

**Theoretical Meets Practical – How to Use Student-authored Role Plays to Teach**

**Managerial Skills and Critical Thinking**

**Abstract**

In this session, we will share an in-class activity that combines student engagement, experiential learning, and reflective practice through student-authored role plays. Research has shown that one of the most effective ways to engage students and facilitate experiential learning is through role plays. Reflective practice has also been associated with many positive learning outcomes, such as critical thinking and the development of managerial skills. As such, based on our experience, we will offer best practices for how to help students write role plays, promote student participation, and ensure a fruitful class discussion. All relevant materials will be provided.

**Keywords**

Student Writing, Reflective Practice, Role Plays, In-class Activity, Experiential Learning, Student Engagement, Student Participation

## Introduction

Over the last few years, we've developed a writing assignment that also serves as a highly engaging in-class activity. Students are responsible for writing a brief role play featuring a manager and an employee. These role plays represent an opportunity for students to put theory into practice. As students learn various managerial theories and skills, the role plays enable them to apply what they've recently learned to a real-life workplace situation. We have found that when students author the role plays, it tends to fuel high levels of engagement and motivation in the classroom.

Role plays are basically incomplete stories (Abma, 2003; Schor, Sims, & Dennehy, 1996) and stories tend to promote student interest, engagement, and interaction (Laditka & Houck, 2006; Levesque, 2018; Steslow & Gardner, 2011). Research further demonstrates that students often enjoy the opportunity to learn from other's experiences and are curious as to how others behaved and why (Levesque, 2018). Thus, upon completion of the role play, students are usually eager to engage in a class-wide discussion in which they share their reactions, interpretations, and strategies, and thereby learn from each other.

In our experience, this activity works well with a more practically-oriented book, such as Harvard Business Review's (HBR) *Manager's Handbook: The 17 Skills Leaders Need to Stand Out* (2017). Accordingly, we have used this activity in a Human Resource/Management elective, although it could be used in any human resource management, management, or leadership course. It is designed for a traditional, face-to-face classroom for graduate and upper-level undergraduate students.

## **Theoretical Foundation & Teaching Implications**

A role play requires students to take on the role of a specific character, such as a manager or an employee. It typically provides information that is shared between characters as well as information that is specific to each character, such as their motives and concerns (See Appendix A). With this asymmetrical information, each student can step into a given role and engage in a meaningful discussion with another student in an attempt to resolve a perceived conflict. Based on their interaction, students must develop solutions and make decisions (e.g., engage in critical thinking), which often results in a variety of unique outcomes. Consequently, students create their own ending to the workplace situation authored by their classmates.

Research has shown that using role plays in class can be an effective teaching tool for several reasons. First, role plays facilitate experiential learning and help students to empathize with other people's perspectives (Schaefer & Crosswhite, 2018). Second, students often appreciate the opportunity to practice and prepare for real-life workplace situations (Levesque, 2018). Third, and perhaps most importantly, role plays promote critical thinking skills, which are an important objective of management and higher education (Athanassiou, McNett, & Harvey, 2003; Burke & Rau, 2010; Ennis, 1996; Lovelace, Eggers, & Dyck, 2016). Critical thinking skills often involve reflective practice, which entails an increased awareness of how to act/respond in various situations (Ennis, 1996; Kolbel & Jentges, 2017; Laditka & Houck, 2006; Levesque, 2018). We have found that when students write their own role plays based on past experiences, it encourages them to analyze previous situations, and thus engage in reflective practice, which has been associated with enhanced student learning, engagement (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Raelin & Coghlan, 2006; Reilly, 2018; Smart & Csapo, 2007), and the development of

managerial skills (Dehler & Edmonds, 2006; Hedberg, 2009; Quijada, McGrath, & Wheaton, 2016; Segon, Booth, O'Shannassy, & Thompson, 2010; Whetten & Cameron, 2011).

Besides engaging in reflective practice, this writing exercise can sharpen student thinking (Weimer, 2011). Composing a role play requires creativity since students have to design a situation in which a manager could use a particular skill, such as emotional intelligence. As such, student-authors must consider the arrangement of the role play, decide which details to include or exclude, and anticipate the possible reactions of their classmates (i.e., the manager and employee). In addition, participation in the role plays provides another opportunity for students to be creative and engage in critical thinking, including reflective practice. Specifically, students must consider the situation holistically and reflect on how to proceed while incorporating the relevant chapter/skill (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Lindell & Kidd, 2011; Quijada, McGrath, & Wheaton, 2016; Reilly, 2018).

In summary, students learn during a role play by reflecting upon and integrating their own experiences, beliefs, and preferences into their strategies and then comparing those with their classmates. Research has shown that when students are given the chance to reflect on their personal experiences, it can lead to a more enjoyable learning environment (McNeeely, 2000). Student-authored role plays provide an opportunity for such reflection. Furthermore, using different role plays throughout the semester keeps the activity from becoming stale since each role, situation, partner, and chapter/skill is different (Levesque, 2018).

### **Learning Objectives**

Based on the theoretical foundations, upon completion of writing and participating in a student-authored role play, students will be able to:

- Compose a role play that provides managers with an opportunity to apply a particular managerial skill;
- Evaluate a situation involving a manager and employee and identify strategies to apply a managerial skill in this “real-life” situation;
- Compare/differentiate their strategies with those of their classmates (i.e., other managers) and provide support for their decision.

### **Activity Overview**

#### *Logistics*

Each role play is intended to take about 15-20 minutes, with 5-10 minutes for role playing and 10 minutes for discussion. However, since all students need a chance to be both manager and employee, each chapter requires a minimum of two role plays. Therefore, the activity usually takes at least 40-45 minutes to complete per week. The only materials necessary are paper copies of each role play (or students may use their laptops). This activity is appropriate for any class size, although we have used it in classes with 15-30 students.

#### *Flow*

Students are often initially nervous about the prospect of creative writing in a business class and having to share their experiences (and writing) with classmates. Since this is a semester-long assignment/activity, we recommend spending adequate class time (usually the first 1.5-2 weeks) addressing student concerns by introducing them to the course, assigning role play

chapters and the associated skills to be developed, and providing detailed information on how to write a successful role play (See Appendix B).

As an overview, we recommend using two role plays per chapter/week (or more depending on class size). For each chapter, students are responsible for creating a brief role play between a manager and an employee, with each role containing some shared information (e.g., name of the company, what it does/makes, it's basic structure, names of relevant coworkers/employees, etc.) and some role-specific information (e.g., the character's background, motivation/goals, and perceived conflict). To help with this process, at the end of every class, the instructor devotes time to proofreading a student's role play and helping brainstorm their plot/storyline so that there's enough complexity to induce different outcomes depending on how students respond to the scenario. After incorporating the instructor's feedback, students submit their role play onto the Canvas-Discussion page (or another learning management system) 24-hours before class so that there is enough time for the instructor to assign roles and for the students to read their roles.

In class, first ensure equal numbers between managers and employees before distributing hard copies for each role. (If numbers are uneven, the student-author fulfills a missing role). Students then partner with another classmate (so that every manager has an employee) and proceed to enact the role play. Students are given ten minutes to conduct the meeting and resolve the conflict, thereby giving each manager a chance to apply the managerial skill they learned the previous class. After the role play session, the student-author facilitates a brief discussion (See *Debriefing Guidelines*), and students move on to the second role play of the day so that everyone who was an employee now has a chance to be a manager, and vice versa.

The chapter skills from HBR (2017) that we find most engaging, relevant, and useful are:

- Emotional Intelligence
- Positioning Yourself for Success
- Becoming a Person of Influence
- Communicating Effectively
- Personal Productivity
- Self-Development
- Delegating with Confidence
- Giving Effective Feedback
- Leading Teams
- Developing Talent
- Fostering Creativity
- Hiring - and Keeping - the Best

Of note, most chapter skills are aligned with developing the talent of one's employees. However, some chapters involve skills that could potentially relate to helping one's own career path as manager (e.g., self-development). For these chapters, students are encouraged to write a role play in which the manager has an opportunity to meet with his/her boss (e.g., Senior Manager or VP) to discuss why s/he is deserving of a promotion.

### *Debriefing Guidelines*

As previously stated, upon completion of the role play, the student-author is responsible for facilitating a class-wide discussion (See Appendix B). In general, we encourage students to

find out what strategies each manager and employee used (and why), field questions from the class, describe the ending (i.e., explain what really happened and/or perhaps what they wished had happened), and ensure classmates understand how their role play connects to that week's chapter/skill. To aid them in the debrief, instructors should read the role play before class and generate a brief list of questions to ask each group of role players that emphasize the issues that the entire class should consider. This approach gives the student-author a chance to facilitate the discussion to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn from each other (e.g., appreciate each other's perspective and proposed solutions for resolving the conflict) and understand how a manager could apply that particular chapter skill before the instructor helps to guide the class dialogue.

## **Session Description**

### *Overview*

After welcoming everyone and introducing ourselves, we will explain our role play activity by first providing an overview of what it entails, the type of classroom for which it is appropriate, and the relevant learning objectives that it achieves. We will then provide the details of how best to incorporate student-authored role plays into the classroom. Afterwards, we will give the attendees a chance to participate. Specifically, we will split the session into two groups, so that there are equal number of managers and employees. (If necessary, one of the co-authors can also participate to balance out the numbers). We will then hand out a sample role play, give the participants time to read it, and then instruct them to partner up and engage in the role play. Finally, we will facilitate a class-wide discussion to hear from the managers and employees about how they resolved their issues or came to a solution. We will conclude by answering all



participant questions and provide additional details to ensure participants understand the activity and how to incorporate it into their classes.

*Timeline*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Duration for 90-minute program</b>
Welcome & introductions	10
Provide overview of activity (theoretical foundation and learning objectives)	10
Step-by-step explanation for how to incorporate activity into the classroom	30
Interactive, demonstration of activity (divide class into managers and employees, distribute handouts, facilitate class-wide role play & discussion)	30
Facilitate Q&A and share tips and best practices to ensure the activity is a success	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>90</b>

## **Appendix A. Example of student-authored role play.**

### **Producer (Susan)**

Susan produces feature films for an up-and-coming and ambitious director. As the director's lead producer, she is responsible for keeping projects on track and staying within budget. She manages all logistical aspects of a film shoot and is the primary liaison for all contracted crew. Once a film is complete she works alongside the director to secure distribution. On occasion she also helps to identify sources of funding, but for the most part the director, who has a vast and deep network, handles these efforts.

Susan oversees a small team of production assistants. As with most jobs in the film industry, production assistants fluctuate depending on the project. There is one production assistant, however, that has been working for Susan for four years. Jamie recently graduated from college with a degree in film. She understands all of the technical aspects of a production and can just as easily jump behind the camera as she can set up lights, work the sound, or help in the edit room. Susan really likes Jamie – she is dependable, flexible, and has a refreshingly positive attitude – and thinks she has a bright future ahead. The crews that Susan assembles agree and often request that Jamie be assigned to their projects. Susan is a seasoned project manager and a skilled communicator. She is not overly technical though, which makes Jamie's role particularly valuable.

Lately though Jamie seemed distracted. She arrived late to a film shoot a few weeks ago - which was totally unlike her – and had recently mislabeled a sequence during an edit. Susan knew that Jamie just went through a painful breakup and called her into her office to ask if she was okay. Jamie said that she was and seemed appreciative for the check in.

At the company, once a film was complete the director liked to hold “sneak peeks” for investors and other VIPs. Susan was responsible for organizing these events. Jamie’s job was to ensure that they had the right film format for the venue. She also brought a back up DVD in case something went wrong with the projector, although they did not like to go that route because the screening quality from DVD was not nearly as good.

One night Susan organized a sneak peek of a film that the director was particularly proud of and thought would go over well with the distributors expected to attend. Getting distributors to attend these types of screenings was difficult to do, but the director pitched it hard and his efforts paid off. The room was full and the director was excited. During the introductions though it was discovered that the wrong film format had been prepared. To make matters worse, the backup DVD had been left in Jamie’s car which was parked a few blocks away. After a seemingly endless delay, the screening finally began but under suboptimal conditions. The distributors and investors in the audience were underwhelmed.

The director was furious. He was mercurial in temperament and Susan worried about what the fallout might be. While Jamie clearly messed up, Susan was in charge of the event. Susan had been working for the director for nearly a decade and was his trusted right hand. Surely he would cut her some slack? The next morning her cell phone rang before she got to the office. It was her boss. He wanted Susan to let Jamie go.

**Questions:**

1. How should Susan respond to her boss?
2. Does Susan bear any responsibility for the mishap?
3. Should Jamie be fired? Why or why not?

### **Production Assistant (Jamie)**

Jamie is a production assistant at a growing film company. She has worked there ever since she graduated from college four years ago. She majored in film and particularly likes camerawork.

When Jamie initially began working for the company she thought it would be for just one project, and then she would start looking for her next project somewhere else. She learned in college that that was how things typically happened in the industry, particularly when you are just starting out. But Jamie gets along well with the director's lead producer, Susan, who is also her boss. Jamie is eager to impress and excels in her assignments. One day she could be out in the field assisting a camera crew on a shoot, the next day she could be in the edit room preparing dailies for an editor. She had become a familiar face in the local filmmaking community and was building a solid reputation. She was Susan's go-to technical person and took her responsibilities seriously. Jamie had a lot of respect for Susan and was often in awe of the way she could handle so many tricky personalities. Film was famous for this. Susan also seemed to work effortlessly with the director, who was brilliant but very unpredictable.

With its long days and often-longer nights, working in film can put a strain on personal relationships and Jamie's was no different. Her boyfriend of five years recently left her and was already dating someone new. She sometimes saw them together at the coffee shop down the street from her office. While the break up did not come as a total surprise, the way that he jumped into another relationship so quickly stung. She was heartbroken and grateful that her job helped keep her busy. She had been making some small mistakes lately though which was definitely out of character. Susan noticed and asked her if something was wrong, but she didn't want her boss to think that her personal life was interfering with work so she said nothing.

The evening of her now ex-boyfriend's birthday, Jamie was scheduled to work a VIP screening of the director's latest film. Jamie's job was to prepare the film to meet the venue's format requirements. She also made a backup DVD just in case. Jamie has worked many of these types of events and enjoys hearing the reactions from the audience. She was really looking forward to this screening because Susan mentioned that distributors would be in attendance. This was a real coup, and helped distract her from thinking about the birthday that her ex was likely celebrating with his new flame.

As the guests were filing into the theater Jamie met with the projectionist to hand off the tape. It was then that she realized that she had prepared the wrong format. Panicked, she looked in her bag for the backup DVD but it was not there. She realized that she left it in her car, which was parked a few blocks away. She ran as fast as she could to her car, retrieved the DVD, and sprinted back to the theater. By the time she returned it was almost 20 minutes later than the scheduled start time. To make matters worse, the screening quality of the DVD did not look as good as the digibeta tape that they should have been playing. The sound quality was worse, too. The director was not happy and Susan was stressed.

When she got to work the next day she headed straight to Susan's office. With tears in her eyes she begins by saying 'please don't fire me.'

**Questions:**

1. What is Jamie's argument for keeping her job?
2. How should Susan react?
3. Does Susan bear any responsibility for the mishap?

## **Appendix B. Explanation of assignments provided to students on Canvas.**

### **Role Play Participation**

#### **Action Items (for students):**

1. Between noon (12pm) the day before a role play and the start of class, download all weekly role plays and read **ONLY** your specific roles. **DO NOT read the entire role-play!** All role plays and assigned roles can be found on the Canvas-Discussions webpage. Come to class prepared to participate as your role for EACH role play.
2. During role plays, you will be randomly assigned into pairs (one Manager & one Employee). Print-outs of each role play will be provided. Engage in one-on-one role plays & follow-up discussion.

#### **Grading:**

- Everyone starts off with 100 points for their Role Play Participation grade.
- In total, there will be 12 role play classes (see syllabus for exact dates), which roughly equals 8 points per class.
- If you show up each time having read your roles, take the activity seriously, and participate with genuine enthusiasm (i.e., really pretend/imagine that you're the employee or manager in that situation), then you'll keep that 100 points.
- However, if you miss class or do not appear to be taking the role play seriously (i.e., you finish quickly or are on your phone), you will lose 8 points for that class.

## **Role Play Writing**

### **Assignment Overview and Submission Details:**

- Write the role play (see details below)
- Meet with professor at end of prior class to discuss/finalize your role play
- Post your role play to "Canvas - Discussions" by noon the day before class and follow the formatting created under the "Pinned Discussions":
  - Click the blue button in the top-right corner marked "+Discussion"
  - Title = "Chapter # Role play (Your Last Name)"
  - Attach Role play (.doc, .docx, .pdf)
  - Click "Save and Publish"
- I will then go into the Discussion and assign students to each role

### **During Role Plays:**

- As the author, walk around the class to help facilitate role-play interactions between classmates, answer questions, provide clarifications, etc.
- Debrief – Prepare 10-minute follow-up discussion and questions... This is when you will find out what strategies each Manager and Employee used (and why), field questions from your classmates, describe the ending (i.e., explain what happened and/or perhaps what you wished had happened differently), and ensure classmates understand how your role play connects to that week's chapter/skill.
- This part is just as important as your actual role play, so please take it seriously and come prepared to lead a class-wide discussion.

### **Ingredients of a Successful Role Play:**

I am looking for approximately TWO single-spaced pages in which you tell an incomplete story that has two sides/perspectives - one page for the manager and one page for the employee. Please include details on the following information (only if relevant):

- Individual backgrounds (Manager & Employee)
  - Experience, personality, etc.
- Their relationship
- Task/responsibilities
- Unresolved conflict and tension
  - Be creative here... is it due to: Miscommunication? Difference in attitudes? Perceived inequality? Motivation/goals? Etc...
  - Provide a clear setup for why this one-on-one meeting needs to take place
    - Create some complexity, layered issues... generate enough drama to warrant a 10-minute discussion between these two characters
- Uncertainty regarding what each character should do next
  - This is really important: Create 1-2 thought-provoking questions at the end for each role
    - These questions should frame the major/central issues... what must each character be asking themselves before this meeting takes place? (See "Sample Role Plays" for an example.) Provide just enough information to give your classmates a chance to think critically about what their options are AND the consequences, without making it too obvious as to what they should do next.



**Other Important Things to Consider as You Write:**

- Make it easy for your classmates to understand their role... that means that they'll need to know all the facts and personal info FROM THEIR CHARACTER'S UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE... including their character's background, what's important to them, how they feel about the conflict, and why this meeting needs to take place, etc. Make all that info transparent and easy to understand!
  - The fun occurs in-class when your classmates become the characters and interact (i.e., work together, each based on their own perspective with their own goals/agendas) to resolve the conflict together.
- Give the manager a chance to tap into/apply/address the skill from your chapter
- Remember that role plays can also be between a manager and his/her boss, such as a VP or Senior Manager
- Don't use headers. Instead, create a free-flowing narrative... tell a story!
- When writing both roles, there will likely be information and details that overlap. It's okay to use the same information for both roles (copy-and-paste), as long as each character's perspective remains distinct/unique.
- It may be easier to write both roles in the 3rd person (e.g., Jack and Jill)
  - Either way, make sure to name all the characters so that everyone knows their own names and each other's and can tell the difference between the two.
- Make sure to change all names, including the company!!! I want to avoid a lawsuit.

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