

## **Role-Playing in Teaching: An Evaluation of a Learning Method**

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### **Abstract**

Often student teams become dysfunctional as a result of inexperience and lack of prior knowledge. This exploratory study implements and evaluates a framework that attempts to scaffold teamwork skills through role-play activities. The review highlighted five essential teamwork skills that are supported with teaching materials. The results indicated that measuring change in team performance is difficult. However, the study showed that role play was an effective teaching approach and well received by the students.

### **Introduction**

Students' role in the classroom especially in the professional courses is no longer a passive one. Indeed, students' input on the teaching-learning process is paramount as it is their education that is at stake. Inevitably, their perception presents methodological challenges. The opportunity to be "heard" raises their own awareness about their own learning experience and the teaching process.

Wittrock (1986) talks about this reciprocity, suggesting that research on students' thinking and perception functions as a mirror that can be used by both teachers and students to reflect upon their learning and teaching, hence enhancing their understanding of teaching and increasing its outcome.

Many pedagogical tools have evolved over time, not many institutions have adopted one or each of the tools by management institutions. Lecturing remains the most prominent method of imparting instructions to the students. However under the circumstances, the need and the relevance of modern methods of imparting instructions can not be underestimated.

Teaching and preparing the students of any business management programme is a set of a systematic processes designed to meet learning objectives related to students' current or

future jobs and delivery methods can be divided into cognitive and behavioral approaches. Cognitive methods provide information orally or in written form, demonstrate relationships among concepts, or provide the rules for how to do something. They stimulate learning through their impact on cognitive processes and are associated most closely with changes in knowledge and attitudes. The pedagogical tools such as lecture, discussion, e-learning and, to some extent, case studies are cognitive methods. Though these types of methods can influence skill development, it is not their strength.

Conversely, behavioral methods allow the students to practice behavior in a real or simulated fashion. They stimulate learning through experience and are best at skill development and attitude change. Equipment simulators, business games, role plays, the in-basket technique, behavior modeling and, to some extent, case studies are behavioral methods and generally grouped under Activity Based Learning (ABL). Both behavioral and cognitive methods can be used to change attitudes, though they do so through different means.

Activity based learning as an instructional technique has enjoyed varying levels of popularity over the last four decades. It is notable for the way it involves students in their own learning skills and in a stimulating, 'real-life' environment and its applicability. The popularity of activity based learning has waxed and waned in the education sector. It was clearly a favored teaching method in the 1970s, as demonstrated by the extensive collections of 'how to' books in tertiary libraries. Out of many activity based learning techniques, Role-playing is currently used in a range of disciplines including drama, education, psychology (Britt, 1995), social sciences (Duveen and Solomon, 1994), philosophy, English literature (Wolf et al., 1994), foreign languages (Ladousse, 1987), environmental science, engineering, geography (Maddrell, 1994), health sciences, business (Brown, 1994; Egri, 1999), tourism and hospitality, ethics (Brown, 1994; Raisner, 1997), economics, marketing, political science and information technology (Kirkwood and Ross, 1997). New approaches are also emerging via specially designed computer software (Wagner, 1997).

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, although a little didactic material can be helpful in creating an intellectual framework for the accommodative learning. 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 a natural constituent of ABL fills up this gap.

Role playing, a derivative of a socio-drama, is a method for exploring the issues involved in complex social situations. It may be used for the training of professionals or in a classroom for the understanding of literature, history, business management and even science.

What astronauts do in their practice for missions; what pilots do in learning to navigate in flight simulators; what thousands of soldiers do in the course of military exercises--it's all role playing. Teaching salespersons to deal with customers, teaching doctors to interview patients, teaching teachers to deal with difficult situations, all these require some measure of actual practice and feedback.

Role playing, then, is nothing more than rehearsal. Musicians and football 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 this kind of role playing. Of late management education has not remained insulated from the impact of role playing sessions.

The role play is a simulation of a single event or situation. Trainees who are actors in the role play are provided with a general description of the situation, a description of their roles (e.g., their objectives, emotions, and concerns) and the problem they face. One aspect of role playing was that of diagnosis or assessment--a test of how a person would act when placed in an imagined or pretend problematic situation.

Role plays differ in the amount of structure they provide to the actors. A structured role play provides trainees with a great deal of detail about the situation that has brought the characters together. It also provides in greater detail each character's attitudes, needs, opinions, and so on. Structured role plays may even provide a scripted dialog between the characters. This type of role play is used primarily to develop and practice interpersonal skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and group decision making. Spontaneous role plays are loosely constructed scenarios in which one trainee plays herself while others play people that the trainee has interacted with in the past (or will in the future). The objective of this type of role play is to develop insight into one's own behavior and its impact on others. How much structure is appropriate in the scenario will depend on the learning objectives.

Whether structured or spontaneous, role plays may also differ based on the number of trainees involved. Single, multiple, and role-rotation formats provide for more or less participation in the role play. In a single role play, one group of trainees role plays while the rest of the trainees observe. While observing, other trainees analyze the interactions and

identify learning points. This provides a single focus for trainees and allows for feedback from the trainer. This approach may cause the role players to be embarrassed at being the center of attention, leading to failure to play the roles in an appropriate manner. It also has the drawback of not permitting the role players to observe others perform the roles. Having non-trainees act out the role play may eliminate these problems, but adds some cost to the training. In a multiple role play, all trainees are formed into groups. Each group acts out the scenario simultaneously. At the conclusion, each group analyzes what happened and identifies learning points. The groups may then report a summary of their learning to the other groups, followed by a general discussion. This allows greater learning as each group will have played the roles somewhat differently. Multiple role plays allow everyone to experience the role play in a short amount of time, but may reduce the quality of feedback. The trainer will not be able to observe all groups at once, and trainees are usually reluctant to provide constructive feedback to their peers. In addition, trainees may not have the experience or expertise to provide effective feedback. To overcome this problem, video tapes of the role plays can be used by the trainee and/or trainer for evaluation.

The role-rotation method begins as either a single or multiple role play. However, when the trainees have interacted for a period of time, the role play is stopped. Observers then discuss what has happened so far and what can be learned from it. After the discussion, the role play resumes with different trainees picking up the roles from some, or all, of the characters. Role rotation demonstrates the variety of ways the issues in the role play may be handled. Trainees who are observers are more active than in the single role play since they have already participated or know they soon will be participating. A drawback is that the progress of the role play is frequently interrupted, creating additional artificiality. Again, trainees may be inhibited from publicly critiquing the behavior of their fellow trainees.

The focus of this paper is on application of role-play to teaching commerce education which begins by examining the concept of role-playing and the various approaches to this learning method. A brief review of the use of role-play in other disciplines follows. The second part of the article outlines the development and implementation of a role-play in a commerce subject within a commerce degree programme. Finally, the results of an evaluation of the educational objectives of the role-play have been presented.

### **Related terminology - simulation, gaming and role-play**

Literature concerning activity based learning circumvents upon the terms simulation, gaming and role-play and presents confusing pigments. Van Ments (1989) considers role-playing as part of a wider set of techniques collectively known as 'simulation and gaming'. He states

that simulation is ‘a simplified reproduction of part of a real or imaginary world’ where participants maintain their own role and personality and the focus is on the simulated environment. Gaming is ‘a structured system of competitive play that incorporates the material to be learnt’ (van Ments, 1989), whereas role-play is ‘a make-believe representation of some real-life event, carried out in order to help participants [who play a role] get better at managing the event itself’ (McGuire and Priestley, 1981). The word ‘play’ demonstrates its close relationship to playing a game. The frivolity of play is not necessarily an intended outcome but the atmosphere of role-play does permit suspension of belief and exercise of imagination. This allows participants to experiment with new behaviors and skills in a risk-free environment (Errington, 1997). Furthermore, role-play does not usually focus on winning; the emphasis is frequently on ‘how you play the game’ and reflection on the ‘game’. In role-play participants assume a specific role, enter a simulated scenario and behave as they expect they should in the circumstances. Role-plays can be remarkably heterogeneous; they may be very simple (such as role-playing a telephone call) or complex (designing and running a facility). The reality of the scenario and its linkage to personal experience is also flexible – from a shipwreck to a classic job interview, for instance (McGuire and Priestley, 1981).

Errington (1997) outlines a range of reasons for adopting role-play in higher education in relation to learning outcomes. One of the most straightforward applications of role-play is the demonstration of acquired knowledge, skills or abilities from a course of study. Role-play may also be used to encourage the practical application and integration of knowledge to a professional context without venturing into the work environment.

Although students are regularly asked to argue a position in an essay, role-play provides a dynamic environment for comparing and contrasting different social and political positions or perspectives on an issue. The different perspectives may lead to greater empathetic understanding (Errington, 1997). The experience is particularly enlightening if students are required to assume roles that are in opposition to their natural leanings (for example, an environmental science student with a strong environmental ethic playing the role of a resort developer).

Role-play is a participatory and experiential learning method that emphasizes ‘learning by doing’. A student may learn the theory of interviewing employees, for instance, but role-playing the interview is a valuable practical application of that theory. Finally, the academic environment rarely provides the opportunity for expression of attitudes and feelings without logical justification. Protected by the symbolic umbrella of a role, students can express

themselves in a non-threatening environment and learn about themselves. A student might relish, for example, the opportunity to express the feelings of a person in a developing country towards rich tourists.

### Role-play approaches

Errington (1997) identifies four types of role-play and these are briefly outlined in Table 1. A role-play exercise may combine elements of some or all of the four approaches.

Approach	Typical features
Skills-based approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant acquires and rehearses a skill or ability and demonstrates it to others</li> <li>• Useful for specific tasks with clear performance criteria</li> <li>• Lends itself to practical skills which are difficult to express theoretically</li> </ul>
Issues-based approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant investigates the attitudes, beliefs and values surrounding an issue and then, according to their role, takes a position on the issue in a scenario</li> <li>• Useful for situations which offer comparative perspectives</li> </ul>
Problem-based approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants use their own knowledge to deal with a series of challenges presented by the facilitator</li> <li>• Useful for developing teamwork and decision-making skills</li> </ul>
Speculative-based approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants speculate on past, present or future events using real and simulated evidence</li> <li>• Useful for developing an argument and justifying conclusions</li> </ul>

Table 1

### Strengths and challenges of role-play as a learning method

Role-play can be particularly effective in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and everyday life (Maddrell, 1994). Another key strength lies in the ability of role-play to encourage ‘students [to] take an active part in their own construction of knowledge’ (Duveen and Solomon, 1994); it does not allow them to remain passive recipients of authoritative knowledge (Mitchell, 1998).

Students are virtually *obliged* to participate in role-play and, as Richardson and Kleiner (1992) argue, participation in their own learning can lead to enhanced interest in the topic

and retention of knowledge and skills. Brown (1994) argues that role-play is typically a highly interactive activity that captures students' imaginations, stimulates involvement and allows significant freedom of expression. The acquisition of the role, like donning a liberating mask, helps some students lose their self-consciousness (Maddrell, 1994; Ladousse, 1987) and allows them to experiment with self identity and role fixity in social life (Mitchell, 1998).

Role-play is noted for building the confidence of students in a non-threatening environment in which belief is suspended; especially when the fact that the participant is simply playing a role is constantly acknowledged. When encountering a similar situation outside the learning environment, Richardson and Kleiner (1992) propose that the student will be more confident to handle it as it has already been 'practised'. Another strength of role-play is the acknowledgment that alternate solutions are possible; the outcome of a role-play is generally not known so it more closely resembles the uncertainty of the 'real world'.

Role-play is not a straightforward learning method. It is considered a slightly exotic activity and is often unfamiliar to students and teaching staff (McGuire and Priestley, 1981). Students often confuse role-playing with amateur theatrics and game playing; unfamiliarity can result in fear and anxiety and students may withdraw completely (Jones, 1988; Mitchell, 1998).

In comparison with traditional forms of instruction, role-play is very time consuming to design, implement and evaluate (Richardson and Kleiner, 1992; Alden, 1999). Maddrell (1994) argues that lack of time and resources discourages many teachers, and that perceived lack of control over the activity is also an issue. Many teachers find conducting role-plays quite intimidating as the outcomes are unpredictable (Richardson and Kleiner, 1992; Brown, 1994; McGuire and Priestly, 1981; Mitchell, 1998). Role-play also 'demands dramatic and extrovert mode[s] of teaching' (McGuire and Priestley, 1981), but is not commonly covered in the teacher training curriculum (Saunders, 1994). Maddrell (1994) argues that this lack of training may have resulted in the infrequent adoption of role-play.

### **Role-play in commerce education**

Discussions with other commerce educators indicate that role-play is used reasonably frequently. Details of its use and application, however, are seldom reported in the literature. In commerce education, role-plays are used to teach skills associated with commerce activities and management. Foucar Szocki (1989) describes a role-play conducted in a simulated class room in which students assumed a trader role. Harris (1997) adopted a novel approach in accounting and finance, where students prepared a seminar that incorporated a role-play in order to engage the other students. Research that examines the efficacy of role-

play as a learning method is emerging. Daruwalla (1996; 1997) examined a disability awareness intervention programme for tertiary education students who were employed in industry. She tested the efficacy of multiple learning methods for changing attitudes towards people with a disability by using a lecture, video, role-play and contact with a person with a disability.

Literature shows the evidence of development of following skills amongst the participants after the role play sessions:

Identified skills	Relationship to the role-play
Capacity for independent and critical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• research and analysis of the issue</li> <li>• preparation of position on the issue</li> </ul>
Oral business communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• requesting information from relevant agencies</li> <li>• meeting skills (listening, speaking, argument, persuasion, responding to cues and questions)</li> <li>• negotiation (compromise, cooperation, bargaining)</li> </ul>
Capacity to handle pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unfamiliar role-playing format</li> <li>• assessment deadlines</li> <li>• performance in meeting setting</li> </ul>
Interpersonal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• working in pairs</li> <li>• requesting information from agencies</li> <li>• interaction in meeting</li> </ul>
Time management skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assessment deadlines</li> </ul>
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• working in pairs</li> <li>• interaction in meeting</li> </ul>
Comprehension of business practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• preparation for and attendance at meeting</li> </ul>
Written business communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• preparation of position paper</li> </ul>

Table 2: Skills sought in new graduates and their relationship to the role-play

Objectives of this research effort were to bring to fore (i) the student's (of commerce education programme) perception of their skill development when exposed to role playing sessions, (ii) the student's perception of their own learning, and (iii) potential improvements to the role-play from the teacher's and students' perspectives.

### Methodology

The efficacy of role-play technique was evaluated using observation and reflection, debriefing, and a questionnaire administered over the students of commerce education programme who had already been exposed to many role playing session during the entire curriculum. The students' responses to the role-play sessions were recorded and were asked to pin-point their personal reflections, if any, vis-à-vis traditional methods they were subjected to. During the debriefing a one-word response was elicited from every student to



the question “Tell me how you now feel about role-playing or the role-play?”. This was followed by a discussion of the responses. The questionnaire contained ten statements with a five-point Likert response scale ranging from ‘all of the time’ to ‘none of the time’. Completion of the survey was optional and anonymous and the response rate was 96 per cent. The results of the methods were analyzed using EXCEL.

## **Results**

### **Students’ reactions**

The immediate reactions of some students to the use of role-playing were strong and negative. Students found it “difficult, stressful, frustrating (due to lack of time), tedious, loathsome, anxiety causing, pressured, unpredictable and confusing”! Other students were positive and described it as “fascinating, interesting, fun, realistic and effective”. Some were ambivalent and reported feeling “weird and strange”. The immediacy of the impact of the role-play was obvious in the students’ verbal and physical responses. Subsequent evaluations during the interviews show their response changed as they reflected on their learning and achieved emotional distance.

### **The achievement of educational objectives**

The students’ perceptions of their learning are listed in Table 3 with each response linked to the original educational objectives. The role-play clearly achieved some of the original objectives in terms of both higher education and vocational skills, and these results were also supported by the questionnaire that focused on skill and knowledge development (Table 4). From the students’ perspective, the role-play promoted higher education and vocational skills development. Analytical, communication, conflict management, research and teamwork skills were developed by the various components of the role-play for the majority of students. However, it was not particularly effective for knowledge acquisition. From student consultation, the students were open to being exposed to novel subject areas but were not confident in acquiring a deeper understanding. The high rating on exposure to other ideas and subjects is encouraging given the multi-disciplinary nature of Trade and business.

### **Teacher’s observations and reflections**

Initially, the students were anxious about the unfamiliar learning environment and required support through consultations and in-class exercises. This situation was complicated by the two assessments linked to the role-play. Assessing the written position paper was straightforward but assessment of the students’ performance in the meeting was more complex. Despite careful facilitation, the students had differing opportunities to demonstrate

their role-playing skills and the full suite of meeting skills (negotiation, compromise, etc.) was not fully developed by all. Furthermore, some of the roles were more complex and taxing. Finally, the duration of the actual role-play was too short. The students did not have the opportunity to immerse themselves fully in the learning environment and were frustrated in their attempts to articulate their views in the time available.

### **Improvements to the role-play**

Three issues were identified: understanding role-playing, identifying the other roles and the duration of the role-play. The students had had no exposure to role-play in their secondary or tertiary education except for simple customer service-style role-plays. They felt a more step-wise introduction to role-playing was required. Secondly, the students did not receive a complete role list and were asked not to liaise with other roles before the first meeting. This approach was used to see if the students could predict the other roles and most felt disadvantaged by this. Finally, almost all students felt the duration of the role-play was too short. Once they had begun role-playing they found it generally enjoyable and wanted more time to test and demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

#### **The effectiveness of role-play**

The objectives for the role-play were to apply theoretical course material and develop higher education and vocational skills. The role-play was effective in developing higher education skills such as researching, analysis and communication for the majority of students. Although these skills were already reasonably advanced for most students, the role-play provided a novel environment for their further development and application. The role-play was particularly successful in encouraging vocational skill development and, specifically, comprehension of business practice, oral business communication skills, interpersonal skills and teamwork. Oral business communication skills were identified by ACNielsen (2000) as the single most important basic skill required by employers. It introduced students to the Trader's meeting format - a recognized organizational activity with which they will invariably be involved in the future (Mosvick and Nelson, 1996).

Response	Higher education skill/s	Vocational skill/s
Gave us a chance to consider a different point of view on a development proposal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>insight into other perspectives</li> </ul>	
Helped to understand issues that need to be considered in development projects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>analysis of issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>capacity for independent and critical thinking</li> </ul>
Research prior to meeting was very helpful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>analysis of issues</li> <li>research skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comprehension of business practice (meeting preparation)</li> </ul>
Research we had to do after the first meeting was helpful to our learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>analysis of issues</li> <li>research skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comprehension of business practice (post-meeting reflection and preparation)</li> </ul>
Insight into how meetings are run.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comprehension of business practice</li> </ul>
Relevant skills for meetings.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comprehension of business practice</li> <li>oral business communication skills</li> </ul>
Gave us the opportunity to discover strengths and weaknesses in conflict management.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>interpersonal skills</li> </ul>
It allowed everybody to participate effectively and evenly.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teamwork</li> <li>interpersonal skills</li> </ul>
Gave us an opportunity to learn about co-operation – finding a medium across the group.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teamwork</li> <li>interpersonal skills</li> </ul>
Structure of meeting gave everybody the chance to practice their communication skills.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>oral business communication skills</li> </ul>
Working in groups increased your motivation (you did not want to let the group down).		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teamwork</li> </ul>
We learned from others during the role-play.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>teamwork</li> </ul>

Table 3: Responses to the question ‘What in the role-play helped your learning?’

	Response (%)		
	All or most of the time	Half of the time	Little or none of the time
<b>Knowledge</b>			
The role-play was an effective way of gaining exposure to other ideas and different subjects.	70	19	11
The role-play was an effective way of gaining knowledge on this topic.	56	15	30
<b>Skills</b>			
I have (further) developed my analytical skills as a result of the role-play.	69	23	8
I have (further) developed my communication skills as a result of the role-play.	67	22	11
I have (further) developed my ability to work in a team/group as a result of the role-play.	67	19	15
I have (further) developed my conflict management skills as a result of the role-play.	62	27	12
I have (further) developed my research skills as a result of the role-play.	59	22	19

Table 4: Responses to questionnaire statements on skill and knowledge development in the role-play

Students highly rated the role-play activities and resources and believed them to be relevant to what they were doing and a motivational learning framework. Feedback obtained from surveys and focus group sessions showed strong and positive engagement in using the role-

play strategy and there was an improvement in their perception of their skill levels. Students perceived role-playing as one of the most important techniques for learning communication skills, after discussion. Role-playing scores the highest for the most enjoyable learning environment and since learning is improved if a student is motivated and engaged this is important to their learning outcomes. Students realized that there was a growing emphasis in higher education institutions on students developing professional skills that can be directly applied in industry. Important areas reported included such as the development of teamwork skills, problem solving skills, decision-making skills, communication skills and information literacy skills.

Overall the students enjoyed the role playing sessions. When asked about how they felt about role-play and if they found it uncomfortable one student commented:

*“Well obviously, but that’s really beside the point as I found it really good to learn because you always think you know about that stuff but until you actually try it out... and it’s good to role-play because even if you make a mess, you know, it’s OK, but if you are actually with a client and you got deadlines then you start figuring out that you should be doing this and it might be a bit too late”.*

The business environment of the role-play was reflected in the students’ comments in the debriefing. One student stated:

*“I find it is probably the most realistic insight into the real world that I’ve experienced at university... and I have been here for many years ... which is good because we are meant to be being trained to go out into the real world and perform quite a high standard of work in whatever field we choose and yet everything we do is so theoretically based and I can imagine going out and not having a clue really.”*

A mature age student also noted that:

*“...having been out in the big bad world and being involved in numerous meetings ... it is a skill that you pick up after a long period of time because not only do you have your own point of view but you have to listen to what everyone else is saying as well, mull that over and work up a new proposition.”*

Another student commented on one particular module (interdependence):

*“I actually thought that one was really, really good and really enjoyed that one. That taught me a lot about myself and how I conduct myself and in groups, so I thought that was really, really good.*

### **Improvements to the role-play**

The evaluation clearly indicated the need for adjustments and these are described here because they have broad application to role-play as a learning method. First, students have different levels of experience with role-play and those levels need to be ascertained before commencing a more complex role-play. If students are inexperienced, a series of mini-role-plays and related exercises are recommended. In this case, the modularization of the role-play into distinct tasks – researching your role, learning about meetings, preparing for a stakeholders meeting – would have been justified. More broadly, role-play could be adopted at early stages in a tertiary programme to prepare for complex, multi-layered and multi-subject role-plays in senior years.

There is always a balancing act between providing the students with too much and too little material for a role-play. Too much material may swamp the students and constrain the natural flow. Too little material may result in anxiety and uncertainty. In retrospect, basic material on the other roles was warranted and may have led to more thoughtful preparation and ‘politicking’ of other stakeholders before the first meeting.

Another difficult decision for the role-play designer is duration and this is likely to be resolved through trial and error. Ideally, a role-play should be left to run its natural course. In this case, the duration was governed by the wish to reproduce a realistic business environment. If students are to be assessed on their performance, however, it is important that they have adequate opportunity to demonstrate their skills. In this role-play, two hours of role-playing per student would have been more satisfying and would have permitted more accurate assessment of ability.

In this role-play, the students were simply participants in the meeting. To add realism, it may have been profitable to assign the students to other meeting duties (e.g., choosing and setting up the venue, composing an agenda, recording minutes). Furthermore, learning about meeting skills, setting readings on meetings and meeting skills (e.g., Hayes, 1998; Haynes, 1988; Mosvick and Nelson, 1996; The Open University, 1992; Timm and Stead, 1996; Walsh, 1995) and a practice meeting may have been beneficial. Similarly, examining the behaviors and tactics that participants may adopt in a meeting (e.g., tension reliever, clarifier, energizer, devil’s advocate, know-all, pessimist, obstrucater) would have been an interesting reflective exercise (Hayes, 1998; The Open University, 1992; Walsh, 1995). Students could have compared their predicted and actual behavioural styles in the meeting – an exercise that can offer useful insights and self-knowledge.

Role-play is a powerful tool for higher education learning and teaching. As Duveen and

Solomon (1994) argue 'true learning cannot take place when students are merely passive observers of the teaching processes. Role-play is infinitely flexible in terms of length, complexity, purpose, scale and scope and therein lies its power as a learning method. Further publications and presentations on the design, operation and evaluation of role-play in the business management field would encourage their future application.

### **Problems with Role Playing**

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's knowing how to prepare a patient for an operation.

Many people who have had unpleasant experiences with role playing in fact suffered because the teacher hadn't warmed up the class or those assigned parts to their various roles. Simply assigning roles, saying to one person, "You're the principal of a school," and to another, "Okay, and you're a kid who was sent to the principal's office--go!" isn't enough information and those thrown into this situation in that fashion will feel as if they'd been tossed into a pond and told to learn to swim. The teacher as dramatic producer needs to talk to each of the players, interview them "in role," drawing them out regarding their thoughts about associated aspects of their role, gently involving them imaginatively in the situation.

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. So, for example, if a girl was having trouble in playing Ratan Tata to another child's "Indra Nooi," giving in too easy to the latter's entreaties instead of making him really sell his project, it would be inappropriate to shift into an exploration of why that girl had problems with self-assertion.

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 (much less mastery). It's like the way adolescents will say, "oh, yeah, I've got it now" when they have only acquired the most superficial knowledge, whether it be in driving a car or doing some household task. 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.

Role-playing thus provided an authentic setting where students could apply their new knowledge, "Most of us have been in that group situation before, and so we could sort of relate to that." They found that the information was more readily retained than by other more traditional teaching approaches. For the same reason, as they were able to contextualize the problem as it reflected the situation and provided understanding.

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