Role Play and Simulation

Returning to Teaching for Understanding

By Timothy C. Clapper

SIMULATION involves participating in a very real learning experience that closely resembles an actual setting. These actual settings may be replicated by either employing models or mannequins or in the case of role-play, the use of actors to bring the experience to life. However, while simulation is becoming more prevalent among other professions for increasing understanding and skill building, the general education community has not fully embraced this important learning strategy.

The advantages of using simulation are numerous and include the ability to help learners make meaning of complex tasks, while also developing critical thinking and cultural skills required for the 21st century workplace. Simulation accomplishes this by incorporating active learning, emotions, and reflection, key components to creating lasting understanding.

Meaningful Learning

In the medical community, simulation has allowed learners to move to new levels of understanding leading to improved competence in the application of critical skills. Rather than making mistakes on real patients, learners involved in simulation are able to practice and to view mistakes as an opportunity to learn. For example, a recent medical study involving simulation of catheter placement, showed that medical residents who received training and practice using simulation not only exhibited higher rates of confidence, but also

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performed the procedure faster and with fewer errors than those not receiving simulation training.

Although the medical world is embracing simulation as a strategy to develop lasting understanding, this strategy is not used enough in general education today. As more educators are being asked to prepare learners for the 21st century workplace as well as increase scores on standardized examinations, why not consider using simulation and role play?

Role Play

One major form of simulation that allows the learner to become immersed in learning involves the use of role play. Role play has the ability to develop and enhance content skills as well as skills needed for future success by incorporating realistic, or real-world, problems. Those involved in role play are also actively involved in the construction of their learning which has also been shown to enhance student's critical thinking skills, especially when used in conjunction with good facilitator questioning techniques. To be considered "actively involved" means that instead of being told to sit still and listen to the teacher in front of the room speak, learners are encouraged and even required to move and interact as part of the skit. This interaction may also allow for processing of the information at multiple levels. Brain-compatible learning expert Eric Jensen observes that learning has to be input, filtered, associated, processed, evaluated, and stored in order to be useful. Yet, far too many passive learning environments may never move beyond the input phase, perhaps because learners do not have enough opportunities to do anything constructive with the information.

When viewed from a multiple intelligences angle, the importance of role play is quite logical. Learners use and develop any number of intelligences dependent only on the resources available and the creative minds of both the facilitators and the learners. Additionally, movement allows both sides of the brain to be activated, which recent research demonstrates a strong relationship between motor and cognitive functioning.

In order to engage the entire brain in learning, there appears to be a need for movement. As an example, a recent competition pitted teams of medical interns and residents against one another in realistic, emergency patient care involving mannequins very identical to real patients. One particular team that performed extraordinarily well was under the leadership of a senior resident. After each episode of decision making, which included receiving feedback from his team of residents, the leader would rock back and forth, shifting his weight from side to side as he

internalized the information. This process was immediately followed by a set of instructions to be carried out by his team members. Although he could have stood still, he found movement to be the more comfortable way to internalize the information prior to making a critical decision.

The Power of Emotions and Communication

Simulation involving role play takes emotions a step further by incorporating the communication process that exists in real practice. In the medical world, it is incorporated by using actors to portray patients and family members. A common requirement involves a resident or medical school student assessing and offering treatment to the simulated patient. As well as requiring critical thinking skills, learners are challenged on emotional levels as actors portraying family members imply that such treatment suggested by the resident violate family or religious beliefs. While this uses a medical situation, one can think of how cultural awareness issues can also be addressed through role-play in nearly any subject.

In fact, emotions and communications exist in many role play scenarios. In 2009, Benjamin Dotger and Mara Sapon-Shevin described a parent-teacher communication program that used actors to play the role of parents to facilitate and provide feedback on the communication experiences among pre-service and new teachers. The authors noted that there is strong evidence that role play helped to identify gaps and improve teacher understanding related to communication between parents and teachers.

Many learners are able to reflect upon emotional experiences and identify with sources of information that caused the emotion to occur. These types of emotional experiences are important for storing the experience into memory, and role play is a way of introducing differing emotional motivations into learning. The goal of educators should be creating meaning and this can be accomplished by building relevance and emotions into the context. If role play is effective for generating emotion and creating greater understanding in physicians and teachers, perhaps educators can carry this message into their own classrooms as they reflect upon the value of this modality.

Role-Playing for Other Important Skills

Additionally, the social interaction that is a part of role play reinforces or challenges what the learner understands about the experience. Other related benefits for employing role-play include helping learners to develop a focus on culture and the diversity skills

development required for the 21st century workplace. Learners are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings while evaluating their own attitudes and skills as they consider the feelings and beliefs of others.

Facilitators employing role play can help students develop these skills while also assessing learning through their performance. This technique also provides an opportunity to focus learners toward the objectives should they get off track. Time allowing, the skit could be repeated, giving learners the opportunity to reflect on the experience and adjust their perceptions. In this way, what matters most is their last performance.

Role play offers an opportunity to reflect on the experience while it is occurring as well as afterwards; a process referred to as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Questions for the reflection-on-action can be developed by the facilitator ahead of time, but he or she may wish to allow a great deal of flexibility so as to adjust to each situation in a unique way. A general flow might follow B. R. Williams and S. E. Dunn's 2008 processing model, which includes asking questions such as: "What happened?", "So what does this mean?", "What now?", and "What else can we do with this information?" Additionally, facilitators can exploit the essence of emotions by asking such questions as "How did

it feel when . . ." or "How do you think they felt when . . ." However, facilitators are cautioned against putting individuals on the spot or using questioning that causes the learner to feel cornered or embarrassed.

Reflection-in-action is a very powerful component of learning during role play. In the DVD series *Interactive Nights Out*, individuals and groups of teenagers view life-like scenarios, and make decisions that will cause the actors in the DVD to take an action that may lead to an unfavorable outcome. The program uses numerous pause-points, where the learner is expected to reflect upon what they have learned and make the appropriate decisions. Since learners are actively involved in this process and the situations are authentic and emotional, learners are often captivated and completely engaged in this vicarious experience. The creative design also allows for reflection-in-action to occur.

Planning the Role Play

Planning for such an activity involves creativity, but this does not have to be limited to the creative levels of an individual educator. Groups of educators within a department can collaborate on skit scenarios and ways to incorporate them into the lesson plan. Cooperative-based learning, lecture, or a combination of both could be used to introduce the content and help

learners gather information about the objectives that can be applied to the scenarios. Learners would also need guidance on how they will be assessed for performance, which may include the use of a participation rubric that allows learners to receive points for actively engaging in the learning process. Additional rules can be agreed upon with participants, which may be addressed with a well-designed rubric, including the need to contribute in a positive manner, displaying respectful conduct, and providing positive feedback that is centered not on the performance ability of the performers but on the context in which it was delivered. Most importantly, ask the learners to put together a skit or role play in such a way that others will be able to see the information in action, which was gathered during the cooperative learning sessions.

Facilitators must determine ahead of time when it is best to build the scenario for the skit and when to involve the learners. For many educators, time is a major factor. A well-designed role play scenario can be only 5–8 minutes long and still be very effective if it helps learners to internalize the lesson content in an authentic way. Allowing learners to create the scenario themselves easily adds an additional 20–30 minutes, but allows for life skills and meaning to be developed. Role play development and implementation becomes a judgment call for the facilitator who is also expected to keep things moving according to time constraints and learning objectives, while also leaving time at the end of the session to help learners reflect, internalize, make meaning, and store the experience.

Obstacles to Implementation

A 2006 study found the biggest perceptions of barriers to the use of simulation included limited time available for development, not being aware of available methods, and limited availability of resources. Yet, ironically, only 19.9% responded that teaching innovation was low priority at their school. If teacher innovation is truly something that is high priority, then the use of role-play and simulation should be more common place, given its proven value as a learning strategy.

Conclusion

Role play allows for a great deal of understanding to be achieved while also addressing critical skills required for the 21st century workplace. We can take lessons from the medical community using this strategy to create long-lasting understanding. Educational leaders would be well advised to include this important strategy in their professional development plans as a school-wide initiative across disciplines. ∎