EMPOWERMENT OF STUDENTS BY ROLE-PLAY GAMING

K. Brogan[1], A. Scicchitano[2], D. Diletti[3], V. McGrath[1]

[1]*Munster Technological University (IRELAND)*
[2]*LabGDR ASD APS (ITALY)*
[3]*Consorzio Ro.Ma (ITALY)*

Abstract

EUropean LABoratories of Role-Play Gaming (EULabRPG) aims to enhance metacognition, social and emotional skills of post-primary and tertiary students between the ages of 13-19 years. This project will focus on increasing the importance to be paid to the empowerment of students and their wellbeing, enhancing teachers' ability to mitigate risk factors for mental illness as well as protective abilities. Specifically, the project aims to empower students with emotion recognition and regulation skills, collaboration, communication skills, problem-solving and teamwork skills. All these competencies can support mental wellness. To achieve its aims, the project foresees leveraging Tabletop Role-Play gaming (TTRPG) activities as educational tools, including metacognition moments, to increase students' emotional and individual skills and promote an inclusive and supportive school environment.

The project partners attended a face-to-face three-day train-the-trainer event to enhance their understanding of role-playing games and TTRPGs as educational tools. The meeting emphasised the crucial role of the Game Master in educational TTRPGs. The partners received additional training to enhance their understanding of the TTRPGs with a follow-up online training session. This training session provided a new cohort of teachers with an opportunity to experience TTRPGs as educational tools. The teachers took on the role of the players while the project partners acted as Game Masters. These role-play gaming activities will be of benefit to the students, which the partnership believes will make them more resilient against adverse life events.

The project objectives are:

- Place greater emphasis on empowering students, recognizing it as essential for both life and personal skill development
- Empower teachers in social and emotional learning, the empowerment of students' individual life skills, as well as the ability to carry out TTRPG scenarios
- Promote TTRPG scenarios and methodology as upgraded school activities to recognise and support students' discomfort.

Results:

During the training event of the EULabRPG project, several outcomes, including project results, will be produced:

- The project will provide participating schools with a dedicated curriculum outlining the methodology, competencies, and supplementary activities.
- A comprehensive training toolkit will be available to help increase the number of trained teaching staff.
- Providing teachers and students with all the necessary tools to carry out the role-play gaming training.
- Teachers and students practice the activities first (see if it's positive/effective).

Partners:

The partners for the project include: Munster Technological University (MTU), (Ireland), Coordinator, Organisations Consorzio Ro.Ma, (Italy), PASCAL English School Lemesos (Cyprus), Labgdr (Italy), X LO im. I.J. Paderewskiego w Katowicach (Poland), Vardakeios School (Greece).

Find Out More about this project: Website: https://www.eulabrpg.eu/en/

Keywords: Tabletop role-play, gaming activities, post-primary, educational tools.

1   INTRODUCTION

The EUropean LABoratories of Role-Play Gaming (EuLabRPG) is an EU project that is funded by the Erasmus+ KA2 partnership programme by the EU Commission. The duration of the partnership's collaboration is two years: from December 2023 to November 2025. There are six international partners: Munster Technological University (MTU), (Ireland), which is the Coordinator, Organisations Consorzio Ro.Ma, (Italy), PASCAL English School Lemesos (Cyprus), Labgdr (Italy), X LO im. I.J. Paderewskiego w Katowicach (Poland), and Vardakeios School (Greece). Each of these five partner countries have their own educational system, but the students' wellness is a common concern.

The already tried and tested "Tabletop Role-Play gaming activities" in Italy (https://labgdr.com/?lang=en) are now part of this new partnership, and each partner country will pilot the Role Playing Games (RPG) with their teachers and students. The partnership is confident that the piloting results by teachers and students will be promising and will lead the way to further European use of the RPG to help post-primary and tertiary students develop a skill set that they can use after they leave their educational setting and will be valuable for life.

[1] has highlighted that free play amongst children with their peers has declined in recent years. Play enables children to problem solve, co-create, collaborate, manage their emotions, and form friendships. [2] have stated that adolescents and young adults between the ages of 15-21 years spend on average ten hours a day on their smartphones. As the activity of play has decreased, there has been a noteworthy increase in mental health issues among adolescents, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts [3].

Being self-reflective and capable of observing one's emotions with detachment is a skill known as metacognition [4]. Individuals who effectively utilise metacognition can enhance their mental and emotional well-being by evaluating their responses and identifying the factors that trigger personal limitations. Mastering metacognition is a gradual process that requires time and practice.

Various tools can aid in the development of metacognition; one such tool is fostering positive friendships through role-playing activities for educational purposes. Role-playing is a valuable tool that enables participants to visualize their inner worlds, fostering the development of metacognitive processes. It helps create mental images and solidifies positive peer relationships [5]. In role-playing, participants create a setting and define the roles they wish to assume during collaborative activities. Subsequently, participants embody the characters assigned to them, expressing emotions and engaging in experiential activities throughout the role-playing sessions. Humans tend to engage in activities that are practical and focus on their physical and mental responses [6]. [7]and [8] believe that role-playing fosters social sharing.

For role-playing to effectively support participants in developing metacognition and fostering a positive experience, a fundamental element is spontaneity, which is expressed through actions, gestures, and emotions [5]. Through role-playing and the metacognitive process, individuals can engage in a phase of human and shared development in relation to others [9]. Role-playing is especially effective for engaging young adults, as it is an activity characterized by minimal rules within a supportive environment [10]. Through role-playing, participants can apply metacognitive strategies and utilize them to establish structured relationships with their peers [11], [12] and [13]. The educational advantage of role-playing lies in its emphasis on the entire group of players rather than on a single participant, which makes this suitable for a post-primary environment [5]. Since role-playing is an enjoyable activity, the concepts learned during these sessions are more easily retained by participants [14]. Engaging in playful activities is a natural instinct for humans, and play is essential for social and cognitive development, which is necessary for forming friendships with peers [15]. Therefore, role-playing and metacognition can be viewed as effective tools for helping young adults develop friendships grounded in skills such as empathy [16]

In this article, we would like to use the EuLabRPG project as a case study and provide reasons why it makes sense to use it in a school setting. It is not a frontal teaching device, instead, it will empower the students while playing, and the teacher will be empowered as a Game Master who can build up another type of relationship with their students. The teacher is much more of a facilitator.

2   METHODOLOGY

The rationale of this project is to empower students at the post-primary and tertiary level by playing the Tabletop Role-Play gaming activities while their teacher becomes the Game Master. Students can experience another identity through their gaming character and are free to behave differently. For example, a shy student can experience during the game the necessity to be brave in order to rescue a

team member. Playing the game allows to stimulate metacognition abilities, social-emotional and individual skills, especially amongst adolescents [5].

2.1 Case study

A case study was produced to explore multiple insights into the effectiveness of the TTRPG in a post-primary setting across 5 European countries. The project began with the creation of a School Curriculum, outlining the LabGDR methodology and its application within school settings, alongside competences from the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and LifeComps the frameworks The SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. LifeComps Framework is a European Framework that established a shared understanding for "Personal, Social and Learning to Learn" Key Competence.

Subsequently, project partners attended a three-day meeting in Italy. This meeting focused on providing training in role-playing games and TTRPGs as educational tools, emphasizing the crucial role of the Game Master in educational TTRPGs. The partners then received additional online training, managed by LabGDR with support from Jano Studio S.r.l., a consulting and game design company for socio-cultural activities through play. This online session enhanced their understanding of TTRPGs as educational tools. Furthermore, there was a focus on the TTRPG "Fantasy Chronicles," developed by Jano Studio and based on the LabGDR methodology. LabGDR organized an online training session where teachers, agreeing to participate in the EuLabRPG laboratory phase, experienced TTRPGs as educational tools, taking on player roles while partners acted as Game Masters. The teachers participating in this online training received the essential materials to begin the laboratory phase."

The outputs of this project are:

- The project will provide participating schools with a toolkit that can be integrated into the existing school curriculum to support the social development of students.

- A comprehensive training toolkit will be available to help increase the number of trained teaching staff.

- Providing teachers and students with all the necessary tools to carry out the role-play gaming training.

- Teachers and students practice the activities first (see if it's positive/effective).

The game operates as a role-playing activity where participants embody fictional characters within fantastical settings, driven by fantasy, improvisation, and player agency to create dynamic narratives. A Game Master guides the story, portraying non-player characters and presenting challenges, while players control their characters and influence the narrative through their actions. The adventure, "The Rite of the Bell," centers on the town of Virae and the disruption of its traditional rite by a shadowy entity named Malhal, exploring themes of empathy and conflict resolution. Characters serve specific functions: Malhal acts as the antagonist, clan leaders represent socio-political forces, and player characters ("Wanderers") drive the story forward, with additional characters providing context and information.

The project methodology featured a training event delivered through a cascade model. It started with a train-the-trainer style face-to-face (F2F) event in October 2024 for project partners and teachers to provide them with the necessary skills and competencies to implement TTRPGs with their students. The teachers were introduced to the game and had the opportunity to be the first to play the game. The teachers were shown how to act as a Game Master. Additionally, a specific scenario and character sheets were created to facilitate the implementation of the gaming.

In February 2025, EuLabRPG provided a three-hour online training session to the participants of the previous F2F training event and a new cohort of teachers from all partner countries. Teachers who attended the F2F event assumed the role of trainers during this online training session.

Teachers were provided with an additional opportunity to play the game online with other new teachers from the partner countries. Zoom and breakout rooms were used for this purpose. The thought process behind this was to provide teachers with additional experiences in order to make it easier for teachers to play the game with their students in the future. During the training of the teachers, staff from Jano Studio, along with staff from LabGDR supported the online training of teachers. The teachers experienced role-play gaming activities that could benefit their students in the future. These experiences may then result in students being more resilient against adverse life events that may occur in their own lives.

The overall purpose of this training event was to provide the teachers with an understanding of what it means to be a player in TTRPG. Following the training, they received documentation that enabled them to independently manage the workshops in their schools.

The structure for the online training event was as follows:

1   There was only one online meeting that lasted three hours, during which the teachers participated in role-playing as players. In these specific scenarios, the partners acted as facilitators or Game Masters.

2   The teachers received a package that clearly outlines activities they can conduct during the workshops with their students. With the materials provided, they will be able to work independently without needing a partner to participate in the workshop.

Teachers received the following material:

- A document that outlines the rules for the TTRPG.

- Six pre-compiled character sheets allow the six students to participate in the workshop to play without needing to complete the worksheets.

- A keyword system designed to support both the participants and the facilitator during the workshop.

The piloting phase has just started and will last until the end of October 2025. Students in all participating institutions will be asked to complete an online survey for the evaluation before and after the gaming experience. Teachers of each participating institution are asked to participate in a F2F evaluation session mid-way through. There will be a final evaluation by teachers and then each project partner will undertake an analysis of the results to summarise all evaluation results from their teachers and students into one report by country

Our partner in Cyprus and Greece have already begun with their piloting and so far, the results are very positive. Christina Mariou who is Head of Languages, at Pascal Private Secondary School, Lemosos, Cyprus has stated that "As a teacher, I have seen how LabGDR's role-play approach helps students connect on a deeper level. It encourages empathy, respect, and positive friendships through meaningful, shared experiences."

Aggeliki Tzalla who was the facilitator of the first group of the workshops for the Greek partner commented that "role-playing games spark imagination, courage, and connection—turning every student into a storyteller, an explorer, and a learner."

3   RESULTS

It is anticipated that the complete results of the piloting of this project will be available by early November 2025. However, the project partnership has already compiled results from the F2F training and the online training of international teachers.

3.1   F2F training survey – October 2024 in Roma, Italy

Participants of the train-the-trainer event were: two trainers and one teacher from MTU (Ireland); two trainers from Ro.Ma. (Italy); two teachers from PASCAL (Cyprus); one teacher from Xliceum (Poland); three teachers from Vardakeios (Greece); three trainers from LabGDR (Italy); 2 trainers from Jano Studio (as staff for LabGDR). At the end of the event, a survey was distributed to the participants.

Eight out of twelve participants strongly agreed that they are satisfied with the clarity and appropriateness of the objectives and methodology used in the training programme. Nine participants felt that the learning objectives were clear. Nine participants strongly agreed that activities and training objectives were coherent. Only one participant disagreed with the statement that there was an appropriate level of achievement of training objectives. One participant disagreed with the statement that the session/workshop-based structure was effective. Only two participants disagreed that the number of workshops was appropriate. In addition, one participant disagreed that the training delivery method (classroom) was effective.

Nine participants felt that the duration of the training to meet learning outcomes was appropriate. Nine participants strongly agreed, two agreed, and one chose "Neutral", indicating a strong consensus that the materials were well-prepared and easy to understand. One participant disagreed with the statement that the accessibility/availability of materials was appropriate. One participant disagreed with the statement that the materials were clear. Everyone agreed that the materials were up to date. Only one

participant disagreed that the materials were complete. One participant disagreed that the materials were easy to adapt for local use.

Eight participants strongly agreed, three agreed, and one selected "Neutral," demonstrating a high level of satisfaction with the teaching methods used. The same result was the case for the question on the effectiveness of the teaching methods used during the training. All participants agreed that there was an appropriate level of learners' engagement. One participant disagreed with the statement that there was good rapport between teachers and learners. One participant disagreed that the teaching methods were appropriate to achieve the training objectives. Eight participants strongly agreed, three agreed, and one selected "Neutral," indicating a high level of satisfaction with the methods used to assess learning.

Nine participants strongly agreed, two agreed, and one selected "Neutral," reflecting a strong consensus that the methods were effective in tracking learning progress. Eight participants strongly agreed, three agreed, and one selected "Disagree," suggesting that while the majority were satisfied with the tools used, one participant felt they were not suitable. Eight participants strongly agreed, three agreed, and one selected "Disagree," suggesting that while the majority felt there was significant engagement from all actors involved, one participant perceived a lack of inclusivity or involvement. However, one participant was not satisfied with the achievement of learning objectives. This participant also felt that the level of acquisition of the learning content was not appropriate, and the level of engagement by learners in assuming and completing assigned tasks was not appropriate. One participant felt the level of learners' commitment was not satisfactory. Lastly, one participant adopted a neutral stance towards the use of teamwork during the training event.

3.1.1 Overall Impressions of the F2F Training and Recommendations:

The following is the overall impression and recommendations for future implementation from the participants who took part in the F2F training and the online training sessions.

Firstly, all participants appreciated the insights into role-playing and its potential. One participant noted, "The Learning, Teaching and Training Activities (LTTA-this is a teacher training event) days gave us an insight into role-playing and its potential." However, there were concerns about scalability and clarity in the implementation of the methodology. This was evidenced in a comment by one participant who remarked, "I would have liked to see evidence of this in educational settings."

3.1.2 Overall Analysis and Recommendations

The EuLabRPG LTTA training program effectively introduced participants to role- playing methodologies and fostered collaboration. Positive feedback on materials, methods, and trainer support was tempered by suggestions from the participants for improvement in facilitation and the structure of the training event. The overall recommendation was that there is a need to enhance the balance between theory and practice, refine the facilitation process, and a need to showcase real-world applications, which will in turn strengthen the program's impact.

3.2 Online Training survey – Feb 2025

An online survey was distributed by members across the partnership. Eleven out of the twenty-two survey participants who completed the online training session rated their overall experience in this training session as excellent. 41% of the participants found the adventure-based approach of the session extremely engaging. 41% mentioned that the session content aligned very well with their teaching needs and professional development goals. 41% thought that the TTRPG adventure helped them to understand and explore the concept of empathy. 45% rated the balance between theory and practical adventure elements as perfect. 59% of the participants mentioned that the guidance by the facilitators in the session and the supports provided to assist the participants' learning were extremely effective. 44% were very confident/confident that they would be able to integrate TTRPG or adventure-based learning techniques into their classroom after this session. 50% of the participants agreed that the session provided them with new strategies or ideas to promote empathy among their students. Please note that 68% never participated in any TTRPG or role-playing activities as a teaching tool before this session.

Participants were asked to respond to an open-ended question which focused on the aspects of the training programme that the participants found to be most beneficial. Below are some of the comments from the participants:

- "Communication improved between everyone"

- "The way our team worked in the best way to bring unity to the game"

- "The collaboration between the group"

- "Taking personal initiative allows the story to unfold"

- "Practical approach"

- "I really had fun"

- "The most beneficial aspects of the training session were learning how to effectively integrate tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) into the classroom setting. I found the practical examples and strategies for using TTRPGs to enhance student engagement and learning particularly valuable. Additionally, the session's focus on fostering creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration through role-playing exercises helped me understand how to facilitate meaningful learning experiences. The hands-on activities also provided a great opportunity to experience the methods firsthand, which will be useful for implementing them with my own students"

- "The gameplay was the most interesting"

- "I felt that practicing the role-play was great"

3.2.1 Overall Summary of this survey:

The TTRPG training session was engaging and beneficial, particularly for fostering creativity, communication, and teamwork. To improve future sessions, it will be necessary to ensure thorough preparation, minimise administrative tasks, provide clear introductions, and incorporate modern themes and activities such as empathy maps. Additionally, it is important to consider organising in-person sessions and address language barriers (if any) in the classroom. Overall, it is evident from this survey that participants are interested in using TTRPG techniques in classrooms, though some are concerned about student engagement and willingness to participate.

4   CONCLUSIONS

This paper has detailed the EU-funded EuLabRPG project, an initiative designed to investigate and implement the use of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) as innovative pedagogical tools within post-primary and tertiary educational settings. The central premise of the project is that TTRPGs can serve as a potent mechanism for empowering students by fostering the development of crucial social, emotional, and metacognitive competencies. The methodology involves the creation and delivery of a targeted training event for educators, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively integrate TTRPGs into their teaching practices. These games are then employed to cultivate essential skills among students, including but not limited to, emotion recognition and regulation, enhanced communication abilities, collaborative capacity, problem-solving proficiency, and effective teamwork. This paper has specifically presented and analysed findings derived from surveys administered to educators who participated in the project's training programs, providing valuable insights into the efficacy and reception of this novel educational approach.

4.1   Key Conclusions

Analysis of the teacher surveys reveals a generally positive reception of the TTRPG-focused training. Participants demonstrated a strong appreciation for the introduction to role-playing methodologies and exhibited a clear recognition of the potential of TTRPGs to cultivate a range of desirable skills in students. Furthermore, the engaging nature of TTRPGs was underscored by the participants, with the adventure-based approach being identified as a particularly effective element of the training. However, the surveys also brought to light certain reservations and areas for improvement. Notably, concerns were articulated regarding the practical challenges associated with the widespread implementation and scalability of TTRPGs within diverse educational contexts. Additionally, constructive feedback was provided concerning the structure and delivery of the training itself, highlighting opportunities for refinement.

4.2   Recommendations and Forward-Looking Suggestions

At this stage of the project, it is very important for the partnership to convince teachers of the benefits of adopting a TTRPG-focused training as it is perceived to be a different methodology and very different to traditional classroom-based teaching. To further enhance the impact and facilitate the successful adoption of TTRPGs, some constructive recommendations, directly informed by teacher feedback, are warranted.

Firstly, to address concerns about scalability and clarity of implementation, future training should prioritise explicit and practical guidance on applying TTRPGs in diverse classroom settings, with a balanced approach to theory and practice. Secondly, to optimize the training experience, a proactive refinement of facilitation processes is needed, focusing on clarity, participant engagement, and minimizing administrative tasks. Finally, to maximise the effectiveness of TTRPG integration, it is important to develop strategies for maximising student engagement and addressing potential challenges in diverse classrooms, as well as incorporating modern themes and activities to ensure continued for future testing. Based on the current feedback from the Greek and Cypriot partners, students, rather than teachers, are more suited to this TTRPG as an educational tool. In addition, when students are playing the game, teachers can gain a deeper insight in how the TTRPG can enhance the wellness of their students.

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