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Effective Classroom Techniques for Engaging Students in Role-Playing

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ABSTRACT

Role-playing is a teaching technique that provides students with an opportunity to engage with the material in a unique way within the classroom setting. A classroom role-play can involve students reading pre-designed scripts, students play acting characters described on role cards, or students acting out characters of their own creation. Regardless of the specific approach, role-play activities can serve to increase student retention, understanding, and engagement with the course material. In this session, educators explore the benefits and challenges associated with using role-play activities in the classroom. Participants get a chance to experience a role-play activity and consider how to facilitate a role-play that creates a memorable experience and contributes to course learning outcomes. The ultimate goal is to provide participants with the tools to use role-playing in their own teaching practices.

KEYWORDS

active learning; role play; student engagement

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Describe the benefits associated with using role-play as a teaching technique.
- Reflect on how learners experience role-play activities.
- Begin designing role-play activities that align with learning goals.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Belova, N., Eilks, I., & Feierabend, T. (2015). The evaluation of role-playing in the context of teaching climate change. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 13(1), 165-190. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10763-013-9477-x>

Belova, Eilks, and Feierabend use a grounded theory approach to examine student performance in a science-based, role-play exercise. They describe four types of role-plays: (1-2) students present to student moderators or to the instructor, (3) students interact in a limited way, and (4) students engage in spirited discussions/debates. The authors make recommendations for improving the quality of discussion within role-play activities. The suggestions are applied to science-based role-plays but they can be generalized to all role-play activities. The authors suggest that brief role cards with more open roles allow learners to invent their own arguments. In contrast, long, detailed role cards create better arguments but hinder free-flowing discussion. This article is used in this workshop as part of the discussion on the level of detail that should be given in role-play activity instructions.

Block, S. R. (2014). Teaching a course on non-profit boards of directors and executive leadership using experiential learning theory and simulations. *The Journal of Non-profit Education and Leadership*, 4(1), 25-39.

Block describes a course on non-profit governance that relies on role-play activities. The article justifies the use of role-play in the classroom and provides a specific example of how role-play

can be used to teach practical concepts. The article demonstrates how role-playing activities can be integrated within a larger course to aid in student learning and retention of material. While the “board of governance” topic may not be useful to most classes, the approach to delivering and reflecting on role-play can be adapted to any learning environment. This article supports the workshop’s argument that role-play can benefit student learning.

Heyward, P. (2010). Emotional engagement through drama: Strategies to assist learning through role-play. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 22(2), 197-204.

Heyward describes how he uses role-play in his classes to enhance student learning and emotional engagement. His role-plays have three components: 1) an informal role-play where students interact with one another while in character, 2) a formal role-play where a structured activity takes place, and 3) a follow-up reflection out of character. Heyward then provides strategies based on his experience to ensure students are emotionally engaged in the role-play. These strategies include:

- Active participation in the role-play by the instructor to encourage student buy-in
- Establishing a fictional world where students feel comfortable engaging in their roles
- Clearly indicating where a role-play begins and ends
- Allowing for different levels of student engagement
- Adding dramatic twists to stimulate tension and action

The article determines that emotional engagement can improve the effectiveness of classroom role-play activities. This article demonstrates how a role-play can be effectively implemented in the classroom and is used to structure the role-play activity during this workshop.

Sogunro, A. O. (2004). Efficacy of role-playing pedagogy in training leaders: Some reflections. *Journal of Management Development*, 23(4), 355-371.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02621710410529802>

This paper explores the use of role-playing as a teaching technique to demonstrate leadership situations that students may encounter. Over 500 students who have participated in these role-plays were surveyed anonymously by Sogunro to gauge the effectiveness of the role-plays. Using the survey data, he shares ten principles to create effective role-play experiences and twelve benefits of using role-playing in the classroom (see 367-368). This workshop draws on the benefits of incorporating role-playing described in the article and shares the article's tips for designing effective role-play activities. Workshop participants engage in a role-play that is modified from one introduced in the article.

Stevens, R. (2015). Role-play and student engagement: Reflections from the classroom. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(5), 481-492.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1020778>

Stevens analyzes a survey of 144 students using grounded theory following a role-play activity conducted in a history course. Results demonstrate that role-playing, while useful for most

students, can be counterproductive for students that are underprepared. For students that found role-playing to be beneficial in their learning process, Stevens reviews four themes related to their learning: (1) improved engagement and understanding of the material; (2) increased understanding from different perspectives; (3) greater appreciation for the ambiguity associated with interpreting history; and (4) comfort level with learning the material through a role-play activity. The article is used in the workshop during the discussion on the benefits of using role-play activities in the classroom.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Mann, J. H. (1956). Experimental evaluations of role-playing. *Psychological Bulletin*, 53(3), 227.

WORKSHOP CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

DURATION (min)	SUBJECT	ACTIVITY	PURPOSE
10	Introduction	<p>Introduce yourself to participants and describe the learning outcomes for the workshop.</p> <p>Define Role-playing as a situation in which an individual is explicitly asked to take on a role not normally their own, or (if it is their own) in a setting not normal for the enactment of the role (Mann, 1956).</p>	To provide participants with an overview of the workshop.
15	Role-Play Benefits	<p>Break participants into three groups and ask them to brainstorm a list of benefits they see to role-playing. Take up the ideas with the large group.</p> <p>Share details from Block (2014), Sogunro's (2004) list of twelve benefits of a role-play, and Stevens' (2015) four themes related to role-playing. Note areas where participant ideas overlap and differ with the lists.</p>	To familiarize participants with why they may wish to use role-play in their own classes.
25	Role-Play Activity	<p>Refer to the role-play description and role cards in Appendix A.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask one person from each of the three groups to volunteer as "Group Leaders". Give one participant from each team a "Follower 1" card. Give the 	<p>To introduce the role-play activity, assign participant roles.</p> <p>To provide participants with an opportunity to review role-play cards.</p>

		<p>remaining participants “Follower 2” cards. Do not reveal that the Follower 2 cards are all the same.</p> <p>Begin the role-play activity adapted from Sogunro (2004).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants have 10 minutes to plan and 10 minutes to build. • Keep track of the time. 	To allow participants to experience what it is like to participate in a role-play activity.
30	Role Reveal and Role-Play Debrief	<p>First, have each Follower reveal their role. Start with all the Follower type 1s, then the Follower type 2s. Next, have each Group Leader reveal their approach to leadership.</p> <p>Ask participants to share their perception of the role-play activity by answering four questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What worked in the role-play? • What did not work in the role-play? • What elements of the set up were effective? • What elements of the role-play set up would you change? <p>When discussing the set up, share findings from Belova, Eilks, and Feierabend (2015) suggesting that the level of detail included in role cards should be carefully considered.</p>	<p>To help learners understand how to effectively design a role-play activity.</p> <p>To demonstrate how a role-play can be effective.</p> <p>To build confidence amongst participants in using role-play activities in their own classrooms.</p>
15	Lecture: Tips for Effective Role-Play	Share Sogunro’s (2004, p. 367) ten tips for an effective role-play and Heyward’s (2010, p. 202) tips to ensure emotional engagement in the role-play.	To assist participants in understanding how to design an effective role-playing activity.
15	Designing Your Own Role-Play	<p>Use a Think-Pair-Share activity to have participants consider the following question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How would you set up and facilitate a role-play in your own classroom setting?” 	To provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on how to use role-play in their own teaching.

		Have participants reflect, pair up, and discuss the answer to this question. Take up answers with the whole group.	
10	Feedback & Conclusion	<p>Review the learning outcomes and highlight how they were met through the workshop.</p> <p>Ask participants to complete feedback cards. On one side ask participants to answer the question: "What is the most important thing you learned today?" On the other side, answer the question: "What is still unclear or confusing to you?" Follow up by email after the workshop to clarify any confusion among participants.</p>	To summarize the workshop and solicit feedback.
Total Time: 120 Minutes			

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

The role-play activity facilitated as part of the workshop provides the participants with an opportunity to experience this kind of active learning as a learner. By taking part, participants will be able to evaluate what they like and dislike about using role-play as a teaching approach. If the participants decide to introduce role-plays into their own teaching practice, they will also gain an understanding of how their students may feel as participants. The ensuing discussion allows participants to explore how a role-play activity may fit into their teaching in their home disciplines.

This workshop is highly interactive and fast moving to maintain the interest of the participants. It is ideally suited for 10 to 20 participants but it can be delivered to larger groups with minimal modifications.

Materials Required:

- Flip chart paper
- Flip chart markers
- Three packs of playing cards
- Role-play Scenario Description and Role Cards

APPENDIX A: Role-Play Activity

Role-Play Description

Note: This activity is modified from the one introduced by Sogunro (2004).

The facilitator can share the following information with all participants:

- You are participating in this activity to learn about leadership and teamwork. There will be three competing teams. Each team is competing in a playing card sculpture building competition. Your team's goal is to build the most aesthetically pleasing playing card sculpture using one deck of 52 playing cards. Each member of the team has a role card. Do not reveal any information from the role card until after the activity is concluded.
- One person from each group needs to volunteer to take the leadership card. Everyone in the group will know who has taken the leadership card, but no other information from the leadership card should be revealed.
- The playing card sculpture building contest is divided into two parts. First, the team will be given 10 minutes to discuss how they will build the sculpture. During this phase, the teams are not allowed to open the playing card deck. At the end of 10 minutes, teams will be told to open the playing card deck. The teams will then be given 10 minutes to build the most aesthetically pleasing playing card sculpture possible.
- The role-play starts when the contest judge (played by the facilitator) starts the countdown timer to begin the design phase. The activity and role-play concludes when the judge announces time is up.

Individual Role Cards

The facilitator shares the following role with the Group A Leader:

This role is autocratic. "Your job is to be as much of a dictator as you possibly can. It is important that you demonstrate this style of leadership to your group without informing them of what you are doing. Avoid accepting any suggestions from any group members and give orders about the planning and construction. The sculpture is to be constructed from your ideas" (Sogunro 2004, p. 361).

Note: You personally feel the best sculpture is one with exactly three peaks in it. You must ensure the final sculpture has exactly three peaks in it. Peaks can easily be created by having two playing cards lean against one another).

The facilitator shares the following role with the Group B Leader:

This role is democratic. "Your job is to be as much of a democratic leader as you possibly can. It is important that you demonstrate this style of leadership to your group without informing them of what you are doing. When a suggestion is made by you or by any group member, ask to see how many of the group members agree with the idea. Push for some degree of consensus before any idea is acted on. The sculpture is to be the result of the group's ideas" (Sogunro, 2004, p. 361).

Note: You personally feel the best sculpture is one with exactly three peaks in it. You can share this thought, but your main goal is to build a consensus within the group. Peaks can easily be created by having two playing cards lean against one another).

The facilitator shares the following role with the Group C Leader:

This role is laissez-faire. "Your job is to be as much of a laissez-faire ('hands off') leader as you possibly can. It is important that you demonstrate this style of leadership to your group without informing them of what you are doing. Avoid making any suggestions about how or what is to be done or who is to do it. Let every group member do whatever he/she wants. The sculpture is to be constructed from their ideas" (Sogunro, 2004, p. 361).

Note: You personally feel the best sculpture is one with exactly three peaks in it but you never bother to tell the group this. Peaks can easily be created by having two playing cards lean against one another).

The facilitator chooses one team member from each of the three groups to play the role of Follower 1. Share the following information with Follower 1s:

Your job is to try and take over the leadership of the group. You perceive the leader as ineffective and think you should be in charge. You feel strongly the best sculpture is a tower as high as possible. Offer this suggestion early in the process. If your suggestion is ignored, keep returning to that suggestion in an attempt to have it incorporated into the project. Your goal is to take as much control of the group as possible.

The remaining team members all play the role of Follower 2. Share the following information with Follower 2s:

Your job is to be as effective a team member as possible. You feel the best sculpture is one with at least five peaks. These peaks can easily be created by having two playing cards lean against one another. Offer suggestions when you feel it is appropriate but if there is disagreement back off from your ideas immediately. Do your part to try and make sure the group operates effectively as a team.