

Role-Play Exercises

In role-play exercises, students improvise and act out a brief scenario or situation. In small groups or with a partner, students can play a number of roles to investigate different perspectives of the idea.

Role-playing is often spontaneous and relatively unstructured; they often extend to situations beyond reality. In contrast, simulations attempt to model some real-life phenomenon and are usually more structured in organization and objective.

Appropriate Student Level: Any Level

Suggested Class Size: 3 – 100+

Ease of Use Rating: Moderate

Activity Description:

Role-plays can be used to help students experience “stressful, unfamiliar, complex, or controversial situations” by creating temporary circumstances and allowing students to react and reflect in order to develop the skills necessary for coping. (Bonwell, 1991)

Role-plays are different from simulations in that they are usually improvised and short presentations that are designed to involve students in a specific situation; they are usually short, spontaneous presentations. Instructors may choose to assign the roles days or weeks prior to the event to allow students to research the character or the role plays can be assigned on-the-spot to allow for spontaneous interactions. Role-plays can be particularly effective in forcing students to examine their attitudes toward other people and controversial subjects; for example, using a role-play debate, students may present opposing sides to a given topic, thus demanding a wider view of the issues.

Another difference between simulations and role-plays is that role-plays do not typically use any costuming or props to present the scene. Any props are ‘mocked’ by the participants to simulate the use of the tools, this kind of representation helps to keep the role-plays spontaneous.

For more information on forming and working with groups see: “*Some suggestions for forming groups*”.

Role-playing is not new. Its use within education and training is well documented. Role-playing has been used to train counselors, therapists, ministers, physicians, sociologists, and teachers. It has been used in Alcoholics Anonymous, chemical abuse rehabilitation, management training, teaching small-group dynamics, and teaching skill sets. It has served as a survey method and interview technique for issues related to education and equity. Educators throughout multiple disciplines and educational levels have used role-playing activities to teach political science, history, economics, psychology, and the natural sciences. (Jackson, 2000)

The instructor’s responsibility during a role-play may vary.

- Provide background details by giving specific information about the character or the setting to help create the scene
- Define the roles, characters or scenario
- Discuss the goals and objectives of the activity to involve the audience and create a need to learn.
- Facilitate and direct the role play to assure the goals are being met
- Help the audience evaluate and summarize the major factors of the role-play.

Assessment can be conducted in a number of ways. Students can be evaluated on their participation in the role plays and subsequent discussion, how effectively they can state their position, background knowledge, accuracy of information presented and how effectively they defend their position

“Role-playing is a bridging educational model for the sciences. It spans the full scale from the interdependence that typifies industrial work and independent research (individuals in a group retain their individuality but agree to become mutually dependent in achieving a goal) to the partners approach that of necessity characterizes some of the beginning labs in the sciences. As a bridge, it allows students to explore management roles, specialist roles, and small-group communication dynamics, including how to reach a consensus without alienation. Students are encouraged to examine research or development work situations without the high risks that accompany the roles in the professional world. Students cannot be laid off from the course!” (Jackson, 2000)

Role-Play Simulations in the Lesson Plan

Lesson plans using role play and focusing on an aesthetic dilemma typically include four steps:

1. Introduction. Teachers introduce a particular aesthetic concept, for example, some aspect of beauty, censorship, or interpretation. A scenario containing an aesthetic dilemma focusing on that concept is described.
2. Small-group work. Guided by open-ended questions students have an opportunity to explore different points of view and discuss how particular interested parties might react in the dilemma. In one class period, teachers assign roles to small groups. The group helps one member prepare to play "their" character by developing arguments and supportive evidence. It is conceivable that small-group activities be bypassed if students seem prepared to improvise roles or if limited time is available.
3. Large-group work. Role-play characterization is introduced here. Roles could be assigned at this point, or previously arranged roles discussed in the small groups could be played out. The audience may participate if their input would be advantageous.
4. Conclusion. Students benefit from a chance to internalize the class activity by reviewing how the discussion and role play related to the original concept. Responding to questions at the end of class either through a journal or class discussion is helpful.” (Venable, 2001)

References:

- Bonwell, Charles C. and Eison, James A.(1991) Active Learning: Creating excitement in the Classroom. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No.1
- Eyler, Janet (2000) "Focusing student inquiry; The beanbag press conference" College Teaching, 48(2), p. 61
- Halpern, Daine F. (1994) Changing College Classrooms, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco
- Jackson, Paul T; (2000) "Role-playing in analytical chemistry: The alumni speak" Journal of Chemical Education, 77(8); pg. 1019
- Lowry, Pamela E. (1999) "Model GATT: A role-playing simulation course" The Journal of Economic Education 30(2)
- McCarthy, J. Patrick (2000) "Active learning techniques versus traditional teaching styles: two experiments from history and political science" Innovative Higher Education 24(4), p. 279
- Meyers, Chet and Jones, Thomas B. (1993) Promoting Active Learning: Strategies for the College Classroom. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco
- Venable, Bradford B. (2001) "Using role play to teach and learn aesthetics", Art Education, 54(1); pg. 47