The What, Why & How of Role Playing in the College Classroom

Are you interested in a teaching and learning activity that will allow your students to:

- consider your content experientially and critically,
- think about and engage multiple perspectives and approaches, and/or
- engage in a particular practice?

If so, you might consider role playing as a teaching practice. Role playing is an active pedagogical approach where students engage in relevant scenarios in order to gain cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral understanding. They may "act out" imaginary characters or, in some instances, play themselves. Additionally, scenarios may be contemporary or historical (Golwitzer, 2018).

Numerous instructors across disciplines as diverse as history (Morris, 2003), geography (Oberle, 2004), international relations (Shaw, 2004), engineering (McConville, Rauch, Helgegren, & Kain, 2017) and social work (Moss, 2000) have found role playing to be an effective and useful learning activity for students. Researchers have specifically noted certain outcomes in reference to students. For instance, role playing can promote deeper self-reflection, awareness, and empathy (Westrup & Planander, 2013; Sogunro, 2004). It can also help students make more explicit connections between content, which can lead to greater retention of information, as well as the ability to apply knowledge in different contexts (Pavey & Donoghue, 2003). Finally, role playing effectively promotes cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning (Maier, 2002; Rao & Stupans, 2012).

To determine if role playing is the right practice for you, there are certain questions that you should consider:

- **What are your expected learning outcomes for the students?** Role playing is especially good for higher order learning outcomes (Shapiro & Leopold, 2012) (i.e. application, evaluation, analysis, creating, etc.).

- **How much time do you have to dedicate to the teaching and learning process?** It can take some time for students to engage in a scenario. Additionally, to ensure learning, follow up questions or reflection activities are necessary. Sometimes for the role play to be effective, students may need to research their "characters." Finally, creating an effective scenario can be time consuming; however, using existing materials and case studies from your field can reduce some of the development time. Ultimately, ample time should be allotted for these endeavors (SERC, 2018).

■ **What added value does engaging in a role play have over other teaching approaches?** As an instructor, you may take many different approaches to facilitate your students' learning based on your desired learning outcomes. When considering which is best, think about the value each might add to the learning process. For example, while you might certainly lecture and share the multiple experiences and perspectives that individuals can have and take on a topic, role playing makes those perspectives more explicit, real, and relevant. This might ultimately help students develop more empathy and understanding for those who have had these experiences or hold these perspectives. It might also cause students to consider other perspectives and experiences more seriously if they associate them with someone they know and care about. Of course, there are challenges related to maintaining a climate of respect and safety. Whatever the approach you take, the decision is ultimately yours to make.

If you do decide that role playing is the right approach for you and your students, there are several steps you want to take to prepare:

1 **Decide on the problem or issue**

to be addressed (Golwitzer, 2018). As stated above, role playing is well-suited for complex problems or issues with multiple perspectives and opinions. You will want to choose a role play that will be particularly thought provoking or will cause students to engage in metacognition or deep reflection. It should also be relevant and relatable to your students' experience and the content of the course.

2 **Develop characters**

with sufficient detail (SERC, 2018). Make sure that your students have access to background, goals, beliefs, purposes, and expectations of their character. You might provide this in a description of the character or you might direct your students to resources that will aid them in understanding the perspective of their character.

3 **Provide assessment and/or reflection opportunities**

throughout the role playing process (SERC, 2018). Both you and your students want to know if they are learning what you desire and how the roleplaying process is working. It can be as simple as taking a break in the middle of the role play and asking students what is standing out to them and how it connects to the class content. You might have students develop a concept-map to show connections between various ideas. Additionally, you could ask students what they previously thought about the subject and what new thoughts have come about as a result of the role play. Finally, you might ask students to compose a reflective essay about what they learned. To learn more about course-level assessment, visit TLI's assessment toolbox on our [website.](#)

4 **Prepare your students**

for the role playing process (Golwitzer, 2018). Let students read about or view videos on the purpose of role playing. Additionally, you might show examples of role plays from your field and allow students to ask questions. It is essential that you are explicit with students about the purpose of engaging in role playing over other teaching practices. Share what you expect them to think about and learn from the exercise. Finally, let all students know how you want them to be engaged in the role playing process. This might be easier for those students playing a character in a particular scenario although you could have students switch characters mid scenario to better understand other perspectives. Additionally, you might assign task and roles for students observing the scenario. You might have them think and record the arguments made and suggest alternative ones. They might be required to offer solutions. Finally, you might ask the observers to be ready as the "understudy" and take over when asked.

Role playing can add another dimension to the learning of your students as well as provide higher levels of learning and engagement than many other approaches. Depending on your desired outcomes and students, it may be the right choice for you!

For additional information on role playing:

■ Please review the webpage at the Science Education Resource Center at Carleton College.

■ You can also review suggestions on creating scenarios, case studies, and role plays made by the Centre for Enhanced Teaching and Learning at the University of New Brunswick's website.

References

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