Role Playing: Structures and Educational Objectives

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Comment of the Editor of the Journal of Child and Youth Care in which this article first appeared: Role playing is one of the most mis-used and under-used techniques available to the child and youth care worker. This is because it is also one of the least understood of techniques. While we have all seen it, and even experienced it, in our training, we have seldom had the opportunity to really dissect it: to tear it apart and analyze it so that we come to know its value, power and usefulness. As a result we end up using role play when we’re stuck, bored or desperate rather than using it because it is appropriate for this client, in this state, at this time.

In this piece, written for trainers, Henry helps us to understand some of the "how," "why," and "when" of role play in a manner that is simple and clear. In doing so, he models for us one of his favorite 'insistences': that help for
the child and youth care worker should be about "how to do," not about "how to be."

As you read this article think about the times that you have, or could have, used role play in your work as a supervisor, or with children and families. We find this article to be useful and practical; probably the most complimentary thing that could be said about anything we do in this field. After you finish reading, your use of role play will probably change.

Role Playing Today

Role playing seems to be an educational tool favored by students and instructors alike. Students or trainees welcome role playing because this activity brings variations, movement, and most likely, simulated life experience into the classroom or training session. Teachers, trainers or supervisors 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 (Land, 1987). 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.

Currently, role playing is used for its promise to engage learner and instructor alike in a specific learning experience. It can be employed for its rich transfer of learning potential to each participant’s own learning repertoire (Crawley & Gerrand, 1981). Now, with role playing as an educational device of choice rather than a politicized tool, it can be adopted
and effectively applied so long as the instructing persons are clear about the learning objectives (Maier, 1981, 1985). They need to assess the educational appropriateness of each role playing assignment or simulated exercise.

**Role playing as an effective training tool**

The issue, as the writer sees it, is not to engage students, trainees, or supervisees in role playing *per se*, but rather to assess what form of learning needs to be achieved, that is, role playing for what objectives. **Is it primarily for the participants’ skill acquisition (behavioral competence development)? Is it 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-focussed learning experience, be it primarily the behavioral, cognitive or affective domain, will naturally also deal with, and potentially have an impact on, the other two dimensions of learning; they are intimately related. 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.

(Acknowledgment, conceptualization and research of these developmental processes are specifically presented in various publications. See Ivey, 1986; Kegan, 1982; Maier, 1976,1988; and Schuster & Ashburn, 1986.) If we incorporate the above perspective, the person responsible for the learning content and structure of instruction has to decide at any particular juncture of learning whether the focus is essentially on having an impact on a person’s emotional (affective) status, on enhancing each individual’s skills or on expanding the person’s knowledge base (information and cognition). Role playing structures would then be selected and devised accordingly.

**Role playing 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. Moreover, an instructor has to sort out for himself or herself which skills must be learned first.

Once the skills or techniques to be practiced are firm in the instructor’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. Learners are also challenged to arrange the simulated practice situation within the available space, furniture and other props at hand. (The instructor may provide them with props such as a bell, a visible clock, or whatever is in order to enliven the forthcoming role playing 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. It is in the role play where worker and client(s) face each other that the workers’ critical learning will take place.

Because practice skills are to be learned and not merely illustrated, the instructor or supervisor has the task of modeling such differentiated skills not merely by description
but also by acting out the differentiated behaviors. The trainee is then asked to practice
the skills within the forthcoming role playing exercise. Important, too, is that the role
playing situation be brief with the focus upon the worker practicing new skills or
techniques. The learning requires hands-on quick practice rather than the extension of any
scenario. The learner is immediately briefed after each try and typically is requested to
practice once again. The practice may include suggestions for changes in his or her care
work behavior or an important repeat of the handling demonstrated by previous students.
Effective practice behaviors are mastered by doing them, and the learning is affirmed with
the valid experience of having done so. The experience of one’s own efficacy solidifies
learning (Bandura, 1977).

In brief, when training in interventive behavior is the focus, the trying out, practice, and
refinement of such competence are in order with as little discussion as possible about the
many other situational issues that arise. 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.

**Role play for the enhancement of knowledge**

When the learners are challenged to enhance their knowledge through the intake of
information and the expansion of their comprehension, role playing exercises can serve as
a powerful device.

Role playing and simulated practice have to be structured; however, quite differently from
the previous skill learning (Maier, 1976). The simulated situation should assist the learner
to understand, to assimilate, and to accommodate cognitively (Maier, 1988; Piaget, 1978).
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 (Maier, 1976). For instance, when caretakers try to comprehend the pivotal place they assume in their clients’ lives, they need to witness the totality of the children’s requirements in relation to their caring adults, and in particular to the subtle and minute worker-child interactions. Role playing for such a purpose, then, requires that the learners be observers, outside but at the margin of the role-playing situation as if in the front row of a gripping theatre scene.

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 (Maier, 1985). 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.

**Role playing 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 is intended to provide the critical experience. The instructor, trainer or supervisor 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 (Ivey. 1986; Kegan, 1982; Maier, 1976, 1978).

Before the latter role playing exercise can be terminated, role players as well as onlooking 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 experiences 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.

Summary

The preceding material might lead to the erroneous conclusion that this article is prescriptive and advocates a cautious stance for role playing exercises. On the contrary, the intent is to challenge and to liberate. Instructors or trainers, supervisors or practitioners are merely asked to clarify for themselves three role playing models appropriate to specific learning objectives. Structuring of the learning situation will be built on these particular goals.

Playing out roles can then be a vital educational tool to introduce new or enhance existing skills in the learner’s practice repertoire; to focus upon an alternate or more profound comprehension of practice situations or life events; to create pertinent personal affect experience, thereby sensitizing learners’ and others’ affect processes and feeling states as
well as the learners’ capabilities for identification.

A well-planned and focussed utilization of role playing fosters targeted learning while maintaining the inherent hands-on features of this powerful teaching tool.

References

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