

# Role-Play

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In this chapter I will examine the concept of role-play, and its efficacy as an instructional method. This chapter first introduces the role-play and its major components, then the significance of role-play in education, and suggestions for implementation of role-play.

## Defining Role-Play

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2019) has several definitions for the word 'role-play,' such as "to act out the role off," "to represent in action," and "to play a role". In education, several studies have had varying but similar definitions of role-play, ranging from calling it an experience to referring to it as a pedagogy (Agboola Sogunro, 2004; Hidayati & Pardjono, 2018; Radford & Stevens, 1988; Rao & Stupans, 2012; Westrup & Planader, 2013). Using the common themes between these definitions as a reference, role-play is defined in this chapter, as an instructional method where learners take on the responsibility of representing different character roles, within predefined, often realistic, scenarios

## Components of Role-Play

A different approach to understanding role-play, is to examine the vocation of acting. Actors are required to act out scripts that contain lines representing characters in the story. Here we know it is the actor's responsibility to accurately convey the feelings and actions of the characters they are representing, but they must be guided by the director and the script. Can you imagine a movie or play that had random lines for the actors, with no connection or context between them? Much like acting, role-playing must include roles that learners can represent and a scenario that defines the context for the actions that role-players must take. Now you may find yourself asking, but what about the directors' influence?

The director is responsible for guiding and directing the actors to better connect with their roles. Similarly, role-play in education requires a guide or facilitator to work with the learners. A study conducted by Cobo et al. (2011) revealed that the addition of a guide or facilitator was necessary to maximize the benefits received from a role-play session. Another study using role-play discovered the importance of having mentors provide guidance to students during and after their role-play sessions (Nakamura et al., 2011). Taking these revelations and combining them with our definition for role-play, there are three major components needed to successfully implement role-playing: scenarios, roles/characters, and guides/facilitators.

## Scenario

Continuing our movie example, the actors need to have a script that they can follow to better understand how to represent their characters. Similarly, role-play scenarios need to include relevant background information that will help establish the limitations, motivations, and the problems that learners will need to solve (Radford & Stevens, 1988). The problem should align with the content provided and be ill-structured to give students the flexibility to engage in critical thinking. For example, if the objective of the lesson is to teach manufacturing, then the theme of the scenario should relate to manufacturing, the roles/characters should be based around employees in manufacturing factories, and the

problems, presented in the scenario, should relate to the theme. In terms of structure, the scenario should be detailed in areas that help define roles, context, and problems, but remain open ended about actions that can be taken by the roles/characters. This will give the learners a chance to dictate what actions need to be taken.

## Roles/Characters

Much like scenarios, roles or characters need to be well defined, taking into consideration their expertise and limitations (Rao & Stupans, 2012). The roles should be based on the theme of the scenario and should be connected to the problems presented for the role-play session. For example, simply giving the learner a role of 'manager', will not be enough. The learner will need to know what the expertise of the manager is, what strategies they tend to use, and what position they hold in the company. Not knowing these parameters and limitations will reduce the effectiveness of the role-play, as learners will be able to give solutions that are outside the scope and expertise of the role they are representing. Additionally, if there is more than one role, then it is important to define the connection and relationship between the different roles. For example, the manner and method of communication between managers will be different than between a manager and an employee—making it important to define what the responsibility of each role is. Just imagine the chaos that would ensue if all movies were based on impromptu acting and had no defined roles for the actors.

## Guides/Facilitators

If actors and scripts were enough for a movie to be successful, then there would be no demand for directors. The guides or facilitators in role-play sessions, have a similar role in providing direction to the learners. However, simply assigning an instructor to be a guide is not enough. To be effective, the guides or facilitators must prepare for the sessions in advance and have expertise on the relevant subject matters covered in the role-play sessions in order to answer player questions (Cobo et al., 2011; Radford & Stevens, 1988).

## Significance of Using Role-Play in Education

Now that we have discussed what role-play is, let us see what value role-play has as an instructional method. Specifically, we are going to be looking at how role-play promotes active learning, positive player-to-player and player-to-instructor interaction, and increased student engagement and motivation. These elements provide significant value to the efficacy of using role-play in education.

## Active Learning Approach

Role-play is considered as a possible method for achieving active learning (e.g., Bonwell & Eisen, 1991; Westrup & Planader, 2013). The active learning approach has been defined in several studies, across subject matters, as an approach that actively involves learners in their own learning process, letting the instructors act as guides and providing learners with opportunities to grow (Ghilhay & Ghilay, 2015; Graaf et al., 2005; Pekdoğan & Kanak, 2016). As learners engage in critical thinking—through representing characters and making decisions on how to advance through the scenario—they actively engage in their learning process. Also, putting the responsibility of learning in the hands of the learners provides them with more control over their own learning process. This kind of student-centric approach also leads to higher student engagement and participation (Bonwell and Eisen, 1991; Howell, 1992).

## Increased Learner Engagement and Motivation

One of the main goals for any instructional method is to improve the effectiveness of instruction, leading to higher student performance and satisfaction. Cobo et al.'s (2011) research revealed that using role-play, in engineering studies, had a positive impact on learner engagement and motivation. They noted that the students were answering emails even outside of designated class time, which was contrasted with the authors' previous experiences that showed decrease in student engagement outside of class. In another study Agboola (2004) discovered that after applying role-play in education leadership courses, students showed increased interest in students, which led to an increase in their

understanding of the content of the course. Both studies indicate that role-play has a positive correlation between its use and an increase in student engagement and motivation across subject matters.

## Increased Interaction Between Learners

Another important aspect involved in role-play is the interactions between the learners and the instructors. The interactions can take place as discussions, debates or even casual conversations, allowing the learners to observe each other during the session. This level of interaction helps develop a sense of community between the learners in the session and provide opportunities to practice communicating in various social contexts (Ladousse, 1987). Role-play interaction also aligns with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, whereby learners increase their motivation towards actions they observe other learners making.

## Considerations

Before we talk about implementation, it is important to keep some things in mind when considering role-play as an instructional method. These considerations include the amount of time required for role-play sessions, management of the level of complexity of the problem and scenario, and the increased workload for the facilitators. It is imperative to plan for these considerations before initiating role-play.

### Time Requirement

One scenario for role-play has the potential to last for several weeks, depending on how many problems are introduced, or how much time is allotted for each session. Learners can also take several sessions to acclimate to the idea of role-playing their characters (Radford & Stevens, 1988). Extra care must be taken in determining how much time is available when considering using role-play in classrooms.

### Level of Complexity

The open-ended nature of role-play allows each session and scenario to be tailored to the needs of different demographics of learners, regardless of age or expertise in role-playing. However, it is important to recognize the difference between children, adults, novice, and expert learners when it comes to the level of complexity they can handle. For example, a study by Radford and Stevens (1988) revealed that undergraduate students new to role-play had difficulty participating in the sessions but got more comfortable over the next few sessions. A study by Nakamura et al. (2011) showed that novice learners tended to 'stick to the script', and not deviate or explore during the sessions. This was a problem as the script was only meant to guide the learners, and exploration was required to fully engage with the content. This prompted them to introduce experts, to facilitate the session, for each group. The experts were able to provide opportunities for the learners to deviate and explore the scenario, which maximized the effectiveness of each session. Taking this into account it is important to recognize the demographic of the learners that will be participating and designing the role-play sessions, with appropriate complexity to match them. For example, novice audiences will require more scaffolding and guidance, when compared to learners who have experience in role-playing.

### Increased Workload for Instructors/Facilitators

Role-play sessions tend to increase the workload for the facilitators and are difficult to prepare for and conduct (Nakamura et al., 2011; Radford & Stevens, 1988). The higher the player count, the more difficult it is to facilitate the session. The nature of role-play also requires the facilitators to respond to prompts quickly, as learners run the risk of being waylaid or stuck during the session, lowering its effectiveness (Nakamura et al., 2011). Implementing role-play successfully will require instructors to be thorough with their preparation, and account for the increase in student questions. Instructors may also need to seek assistance with facilitating the sessions.

# Implementing Role-Play: How to Use Role-Play for Learning

To create a successful role-play session, it is important to establish the problem you want learners to solve, the theme for the scenario that best fits the problem, and the total time you want to allocate to the session. Determining these factors will provide a solid foundation for creating the session. The time limit will gauge the level of complexity that the problem can have, while keeping the theme and problem connected will make it easier to create roles/characters that fit. The last step will be implementation, where the session will need to be in a location that has enough room for the participants to be close enough to comfortably communicate with each other and the instructor. The checklist created by Howell (1992) provides more details on how to set up and prepare for a role play session. Two examples, one for corporate education and one for higher education, on implementing role-play have been provided below.

## Worked Example: Training to Teach Safety in the Workplace

Below is an example of the steps to take to implement a role-play session for a training to teach workplace safety:

1. Problem. Determine what the underlying problem is. What are you trying to train? In this case it will be about workplace safety.
2. Scenario. Include details about the internal and external workplace environment, location, culture, roles/characters, and other relevant information. For this situation, be sure to include current safety policies, any issues associated with them, their effectiveness/importance, and other additional safety measures that you want your learners to know. Common safety policies include having emergency safety equipment—such as fire retardant on hand—and ensuring there is always adequate ventilation and heating in the workplace.
3. Roles/Characters. Provide details that include motivation, job title, expertise and limitations. Be sure to connect the roles to the theme, problem, and to each other. The main characters here should be employees, managers, and human resources representatives. An example description of an employee can be Jill, who has been working in this company for 4 years. She is well liked and receives good reviews from her supervisor. Jill has complained in the past that some of the policies are confusing and difficult to remember.
4. Total time. Determine the maximum time allotted per session. Adjust the problem, lowering or increasing complexity, depending on available time. Time limit will be determined by company policy, and the time allowed for professional development. An average good time might be 2 hours a week, per session, for a month.
5. Provide materials, such as the scenario and relevant subject matter information, to the learners. Make sure all learners understand the concept of role-playing, are aware of the scenario, and the roles assigned to them at the start of each session. In this case, learners should be assigned the roles of employees and manager. The role of human resource representative should go to the facilitator of the training.
6. Location. Select an appropriately sized location that can hold participants and other observers. The participants must be allowed to comfortably communicate with each other. In this case you can use a large conference room or an outside location that can host the required number of stakeholders.

## Worked Example: Teaching Marketing Principles Using Role-Play

Below is an example of the steps to take to implement a role-play session teaching marketing principles:

1. Problem. Determine what the underlying problem is. What are you trying to teach? What are the objectives of the lesson? In this case, it will be about teaching marketing principles, which can include topics such as the 4 Ps of marketing or target audience analysis.
2. Scenario. Include details about the environment, background for the characters, location, culture, details about the roles/characters, and other relevant information. For this example, the focus should be on creating a relatable background such as a new marketing project being started in a business. Details, such as the name of the business, the location, work culture, and product lines, should be provided.
3. Roles/Characters. Provide details that include motivation, job title, expertise and limitations. Be sure to connect the roles to the theme, problem, and to each other. The main characters here should be marketing employees, manager(s), and team leader(s). A possible description for marketing employee could be Mark, who has 3 years of working experience in marketing, and he specializes in target market analysis. He is a hard worker, gets good reviews, and aspires to lead his own team for marketing projects. Unfortunately, Mark has trouble communicating with his peers, and often has difficulty articulating his ideas.
4. Total time. Determine the maximum time allotted per session. Adjust the problem, lowering or increasing complexity, depending on available time. Time limit will be determined by the total course time, time allotted in the course for assignments, and the frequency of the sessions, per week. An average good time might be one session a week for 50 minutes.
5. Materials. Provide materials such as the scenario and relevant subject matter information to students and assign roles. Make sure all students understand the concept of role-playing, and are aware of the scenario and the roles assigned to them at the start of each session. In this case, students should be assigned the roles of marketing employees, with the instructor being assigned team leader or manager.
6. Location. Select an appropriately sized location that can hold participants and other observers. The participants must be allowed to comfortably communicate with each other. In this case, a classroom setting will work. However, depending on the number of students, the seating structure of the classroom may need to be adjusted.

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