

Role Playing

Role play exercises give students the opportunity to assume the role of a person or act out a given situation. These roles can be performed by individual students, in pairs, or in groups which can play out a more complex scenario. Role plays engage students in real-life situations or scenarios that can be “stressful, unfamiliar, complex, or controversial” which requires them to examine personal feelings toward others and their circumstances (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p.47).

Role plays can be effectively used in the classroom to provide real-world scenarios to help students learn.

Unlike simulations and games which often are planned, structured activities and can last over a long period of time, role play exercises “are usually short, spontaneous presentations” but also can be prearranged research assignments (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p.47).

Benefits of Role Playing

Role playing can be effectively used in the classroom to:

- Motivate and engage students
- Enhance current teaching strategies
- Provide real-world scenarios to help students learn
- Learn skills used in real-world situations (negotiation, debate, teamwork, cooperation, persuasion)
- Provide opportunities for critical observation of peers

Guidelines in Developing Role Playing Exercises

Using a set of guidelines can be helpful in planning role playing exercise.

Harbour and Connick (2005) offer the following:

- If you plan to use role playing as a graded exercise, introduce small, non-graded role plays early in and during the semester to help students prepare for a larger role play which will be assessed.
- Determine how the role play will be assessed: will observers be given an assessment rubric? Will observers’ remarks and scores be shared with the role players? Will the observers’ scores be included with the instructor’s scores? Will the role players be given the opportunity to revise and present the role play again? Will observers be taught how to properly assess the performance (include meaningful feedback that is not purely judgmental but rather justify all remarks that are practical and unbiased)?
- Instruct students that the purpose of the role play is to communicate a message about the topic and not focus as much on the actual person acting the role.
- Tie role plays to learning objectives so students see their relevance to course content.
- Allow time for students to practice the role play, even if it is spontaneous, so they will be able to think deeply about the role and present it in a meaningful way.
- Reduce large chunks of content into smaller sections which can be more effectively presented as a role play.

By means of guidance from clearly developed objectives and instructions, role plays can help students gain knowledge and skills from a variety of learning situations.

- When assigning a role play, explain its purpose and answer questions so students are able to properly prepare the exercise. Provide guidelines about content to include: general presentation behavior (eye contact, gestures, voice projection); use of props; and specific language to be used (content-related vocabulary) and language not to be used (profanity, slang).
- Challenge all students equally when assigning role plays so everyone will be assessed on equal ground.

Examples of Role Play Exercises

Students can gain additional (and alternative) meaning from the context of role playing than from non-context specific book learning and lectures. By means of guidance from clearly developed objectives and instructions, role plays can help students gain knowledge and skills from a variety of learning situations:

1. **Interview practice**—In preparation for career interviews, students can assume the role of the interviewer and/or the interviewee.
2. **Marketing**—In preparation for a class presentation, students can assume the position of a sales representative and sell a product.
3. **Retailing**—To help prepare students for a guest speaker in merchandising course, students can play the role of sales manager and sales representative to gain better insight on the responsibilities of these positions.
4. **Counseling**—In preparing for clinical practice, students can role play a family therapist whose client has revealed she has committed a criminal act.
5. **Teaching**—In preparation for a job fair, students can role play the teacher and the student, or the administrator and the student, or the teacher and a parent.
6. **Debates**—As a spontaneous exercise, the instructor has students briefly prepare arguments for and arguments against positions on a topic such as *Logging in the Northwest and the Spotted Owl*, *Arab-Israeli Conflict* or *Airline Flight Departure Delays*.

Role plays provide students with the opportunity to take part in activities which mirror career-related scenarios.

Summary

Role plays provide students with the opportunity to take part in activities which mirror career-related scenarios. To help students understand the use of role playing sessions, role plays should be content-focused, match learning objectives, and be relevant to real-world situations. Role playing exercises encourage students to think more critically about complex and controversial subjects and to see situations from a different perspective. When properly employed, role plays can motivate students in a fun and engaging way.

References

Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University.

Harbour, E., & Connick, J. (2005). *Role playing games and activities rules and tips*. <http://www.businessballs.com/roleplayinggames.htm>

Lebaron, J., & Miller, D. (2005). The potential of jigsaw role playing to promote the social construction of knowledge in an online graduate education course. http://paws.wcu.edu/jlebaron/Jigsaw-FnlTCRpdf_050812.pdf

Selected Resources

Bolton, G., & Heathcote, D. (1999). *So you want to use role-play? A new approach in how to plan*. London, England: Trentham Books.

Penn State University (2007). *Role-play exercises*. Retrieved from http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/alex/role_play.pdf