

Role Play as a Teaching Method: A Practical Guide

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Preface

This manual is intended as a guide for teachers wishing to utilise role play as a teaching tool. It is based on a workshop held by the Mekong Learning Initiative (MLI) in March 2006 in Lao PDR. The MLI utilises a linking and learning approach to facilitate reflection, sharing and new activities in support of a Mekong 'body of knowledge and practice' on the social science of natural resource management. The project includes partners from eight universities within the Greater Mekong Sub-region, including the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University.

Introduction: Why role play?

Learning to participate is an important skill for humanities and social sciences students to learn in today's multi-stakeholder world. The role play method develops a greater understanding of the complexity of professional practice and enables students to develop skills to engage in multi-stakeholder negotiations within the controlled environment of the classroom. Role play in the classroom can be implemented in a number of ways. It can involve online elements as well as face-to-face interactions. The length of the process can also vary according to the aims of the activity. This guide will outline role play techniques found to be most useful for the social science classroom at a tertiary level.

Role play in the classroom involves students actively in the learning process by enabling them to act as stakeholders in an imagined or real scenario. It is a technique that complements the traditional lecture and assignment format of tertiary level social science learning. In a role play, the teacher selects a particular event or situation that illuminates key theories or may be of importance to the topic of study. Students are given detailed background readings and assigned stakeholder roles as preparation. The format of interaction between stakeholders can be varied and may depend on time or resources available. The role play is concluded with a debriefing or reflection stage which reinforces the concepts introduced by the role play.

According to Brierley, Devonshire and Hillman, the role play technique develops *functioning knowledge*: "a combination of propositional knowledge (knowing about-the academic knowledge base), procedural knowledge (knowing how – having the skills) and conditional knowledge (knowing the circumstances in which to use the skills)."¹ The role play creates a stimulating environment that simulates reality enabling students to intensify their understanding of the situation or event being re-enacted. Students gain a deeper insight into key concepts by enacting issues discussed in the classroom. They also develop practical skills for professional practice.

Hirsch argues that role play consists of the key elements of experiential learning. David Kolb defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience."² The role play technique allows students to apply concepts and problems that have been introduced through lectures and readings to a situation that reflects reality. As students are directly active during the role play it is more effective in "embedding concepts" into their long term memory.³ Role play is a hands-on approach to learning as opposed to more abstract forms of learning such as lectures or essay writing. In role-play students learn through active involvement and therefore personal experience. They also have the opportunity to reflect on this experience.

Role play also introduces concepts that are important in professional practice such as understanding how knowledge is developed and produced, in particular the use of

¹ Brierley, Gary; Devonshire, Liz and Hillman, Mick; "Learning to Participate: Responding to Changes in Australian Land and Water Management Policy and Practice", in *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 18, 2002, p. 7.

² Kolb quoted in Hirsch, Philip; "Teaching geography on the Mekong: experiential learning in practice", **printed in ???**

³ Alden, Dave; "Experience with Scripted Role Play in Environmental Economics", in *Journal of Economic Education*, Spring, 1999, p. 127.

language and how language constructs knowledge, logic and prominence of voice.⁴ Students learn to communicate knowledge in a meaningful and persuasive manner.

Moreover, role play illuminates the divisions and differences between and within groups. Role play in the classroom demonstrates effectively that different stakeholders use different information sources and often hold distinct, if not conflicting views, but that resolutions can be reached. Students learn to work with differing personalities, beliefs, value systems, abilities and background experiences. They develop a greater appreciation of the range of perspectives held on a particular issue and come to recognise the complexity of negotiation and their own role. They realise that they may not have all the answers (and that there may be no easy answer) but see the “critical issues for their professional practice.”⁵

Overall, role-play is a beneficial teaching tool as it develops practical professional skills as well as academic knowledge. Students generally enjoy this hands-on approach to learning and broaden their understanding of multi-stakeholder negotiations through a process of simulated experience.

4 Norman, Heidi; “Exploring Effective Teaching Strategies: Simulation Case Studies and Indigenous Studies at the University Level,” in *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol. 33, 2004, p. 19.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Role play how to: A step-by-step guide

Role plays can take on many forms. They can involve online elements or be conducted face-to-face. Before designing your role play consider the resources available to you and your students and decide on the amount of time you wish to dedicate to the exercise. The following section will present the steps for designing and implementing a role play.

➤ **Design Process**

1. *Determine the learning objectives of the role play.*

The learning objectives can be theoretical as well as practical:

- What are the key concepts that are taught in the course?
- Is there a key event or situation that is the focus of the course?
- What skills should students develop through the activity? Is it aimed at broadening expertise or developing new skills? Do you want the students to experience a different perspective?
- How does the role play fit into the rest of your course? Is it being used to reinforce ideas already introduced through lectures or are you utilizing the role-play to present new theories?

2. *Choose a scenario or situation from reality that highlights the key concepts of the course.*

By re-enacting events from reality students are able to deepen their understanding of real life situations. Additionally readings and context can be provided from newspaper reports, academic articles and documents relating to the event. When selecting your scenario consider what resources may already be available and if students may have some pre-existing knowledge.

- What are the main issues/areas of conflict in your scenario?
- What are the circumstances that created the conflict?
- Consider major events or developments that characterise your scenario. For instance major meetings, revelations or deals. When and where did these occur?

3. *Once you have selected a scenario you need to consider the various stakeholders and their perspectives and adapt the situation to the classroom.*

- Who are the major stakeholders? Consider organisations, individuals and public or private interest groups.
- What are their differing perspectives on the situation? Each stakeholder should have a private and public stance.
- Consider how many students you have in your class. You may need (or prefer) to assign students to roles in groups.
- How will you assign the roles to students? Will students be selected randomly or will you allow them to choose their roles?
- Will all the roles have equal opportunity for participation? This will depend on the scenario you are enacting. It may be pertinent to the learning process to exclude some groups in order to reflect reality.
- Consider the relationship between roles. Which roles can interact with one another? Which roles are allied? Are their alliances public or private? Do some roles act as representatives for others?

4. *Plan the structure of your role play.*

The structure of your role play will depend largely on how much time you wish to allocate to the exercise. It may include online elements as well as face to face interactions. The structure outlined below is an example of how a role play could be structured. The four stages: briefing, interaction, forum and debriefing, involve important elements that enable the students to familiarize themselves with the exercise, engage and reflect.

- 4.1 Holding a briefing stage provides an opportunity for students to familiarise themselves with the role play, select or be assigned roles and prepare for their role by conducting research and reading about the situation and the stakeholder they will be representing.
- 4.2 During the interaction stage students are able to act in their roles, networking, and lobbying with other stakeholders to achieve their agendas. The main point of this stage is for students to present their agenda to other participants and formulate relationships within the provided guidelines.
 - Consider how this interaction will take place. Will it be an online process conducted through emails and chat rooms or a series of face-to-face interactions in the classroom. How will students present their position to other players?
 - The interaction stage should reflect how the situation developed in reality. What events occurred to contribute to the situation and how can these be communicated to students?
- 4.3 The forum stage is an opportunity for all players to negotiate and try to resolve the issue at hand. It could be a face-to-face conference or public forum.
 - Decide the format of the forum stage. How will the players communicate?
 - Are there any stakeholders that will not participate directly? If so how will you ensure those students participate?
- 4.4 The final stage is a debriefing. Plenty of time should be allocated to this as it is the most important element of the role play.
 - Reconsider the learning objectives and what questions you want students to answer in this session.

5 *Consider how you will assess your students.*

Students could be asked to submit a written copy of their private and public position. They could be marked on their participation and ability to express themselves in the role play situation. A written paper reflecting on the exercise could be submitted at the end. Set deadlines according to your timetable.

6 *The resources made available to students should assist them to participate in the role play and fulfill their role.*

Resources given to students will fall into two categories: generic and specific. You may decide to have students conduct their own research into their role. The amount of information given to students will depend on the subject and its level.

- 6.1 Generic resources will give context to the role play and could include:
 - background readings on the situation,

- a brief outline of the stakeholders and their public positions,
- an outline of the relationships between the different stakeholders and their levels of interaction.

6.2 Specific resources will relate to the role assigned to each student and could include:

- background information on the individual or organisation (this could be policy documents, newspaper reports etc),
- personal characteristics (is the temperament of an individual an important factor in your scenario? Is there a certain approach that characterises a particular stakeholder?)
- an outline of the circumstances of the stakeholder at the beginning of the role play,
- details of the boundaries for interaction (is the stakeholder restricted in with whom they can interact? What is the status of the stakeholder in relation to the other roles?)
- a statement of the stakeholders' public agenda,
- a statement of the stakeholders' private agenda.

6.3 It may also be useful to provide students with a guide to the role play that explains:

- how the role-play will work including such details as timetable and the structure of the role play,
- information on the system of communication (i.e. face-to-face sessions or online forums),
- instructions on how participate, especially during the interaction stage (i.e. who to lobby, make contact with or how to present one's position),
- how the role play will be assessed.

➤ **Implementation**

1. *Briefing Stage*

It is important that participants in the role play understand clearly from the beginning what their roles are, how to interact with other stakeholders and what is expected of them in terms of assessment. It may be necessary to provide context to the situation in lecture format or hold tutorials to ensure that students have completed the necessary readings. Depending on how much you wish to control the role play the briefing stage is a chance for you to direct how students are to play their roles and establish relationship boundaries. Additionally the mode of interaction (face-to-face, email or online chat room) can be explained clearly.

Checklist

- Ensure students understand how the role play will work, especially how they will interact with other players.
- Explain the mode of interaction for each stage of the role-play.
- Assign roles and distribute resources/reading materials accordingly.
- Communicate deadlines for the first task (i.e. writing a description of your stakeholders' position, or approaching another stakeholder for support etc.)

2. Interaction Stage

The interaction stage is a chance for students to assume their roles and develop relationships with other stakeholders. It should reflect the development of the real life situation that the role play is simulating and may require detailed instructions for the actions of different stakeholders or the introduction of a series of events that affect the situation. An online element can be useful as group emails are an easy way to distribute information (such as news reports or policy documents) to all participants.

- Allow students to interact with other players according to the roles and relationships outlined in the background material (this may include presenting a public stance in an online forum, building alliances with other stakeholders through letter writing, emails or private meetings, or lobbying other stakeholders).
- As moderator you may introduce events through the medium of communication (i.e. a news announcement) or take on the role of a new stakeholder to alter the course of interactions.
- Check that all roles are active. If any students are not participating talk to them directly.
- Monitor the interactions to ensure the roles are being played accordingly and that the learning environment is safe.
- Identify learning opportunities when they arise and suggest further resources if necessary.

3. Forum Stage

The forum stage sees participants engage in direct interaction involving all stakeholders. The aim is for negotiation to take place with the purpose of reaching a resolution.

- Monitor the discussions as the forum progresses and intervene where deemed necessary. This may be to take on an unexpected role and enter negotiations or introduce problems, traps or new information to the proceedings to challenge the students or engage students who are not participating fully.
- Monitor the interactions to ensure the roles are being played accordingly and that the learning environment is safe.
- Identify learning opportunities when they arise and suggest further resources if necessary.
- Assist students to bring the role play to a conclusion. A resolution may not be possible and this can be discussed during the debriefing stage.

4. Debriefing Stage

The debriefing stage is the most important element of the role play. It is important that students come out of their roles fully for the debrief session so that they might reflect on their role and others objectively.

- Declare the role play officially over.
- Discuss what happened in the role play. Place emphasis on drawing out underlying patterns and dynamics and how this affected what happened.

- Draw out the issues and concepts that were prominent in the role play and compare them to how the scenario developed in reality. What occurred in the role play that could not occur in reality and why?
- Reflect on what was learnt from the role play, focussing not only on the situation that was simulated but also the skills adopted by students during the role play to put their position across.
- Evaluate the role play and get feedback from students on the technique.

For more examples on how to conduct a role play, including case studies by other MLI partners please go to the MLI website:

www.mekong.es.usyd.edu.au/projects/mli/index.htm

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