a form of talent identification for those companies in attendance. It is important for corporations to understand that evaluation of potential job candidates must include assessment of other skills besides just role-play performance (e.g., professional networking ability, persistence, diligence, etc…) in order to ensure that employers are getting the best, most, job-ready candidates rather than simply the best role-play competitor.

Table 4: Stakeholder comments regarding advanced sales curriculum changes.

Student Comments Regarding Curriculum Change	
Topic	**Comment**
Focus on Live-Selling	"I real(ly) enjoy the live-selling aspect of the class. This gave us a real (world) experience we need in order to not only succeed but also evaluate if this is something we really want to get into." "I like how we are not graded on tests and quizzes but on quota and our ability to sell to real world business professionals."
Course Schedule	"Continue rolling out the live selling early in the semester and in phases. Aligning the phases with the coaching was helpful because we knew exactly what to do each week. I also think continuing to focus more on live selling than pro sales or any type of role-play competition is more beneficial since this is more applicable to what we would actually be doing in the field." "The phased structure of the live-selling component of the class should remain the same. This structure allowed me to learn in a progressive way that was also iterative. I was able to adjust and progress. I believe making pro sales not be part of our grade made it almost more competitive but also created more community within the class."
Benefit to Personal Development	"This class is by far the most influential, growth/development driven, and educating course I have ever taken. I have grown so much as an individual and a salesperson due to the experience this course has provided me. Having students in this course act as SDR's (Sales Development Representative) truly prepares them for a role in sales and shows them the reality of the field." "This course is hands-down the highlight of my collegiate experience. I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done for me in regards to personal growth, friendships, and confidence. One of the students in digital told me that she was wanting to take the Advanced course because she was able to see all the Team leads grow in their confidence, professional manner, and overall growth just in one semester."
How Live-Selling Complements Role-Play Competitions	"Live selling provides good and real metrics on how well students can sell, competitions are also so important to help students grow and network with the industry."
Corporate Partner Comments Regarding Curriculum Change	
Topic	**Comment**
Professional Preparedness of Student Sales Representatives	"I owe you an apology. . . . years ago, we focused on all our efforts to hire those students who won sales competitions. We felt your team wasn't focused on these outcomes. Now, in retrospect, I can see that you were focusing on their overall skills as a seller. As I have watched your alumni excel at other companies, I realize you were developing your students to win at the sales profession after graduation. So many of your graduates are now top performers at competing firms. We missed a big opportunity here!" "I love your program! I am watching a student (from your program) do a role play in our academy right now. I am watching all the other employee's faces as they see this is now where the bar is." "When do I get the list of PPS (program in professional selling) students? We will interview every student who achieves(Elite status)""

Implications for Sales Educators

This research also has important implications for sales educators. The establishment of university sales centers has led to the development of the university-trained sales representative. The implicit contract between university sales centers and their corporate partners (or any sales organization looking to hire a university-trained sales student) is that the students actually possess skills that lead to success in the sales field. Consequently, sales educators should always be concerned with answering the question: Can our sales students sell? Heretofore, role-play competitions have provided a glimpse of students' ability to manage a sales interaction. However, while role-play evaluations from these competitions provide a measure of students' abilities to work through the proscribed stages of a sales meeting (i.e., introduction, problem identification, product/service presentation, overcoming objections, close, etc…) they do not necessarily provide a quantifiable measure of a student's comprehensive selling ability. The objective then is to shift from a role-play deliverable to a more comprehensive set of performance measures. When the focal grade component is role-play activities, both course material and student effort is also focused on how to perform different elements of competition level role-play—since that is the end deliverable.

In contrast, live-selling objectives should provide a more realistic assessment of students' holistic selling acumen, including their diligence to identify prospective buyers, cultivate relationships with decision makers, schedule and lead sales meetings and ultimately close the agreed upon sales transaction. For the outcome to focus on actual sales performance, the whole course must shift. Role-plays change from a deliverable to more of a tool used to practice for meetings and to develop skills needed to achieve open and closed pipeline. Moving from role-play centric to quota centric changes the pedagogical focus of the curriculum. Now, students need to prospect, research a company, consider multiple roles, and consider how to manage multiple meetings with a potential client. A key reality for students is that the buyer is no longer scripted and is not worried about a scoring rubric or your process. Live-selling also exposes students to concepts and tools that are ubiquitous in professional selling environments. Sales territories and sales force automation systems are one example of each that students are introduced to in introductory sales courses. Application of such tools and concepts are necessary competencies for most salespeople on day one of the job.

While there are logistical issues with implementing such objectives into advanced sales courses, the experience at one university sales center suggests that sales educators should seek creative ways to introduce such objectives into their sales curricula. For those schools that offer courses in advanced sales, but do not have a sales center to sell sponsorships for, other live-selling opportunities exist. For example, live-selling opportunities could be developed in conjunction with university development offices or athletic ticket offices or even non-profit foundations. Such experiential learning activities provide benefits to sales students in two ways. First, live-selling functions provide sales students with a demonstrable sales record. Second, participation in such activities give students "real-world" experiences to highlight during job interviews. Furthermore, such activities can also provide opportunities for sales educators to track live-selling metrics similar to those discussed in this manuscript.

One final implication for sales educators is to recognize the importance of communicating with stakeholders regarding any curriculum change. Corporate partners and students have unique perspectives on the pros and cons of any educational activity in the curriculum. Sales educators are encouraged to make sure that any changes to their curricula not only adds value to the students' educational experiences but also to the corporate partners who benefit from the final product of that education.

Student anxiety over the initial changes to the grading components of the advanced sales course in the first two phases led to important changes in the third phase. Not all students enrolled in sales courses focus on a future career in sales and many students are concerned about maintaining their grade point average. Course grades that are too dependent on sales outcomes may inhibit students from enrolling in advanced sales courses thus reducing enrollment numbers, which are an important metric to university administrators.

This university sales center addressed student grade concerns by developing two levels of achievement in the advanced selling course thereby facilitating greater student enrollment in advanced selling courses without fear of earning poor grades. At the same time, by listening to corporate partners, this school identified an assessment solution that also provides future employers more meaningful live-selling metrics than the grade point averages that students focused on.

Limitations and Future Research

This research was conducted using data from inter-university sales competition-based role-plays with the understanding that different types of role-plays might yield different results. Additionally, another limitation of the current research is the correlational nature of the examination between role-play performance and live-selling functions. Subsequent research should more rigorously quantify the relationship between role-play performance and actual selling results perhaps by establishing causal relationships between classroom activities and sales outcomes. The most instructive examination of how/whether role-play performance translates to selling success requires the comparison of a student's role-play performance with their post-graduate employment performance. An extension to the analysis just described could compare the sales performance of students trained with the old role-play centric curriculum to the sales performance of students trained under the new curriculum. Such a comparison would provide the most conclusive evidence of the benefit of the curriculum changes. Acquiring the data for such an analysis would be challenging, as it requires internal sales performance data for each individual student hired in a sales position. It is possible that corporate partners of USCA certified sales centers could be compelled to participate in such research if its objective is to develop a more accurate predictor of new salesperson performance.

The current research is also limited in size and scope. Subsequent research would benefit from a larger sample size and the applicability and robustness of the conclusions would benefit from additional data taken from other USCA certified schools. Including data from other schools would help to alleviate any school-specific biases. Future research could also examine whether some metrics (e.g., those related to coachability or prospecting competency) are better or worse indicators of sales performance in a professional setting.

Finally, this research examined the link between student performances in an intra-university role-play competition and their live-selling performances. USCA member schools also participate in national competitions (i.e., inter-university competitions) such as those described by Loe and Chonko (2000). Furthermore, many other schools that are not members of the USCA and do not have established sales centers also use developmental role-play evaluations in class-room settings like those described by Moncrief (1991). It is possible that a link between actual sales performance and performance at national level role-play competitions exists; however, acquiring such data for analysis is subject to the challenges already discussed. On the other end of the spectrum, role-play evaluations done at a classroom level and by faculty instead practitioners may lead to different conclusions. Future research could also look at a variety of different types of role-plays (in-class; practice; internal competitions; external competitions) and then compare performance in those to student success in actual post-graduate sales roles.

Regardless of the context in which role-play exercises are conducted, sales educators need to place role-play evaluations and outcomes in the proper context within the sales curriculum. Moreover, educators and practitioners alike should strive to better understand the connection between role-play performance outcomes and how those outcomes translate to live-selling situations. Ultimately, sales educators should continue to pursue activities and measures that provide students, corporate partners and potential employers with a more holistic assessment of the sales ability of university-trained sales representatives.

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