
ROLE-PLAYING -LEARNING THROUGH ACTING

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The term 'role' comes from the 'rolled-up' script actors used to use over two thousand years ago in Ancient Greece. In time, the script became the part, and actors then were said to play the "role" of, say, Hamlet or Othello or Ophelia or Desdemona.

But one can also create a role, improvise a performance, and in fact children do this all the time in their pretend play. There's a kind of vitality that attends this type of imaginative activity, and a young physician in Vienna around 1910 was intrigued by the nature of creativity and spontaneity. Just as the modern artists were challenging old traditions, so there were those who saw the traditional theater as encrusted with obsolete forms, emotionally phony and dead? This young physician, Jacob L. Moreno (1889-1974) sought to revive theatre by inviting the actors to improvise, and his early "Theater of Spontaneity" in 1921 became the base of the method he called "psychodrama." In addition to applying it to help psychiatric patients, Moreno found that the basic techniques could be modified to help groups address social problems, and called this approach "sociodrama."

Role playing, a derivative of a sociodrama, a method that may be used to help students understand the more subtle aspects of literature, social studies, and even some aspects of science or mathematics. It may be used in a classroom for the understanding of literature, history, and even science. Further, it can help the students to become more interested and involved, not only learning about the material, but also learning to integrate the knowledge in action, by addressing problems, exploring alternatives, and seeking novel and creative solutions. It is the best way to develop the skills of initiative, communication, problem-solving, self-awareness, and working cooperatively in teams

Role-playing, or 'learning through acting' is a technique that requires participants to perform a task in a realistic situation simulating 'real life'. This type of exercise is an effective means to take in and absorb the content and substance of new ideas. It facilitates an active understanding of the information and gives participants the opportunity to apply new skills and abilities. The simulation serves as a rehearsal on how to conduct future activities. By recreating models of real situations, which "play out" a problematic scenario, the participants are given the opportunity to see the situation from perspectives other than those they might be taking in reality. Both the participants and the facilitators have an opportunity to see "hidden obstacles" that may arise in dealing with the problem and can explore alternative ways of addressing them. The participants not only rehearse their own behavior in a particular situation, but also have the opportunity as a group to evaluate how effective the staged resolution of the problem actually was.

Role-playing is very effective methods to learn and gain experience. An individual is likely to remember their personal feelings more intensely and for a longer period of time. The role game helps to analyze how people behave in a certain situation, how to evaluate and predict their reactions. From this viewpoint, self-awareness is an integral part of problem-solving and communications.. And the best way to learn all three categories of skills is through role playing.

Jean Piaget, the great psychologist, described two modes of learning: 'assimilation' and 'accommodation.' In assimilation, people figuratively 'fill in' their mental map of their world, while in accommodation, they figuratively change that mental map, expand or alter it to fit their new perceptions. It is a commonly accepted cliché that we want to teach our young people to think, but thinking at any level of

complexity requires an exercise of three interdependent component categories of skills: problem-solving; communications; and self-awareness. These skills cannot be learned by reading any number of books. Rather, the kinds of skills needed for flexible, creative, rational thinking must be exercised, practiced, and learned in a process of interaction, risk-taking, self-expression, feedback, encouragement

ROLE PLAYING IN TEACHING

Role playing seems to be an educational tool favored by students and teachers alike. Students welcome role playing because this activity brings variations, movement, and most likely, simulated life experience into the classroom. Teachers favor role playing as a handy means of enlivening the learning content; in particular, this model brings forth detailed and concrete study materials which are more difficult to pinpoint by the way of lecture and discussion. Yet role playing at one point in the seventies had become so overused that students often loathed it; almost all classroom or training sessions used this technique. Teachers conceived of it as a safe teaching device because role playing appeared to be a partial answer to the students' demands for more personal involvement in their learning experience. Furthermore, hierarchical levels in the classroom tended to be partially obliterated by this teaching method and thereby were in tune with the times. Role playing had its vogue.

AN EFFECTIVE TRAINING TOOL

Role playing is primarily for the participants' skill acquisition (behavioral competence development) it is basically to enhance the learners' cognitive understanding (information intake and intellectual grasp) or is it essentially to enrich the trainees' affect experience (their emotional awareness and enrichment)

Each well-focused learning experience, be it primarily be the behavioral, cognitive or affective domain, will naturally deal with, the other two dimensions of learning; nevertheless, for the purpose of effective learning and teaching, instructors have to understand that each of these three human processes has its own distinct progression of development. Effective role playing structures would then be selected and devised accordingly.

FOR PRACTICE SKILL ACQUISITION

Role playing geared essentially toward the participants' capacities to expand their practice skills and techniques demands that the instructor be aware that skills are to be central to the participants' learning.

Once the skills or techniques to be practiced are firm in the teacher's mind, she or he has to specify a role playing situation where such skills are in demand. Let us say, for instance, that the participants are to learn ways and means of handling children who are abruptly switching activities because it is time for them to leave for school or some other inflexible time demand. The participants are then challenged to set up for themselves a child or youth care group situation where the youngsters are engaged in a variety of activities, none related to readiness for a school deadline. The nature of such a situation is left entirely to the participants' creativity, utilizing their past experience to produce such a simulated situation.

Prior to the actual role playing, the persons to advance their working skills are coached in the behavior they should practice and acquire. In other words, the selection of practice situation is left open to the participants; the interactions for the critical practice situation are closely defined. This delineates the teaching/learning situation which has to be structured; moreover, the actual behavior to be practiced may have to be learned beforehand. Role playing does not teach new behaviors or techniques; it teaches their application

In brief, when training in creative behavior is the focus, the trying out, practice, and refinement of such competence are in order with as little discussion a role playing of just a minute or so is most effective. The trainer/educator must be immediately on hand to assist the learner in sharpening the skills to be mastered. Rather than a generalized evaluation such as "you did well," specific comments on the learner behavioral actions should be given. The actual satisfaction has to emerge not out of the trainer's evaluation

but out of the practitioners' satisfaction based on learning of their effective interaction within the simulated situation, and subsequent experience of efficacy.

FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

Role playing and simulated practice have to be structured; however, quite differently from the previous skill learning. The simulated situation should assist the learner to understand, to assimilate, and to accommodate cognitively. Such cognitive processes have the best chance when the learners can be set somewhat apart from the role playing scene in order to witness the actual events in a total context.

Instructors would then structure the critical events, the roles to be played, and in particular would clarify the finer points to be acted out in order to deal "naturally" with the learning content to be witnessed. The role players would subsequently then develop their own scenario with the instructor only insisting that they weave in the learning points, so that these occur in the dramatization. This segment demands at least five to ten minutes in order to provide a reasonable portrayal of the critical material to be comprehended.

A discussion, which would follow, is basic to the learning endeavor, and must focus upon that which has been observed in the role play and upon what meaning it has toward comprehension. The objective is to assist trainees with a clearer and more comprehensive or changed understanding in order to expand, or possibly to change their knowledge screen. The actual learners are the viewers. The role players, in contrast to other role playing structures, are apt to be only marginal recipients of the learning situation.

FOR A CHANGE OF AFFECT

Role playing is probably best known for ascertaining feeling levels and possible validation of emotional experiences. Such experiences can be rich learning events when they actually relate to the desired educational objectives rather than serving merely as interesting or emotionally charged occurrences. Affect (emotions) can be changed when participants experience personally the emotions involved and the efficacy of a different framing of these emotional energies.

For the focus upon role playing to deal with affect (emotional) processes, it is essential that the role playing and simulated experience are loosely set. The spontaneous interactions of key role players within a defined context are intended to provide the critical experience. The instructor has to define specifically beforehand which roles are to be in the center and which well specified circumstances are heeded (context). The learners will determine their role selection and cast events on the basis of their own experience and intuitive projections.

This kind of role playing experience requires ample latitude in time, space and follow-up discussion. The actual role playing segment demands at least ten minutes to afford role players sufficient time to get into the required mood and emotion-evoking role interactions. Equally, players need ample space to develop and act out their feelings with each other. The non-playing (but hopefully deeply involved viewers and instructors) must be out of the play scene and absolutely silent. Laughter and expressions of pain, disgust or whatever, have to be totally controlled; otherwise role players may partially act in regard to the onlookers' response.

After completion of the actual role playing, the onus is upon the central role players' personal experience within the critical role playing events. The players' discussion about their affect experience is the essence rather than the onlookers' observations. Again, time is needed to get a firm hold on their affect experience, their power bases, and their desires to "tell it all." The instructor or supervisor has to remain mindful that right after the key players' powerful interactions, the players' experiences have to be identified and discussed. Observations of other players in the simulation, or onlookers' observations, including the instructor's own, have to be held back (however pertinent or insightful these might be). The focus is upon the ongoing feeling processes and possible insights of the actors rather than on the astute wisdom (cognition) of the viewing participants. This is true unless they themselves were so deeply drawn-in and involved that they became partners within the scene. Subsequent deliberations remain centered upon sorting out and coming to

grips with the affective processes, on taking possible steps for creating effective support and change and determining how such steps can be actualized.

Before the role playing exercise be terminated, role players as well as on looking participants, including the teaching person, all require sufficient opportunity to debrief as an essential feature of the total exercise. In role playing with much emotional involvement there are always the risks of stronger than usual personal experience, or misplaced feelings, or a projection of feelings which belong only to the role and its context. Role playing in relation to affect expression can be either a futile draining of energy or a powerful tool in learning about the flow and impact of affect processes

AS SIMULATION

Role playing isn't to be viewed as a particularly psychological procedure. Certainly, it has been widely used as a part of many different types of therapy, but this is because it's a natural vehicle for learning. Role playing is simply a less technologically elaborate form of simulations.

Role playing, then, is nothing more than rehearsal. Musicians and players, actors and firemen, all need to practice their skills. This is because complex operations cannot include all variables in a single lecture or even a thick book. Issues of adapting general principles to one's own set of abilities, temperament, and background; working out the inevitable "bugs" any complex system generates; and preparing for unforeseen eventualities—all are frequent goals of of role playing.

PROCEDURE TO CONDUCT A ROLE-PLAYING

1. Setting up

In the set up stage, the training team describes the scenario and assigns roles to the participants. If the participant plays a particular role in reality, it would be more effective to assign a different role to that participant during the role-play exercise. Another option is to put together a single page description of the scenario to be worked out by the role-play participants. Alternatively, it may be useful to write one-paragraph descriptions of the key role players. A description can include the main objectives and concerns of the person in that role, perhaps can include some key dialogues or a statement to be read by the person playing the role.

2. The Play Stage

During the play stage, the participants act out their roles and the play is carried out. If the role-play becomes too long, then the facilitators can give the participants a time warning of one or two minutes, and then end the play after that.

3. The Follow Up

It is important for all the participants to discuss what happened during the role-play. They may question individual role-players to ask why they took a particular position, made a certain statement, or undertook an action. The explanation and the resulting discussion are important for the participants to obtain a greater understanding of the social dynamics related to a particular "real life" situation.

PROBLEMS WITH ROLE PLAYING

Role playing is a technology for intensifying and accelerating learning; it is like electric power tools in relation to carpentry. Just as carpenters have to be skilled in the many components of their craft, so too do teachers have to be well trained and competent, or therapists well-grounded in the various aspects of that role. The tools aren't panaceas, and they don't work well if used carelessly or as a substitute for actual planning and thinking. And, like power tools, they can be dangerous. But even the old-fashioned types of saws and hammers could do damage if one doesn't know or remember to apply the principles of safety.

The most common problem with role playing is that of the leader not appreciating its essential nature: It is an improvisational procedure, and improvisation requires a feeling of relative safety. This must be

cultivated in a group, the teacher engaging the students in a “warming-up” process in which they get to know each other in a more trusting fashion and become involved in the theme to be learned. Learning how to warm up a class and how to keep the warm-up going is as much a part of role playing as a surgeon knows how to prepare a patient for an operation.

Another problem with role playing arose when teachers gave into their own impulses to “play psychiatrist” and slip from dealing with the group problem to explore some issue to focusing on the real-life personal problems of a given individual. It’s not much harder to prevent these mistakes than to teach safety procedures, but time must be taken to explicitly address these issues and these lessons need to be periodically repeated.

A third problem comes from the common tendency to assume that interpersonal skills are easier than technical skills—though in fact they are even more difficult—and so people tend to think they can engage in directing role playing before they’ve really achieved a level of bare competence. Well, sometimes teachers fail to appreciate the complexity of a skill they’re learning, and it’s important to emphasize that directing role playing is about as complex as learning how to deliver a baby. And it helps if the person doing the learning is also trained in other ways

Sometimes a role-play session may generate strong emotions (anger, dismay, disagreement), especially if some role-players take the play too seriously, and take extreme positions. The follow-up discussions offer the facilitators an opening to explain that these reactions were caused by the structure of the situation, not by the stubbornness of the individuals playing the roles. It is not necessary to avoid strong emotions; rather, it is an opportunity to reveal the nature of some “real-life” situations, and to encourage participants to be sensitive to the different assumptions, values, goals and positions that may be taken by different persons actually in “real life

PROCEDURE FOR MAKING A SUCCESSFUL ROLE PLAY

There have already been some attempts to introduce a guide to making up a role play. Scholars suggest different steps and various successions in applying role play in teaching. Based on the empirical evidence, here is a suggested step-by-step guide for making a successful role play.

Step 1 – A Situation for a Role Play

To begin with, choose a situation for a role play, keeping in mind students’ needs and interests Teachers should select role plays that will give the students an opportunity to practice what they have learned. At the same time, we need a role play that interests the students. One way to make sure your role play is interesting is to let the students choose the situation themselves. They might either suggest themes that intrigue them or select a topic from a list of given situations. To find a situation for a role play, write down situations you encounter in your own life, or read a book or watch a movie, because their scenes can provide many different role play situations. You might make up an effective role play based on cultural differences.

Step 2 – Role Play Design

After choosing a context for a role play, the next step is to come up with ideas on how this situation may develop. Students’ level of language proficiency should be taken into consideration (Livingstone, 1983). If you feel that your role play requires more profound linguistic competence than the students possess, it would probably be better to simplify it or to leave it until appropriate. On low intermediate and more advanced levels, role plays with problems or conflicts in them work very well because they motivate the characters to talk, To build in these problems let the standard script go wrong. This will generate tension and make the role play more interesting.

Step 3 – Linguistic Preparation

Once you have selected a suitable role play, predict the language needed for it. At the beginning level, the language needed is almost completely predictable. The higher the level of students the more difficult it is to prefigure accurately what language students will need, but some prediction is possible

anyway It is recommended to introduce any new vocabulary before the role play At the beginning level, you might want to elicit the development of the role play scenario from your students and then enrich it.

Step 4 - Factual Preparation

This step implies providing the students with concrete information and clear role descriptions so that they could play their roles with confidence. For example, in the situation at a railway station, the person giving the information should have relevant information: the times and destination of the trains, prices of tickets, etc. In a more advanced class and in a more elaborate situation include on a cue card a fictitious name, status, age, personality, and fictitious interests and desires. Describe each role in a manner that will let the students identify with the characters. Use the second person 'you' rather than the third person 'he' or 'she.' If your role presents a problem, just state the problem without giving any solutions. At the beginning level cue cards might contain detailed instructions

Step 5 - Assigning the Roles

Some instructors ask for volunteers to act out a role play in front of the class), though it might be a good idea to plan in advance what roles to assign to which students. At the beginning level the teacher can take one of the roles and act it out as a model. Sometimes, the students have role play exercises for the home task. They learn useful words and expressions think about what they can say and then act out the role play in the next class.

There can be one or several role play groups. If the whole class represents one role play group, it is necessary to keep some minor roles which can be taken away if there are less people in class than expected). If the teacher runs out of roles, he/she can assign one role to two students, in which one speaks secret thoughts of the other with several role play groups, when deciding on their composition, both the abilities and the personalities of the students should be taken into consideration. For example, a group consisting only of the shyest students will not be a success. Very often, optimum interaction can be reached by letting the students work in one group with their friends.

Step 6 – Follow-up

Once the role play is finished, spend some time on debriefing. This does not mean pointing out and correcting mistakes. After the role play, the students are satisfied with themselves; they feel that they have used their knowledge of the language for something concrete and useful. This feeling of satisfaction will disappear if every mistake is analyzed. It might also make the students less confident and less willing to do the other role plays.

PRECAUTIONS FOR SUCCESS IN ROLE PLAYING

The commonest complaint is that they are "unrealistic"; in practice this usually means that they are too realistic for comfort! However, they stand in the same relationship to real life as cartoons do to photographs. They point up certain features and ignore others. In this respect, they present fairly well-defined problems (much more clearly defined than in real life, and usually not mixed up with other issues a. That is a problem, because it is undoubtedly one of the best methods of developing interpersonal skills in a safe situation, and of bringing alive material which would otherwise simply be "academic" in the pejorative sense of the term.

In addition to its integration in the ordinary classroom, these methods can also be used synergistically with special programs for children "at risk." Some children have special needs; some are physically, emotionally, or developmentally disabled; and some are simply not the kinds of children who do well in traditional classrooms and need a more active, multi-modal, experiential approach. Again, role playing in itself is no panacea, any more than the new "scope" technologies now revolutionizing surgery can be effectively applied by people with little training. These are tools, and in good hands, they can powerfully enhance the attainment of the teachers' goals. The movement towards social and emotional learning in the schools and the promotion of emotional intelligence also should make use of this valuable resource.

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