

Designs for Role Play

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The role play is a form of instructional simulation. Participants “play out” (not “act out” as in a fixed drama) the natural dynamic transactions of an open-ended situation that has been specified by the designer of the experience.

Role playing is most effective when it is a natural and easy outgrowth of a learning experience. It depends on spontaneous response of the participants and is a rather fragile medium, easily destroyed by too much structure or over-use. Certain conditions must be present if role playing is to be effective:

- It must be supportive of the main teaching activities. (Role playing cannot be the sole activity or the central event of the teaching experience.)
- It must illustrate, lead to discoveries, or provide practice that is clearly related to the main teaching objectives; otherwise it will distract and arouse diversionary issues.
- It should provide insight-building experience even for the observers, since rarely is it feasible for all members of a learning group to participate in a particular role play.

The design of the role play should provide for two essential ingredients. These two must be present and must come from the designer’s artifacts and/or instructions to the role players:

- *Escape* into a role that is related to but somewhat in contract with one’s real-life role. This frees a person to “be himself/herself” in a more basic sense.
- *Dynamics* of a situation that needs resolution. In other words, the situation must be one that is essentially unstable and in which the role players’ actions can lead toward resolution.

Education Considerations in the Role Play

Criteria regarding educational worth must be established:

- Natural human dynamics (rather than imposed constraints) will be experienced and demonstrated.
- Interactions (transactions) and observations of interactions will demonstrate the goal-oriented human functions.
- Learning will occur in all participants in the direction and extent specified by the goals of the role play exercise.

If the role play is to have educational value, the learning goals must meet these three criteria and any others demanded by the nature of the particular instructional plan.

Educational Purposes of the Role Play

The role play can be used for one or some combination of the following purposes:

- To make a person more aware of his/her own feelings.
- To help people see themselves (particularly their tendencies) more clearly.
- To make a person more aware of the feelings of others.
- To enable the “discovery” of the dynamics in particular roles and relationships.
- To provide for exploration of the interplay between two or more known roles.
- To provide practice in specified interpersonal skills.
- To provide drill and practice in responses to various situations.
- To provide concrete illustrations of abstract transactions.

Hints for Designing Role Plays

Suggestions	Warnings
Use a situational problem or task as a starting place for the role play. <i>Suggest</i> but do not demand how the players are to handle the situation.	Don't create a script! Avoid the tendency to make a role play a theatrical production.
Create and assign roles that the players know something about; but preferably they should allow participants to "escape" into roles that are somewhat different from their own life roles.	Don't ask people to play themselves; it is too threatening for most people. Leave people enough room to project themselves into the roles. Don't expect people to feel comfortable playing roles they don't have any experience with.
Make sure that role playing is the right medium. Is the intended outcome seeing oneself more clearly? Practicing a specified skill? Discovering a particular interpersonal dynamic?	Don't over-use role playing. When it bombs, it bombs big! It can be very time-consuming since you must use sets of episodes to get at the learning outcome from many sides and in many people's experiences.

Using Role Play in Group Facilitation

Role play is the unrehearsed acting out of a situation, relationship or dynamic in which the individuals assume roles to obtain an experiential insight with regard to a particular social or organizational problem. As a technique, role play is especially useful in the following:

- Illustrating interpersonal problems.
- Increasing understanding of different perspectives and role functions.
- Testing alternate behaviors.
- Gaining insight into attitudes and behavior.
- Involving participants in self-learning.

Role play can be a rich resource for learning when used appropriately and conducted effectively. In using role play, it is helpful to keep in mind the following considerations:

- Help the group participants define a problem which they would like to investigate and portray.
- Clarify the essential dynamics of the problems on which the group wishes to focus. Role play works most effectively when the problem is well defined and the dynamics are clearly identifiable.

- Let the role play unfold naturally to portray social situations and perspectives, don't "fake it."
- Let each participant describe his or her own role carefully, giving enough information to other participants for them to get a "feel" of the part he or she has to play.
- Act out the role play and perhaps film the portrayal for later replay and diagnosis. Replay after an initial evaluation to analyze and interpret the data produced.
- Artificial role plays that are "assigned" by the trainer are not nearly as effective as role plays that emerge naturally from group or participant needs and real situations.
- The trainer encourages the group to look at a problem they are discussing "experientially," that is, by making it come alive through role play.
- Once the role play is performed and both players and observers have reported their perceptions, the group may wish to run the "scene" over again to try out different behavioral options and discuss the different results.

Debriefing

The debriefing is crucial. The questions must be carefully designed by the designer (and modified by the user) to help people reflect on and organize the meaning of the experience. The kind of debriefing questions will depend on which of the four basic purposes the particular role play is intended to serve. Suggested questions for each are listed below. Remember that the sequence of debriefing should always begin with affective and lead toward cognitive emphasis rather than the reverse.

To Help People See Themselves

- What did you notice about your reactions and feelings during the role play?
- What were surprised about in your reactions and feelings?
- What did the experience mean to you? In what ways is it like or unlike your life?
- What was the most important moment for you? Why do you react the way you did?
- What can we learn about ourselves from an experience such as this one? What else, from real life, is it like?

To Provide Practice in Specified Interpersonal Skills

- How did you feel while you were following through on the instructions about how to deal with this situation?
- What does this experience suggest about how you will need to adjust to accommodate what is demanded in this sort of situation?
- What are the biggest problems, the most important factors for success in this skill?

To Enable the "Discovery" of the Dynamics in Particular Roles and Relationships

- How did you feel while you were following through on the instructions about how to portray the relationships?
- What did the experience reveal about the ways in which you will need to adjust to particular roles and relationships?
- What are the biggest problems, the most important factors for success revealed in the role play?

To Provide Concrete Illustrations of Abstract Transactions

- How did you feel when you realized what the situation was like?
- What was your major concern as the role play situation progressed?
- Describe any “aha” insights that you experienced as the role play proceeded?
- What can we say about other situations in life such as this one?

Leaders Guide

The leader's guide should indicate the purpose of the role play (or set of role plays) and give suggestions about effective and minimally intrusive leadership. The leader's guide also should include a debriefing guide, indicating sample questions that should be used to bring out the meanings of the experience through discussions.

Sets

A set of role plays is a coordinated series of plays intended to show or allow practice or discovery of the same phenomenon. It is a *set* in the sense that it is more than one, and each is enough different that the group's interest will be sustained while experiencing some three to five role plays on the same theme. The same debriefing guide is usually adequate for the whole set.