Role-Play: An Often Misused Active Learning Strategy

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Role-play is a special kind of case study, in which there is an explicit situation established with students playing specific roles, spontaneously saying and doing what they understand their "character" would, in that situation. Role-plays differ from other case studies in the immediacy of the experience. Students find themselves *in* the role-play. In a case study, they read *about* situations and characters. One of the reasons role-play can work so well is because of the power of placing oneself in another's shoes. This provides opportunities for learning in both the affective domain, where emotions and values are involved, as well as in the cognitive domain where experiences are analyzed.

Instructors need to be clear about the learning goals they have for their students, their own comfort with extensive interaction among students, and their comfort with much less control than with most other classroom strategies (Bonwell and Sutherland, 1996). Instructors, as facilitators, also need to be cognizant of the potential power of students' strong emotions. Below are some uses of role-play that instructors might devise in their classroom:

- To solve a problem (e.g., in a public policy class students play the parts of several stakeholders with distinct goals in a community board meeting.)

- To apply skills (e.g., interviewing clients in social

work, medicine, sociology, human resources; improvising an interaction in a retail store to practice language learning; taking a patient's medical history.)

· To explore or change values; to develop empathy; to become aware of one's assumptions (e.g., students enacting a scenario in which new immigrants have to engage with a city bureaucracy; students taking the part of a person or character for whom they have no sympathy; or a situation between people of different cultures or classes.)

Role-play is not about acting; it is a technique for learning. For some groups the term "role-playing" arouses anxiety. In general, it makes sense not to refer to role-playing or "acting it out" if one doesn't have to. Rather a more useful term might be to "practice" or to say simply, "Let's see what it might look like if John Adams and Thomas Jefferson debated this issue."

Guidelines
A role-play needs to be set up carefully. If the class has never done one before, it is wise to start small and give the activity clear structure: It will take more time to set up than when the class has more experience with role-plays. Written roles for the players help students understand their character. Each student receives a copy of his/her role describing specifically what his/her "character's" goals and intentions are, in order to behave accordingly. Each player sees only a description for his/her character.

When first using role-play in a class, it is smart to involve everyone at first, so no one feels singled out. Instead of asking for volunteers, divide the whole class into trios, in which two in each group are players and the third is an observer. Give specific written guidelines for the observers. For a community board meeting role-play, involving several different stakeholders, written guidelines might include: 1) What goals does [character's name] have?, and, 2) List your evidence--what the character says or does. Without specific guidelines, students won't know what to observe. You will want to focus them on issues related to your goals for their learning; much of the learning will come from their feedback and perceptions during

the reflection time after the role-play. By being clear about what students should look for, instructors increase students' observation skills and deepen the learning that occurs in the process.

Once trios have gone through the role-play once, try switching so that the observers get a chance to experience the role-play and role-players have the chance to observe. Or ask the trios to talk about what they learned from doing the exercise, among themselves at first, and then in the large group. When the class is familiar with role-play, try asking for volunteers to be players and to be observers.

End the role-play as soon as the learning objective has been met. Some instructors let role-plays go on too long so "actors" can get into their roles. This loses track of the purpose of the activity. After the role-play ends, be sensitive to any person who hasn't "succeeded" in his or her role or who hasn't succeeded in getting what he or she wanted in playing his/her part.

Debriefing
The debriefing is the most important part of the role-play. This is when the learning is clarified, confirmed, and solidified. To debrief is to reflect and discuss as a group what everyone learned in the process of performing the activity. This requires students to analyze and synthesize the parts of a complex dynamic. In the debriefing, as facilitator, welcome the discussion of feelings as well as that of cognitive analysis. Feelings are an inevitable part of role-play, and the facilitator need only acknowledge them and recognize them as part of the learning process. Similarly, let the players, rather than the observers, be the first to critique or discuss their own behaviors and feelings in the role-play. Doing so allows them to defend against potential or imagined criticism and to protect their egos. It also helps to have some written and agreed upon ground rules for feedback to the players, e.g., describe rather than evaluate; be specific, not general; speak for yourself, not for the group. Many instructors vastly underestimate the amount of time needed for debriefing (van Ments, 1999). Some experienced role-play facilitators say that the debriefing should take three, four or even five times what it takes to do the actual role-play (Chin, 1983).

Another kind of role-play takes written form. These are often critical

thinking activities which require students to write papers taking the perspective of another person, e.g., asking students to imagine what might have motivated an Ice Age artist to draw a cave picture of a speared animal (Bean, 1996, 127).   Bean is an excellent source for ideas for "perspective taking" activities in different fields. Similarly, one of Angelo and Cross's (1996) classroom assessment techniques is "Invented Dialogues," which asks students to create reasonable written discussions between, for examples--historical people (Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton), or between people who lived at different times (e.g., Henry James and Philip Roth), or simply between two people who have diametrically opposed views on a particular issue. Such invented dialogues ask students to be creative, and to integrate and synthesize information, among other cognitive tasks. The instructor must develop a frame for the role-plays, e.g., who the two people are, what the situation is, otherwise individual students often "play" both parts. Written role-plays can be highly involving for students and can tap the creativity of both students and instructors.

A third type of role-play takes place online, which will increase in prevalence and importance as more instructors understand how to use educational technology for learning goals. Bender (2003) has used it for literary analysis and in her ethics courses. She maintains that it has the advantage of face-to-face role-play without the potential for stage fright. In addition, when the course is discussion-based and asynchronous, it leaves time for students to be reflective, which can be a particular benefit of this kind of role-playing.

Although role-play is difficult at first and complex, it is worth doing if you are prepared to use a high impact-learning tool in a careful and caring way. There are many role-playing sites on the internet and many are educationally focused: (Lebaron & Miller, 2005; Teed, 2006). Instructors who haven't already used role-play in its various forms might want to try something new if their learning goals and their sense of educational adventure propel them.

Resources
Angelo, T.A. & R.P. Cross (2ⁿᵈ Ed., 1993.) *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bean, J. C. (1996). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bender, T., (2003). *Discussion-based on-line teaching to enhance student learning: Theory, practice and assessment.* Sterling, VA: Stylus

Bonwell, C.C., & Sutherland, T. E. (1996). The active learning continuum: Choosing activities to engage students in the classroom. In T.R. Sutherland & C.C. Bonwell (Eds.) *Using active learning in college classes: A range of options for faculty* (pp 3 - 16). New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 67, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Chin, R., (1983). Personal communication.

Lebaron, J. & D. Miller (2005). The potential of jigsaw role-playing to promote the social construction of knowledge in an online graduate education course (abstract).
Teachers College Record, *107* (8) 1652-1674.

http://www.tcrecord.org ID Number: 12091, Retrieved 7/23/2007.

Teed, R. (2006). *Teaching entry-level geoscience.* Retrieved 7/23/2007 from Science Education Resource Center, Carleton College. Website:
http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/roleplaying/index.html.

van Ments, M. (2nd Ed., 1999). The Effective Use of Role Play: Practical Techniques for Improving Learning. London: Kogan Page.

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