

A Foolproof Guide to Running Role Plays

AACH

Authored by: Ellen Pearlman & Calvin Chou

A summary how to set up and run role play exercises, elicited from participants of previous workshops, follows.

CHOOSING ROLE PLAY

Role-play is best used for skills development, or for increasing personal awareness. It is not useful for teaching content alone. Role play is particularly useful for specific types of history taking, for example, taking the sexual or spiritual history. Whenever you feel that participants are overly cognitive or cerebral about a specific interviewing skill, try moving from mental to motor by using role play.

SET UP

The set-up process is critical to the success of the role play. Simpler exercises often work better. The principle of the set-up phase of a role play is to make the exercise feel as contextual as possible. In a content-based workshop on a specific communication skill, eg. practicing empathic statements, setting up a role play includes providing a brief didactic ahead of time. In these situations, scripted role plays (for beginning learners or for highly-charged scenarios such as taking the sexual history) or suggested role descriptions can also be used as triggers for highlighting the skills you hope that learners will practice. In an AACH learning group, on the other hand, setting up a role play exercise requires more time since the facilitator needs to elicit the participant's learning goals and then tightly set up a particular trigger situation before letting the role play run.

Setting up a role play can also be spontaneous. If discussion in a workshop on a communication skill becomes very cerebral, you might challenge the group by just saying, "let's do it."

The setting of the exercise can vary as well. Role play can be used quite effectively on the wards or in a clinic precepting situation. If a learner consults you in real time about a communication dilemma with a patient, you can discuss ways of managing the situation, and then say, "try it out on me."

The most effective role plays are also calibrated to individual learners' needs. If you know your learners well, you can participate in the role play, dial the level of difficulty of the scenario to the ability of the learners, and provide effective feedback. **Safety** is perhaps the most critical piece of the set-up: there needs to be enough tension to induce learning, but not so much that anxiety ensues. Therefore, role play is best used in small groups. If in a larger class, divide it into small groups (triads/dyads), thereby reducing the potential for humiliation. If all learners in a small group are resistant to doing a role play, you can suggest that each person will do the role play, you will go around the room, and you can feel free to volunteer people if they don't do so themselves.

A suggested road map to the set-up process:

- **Elicit learning goals** from the person in the hot seat. It is often useful to engage in conversation with the hot seat learner first, to provide safety and structure. It is often useful to sit next to the hot seat learner for this purpose, especially since it sets up an opportunity

for in-the-moment coaching. Sometimes it can be useful to start by asking the hot seat learner about prior experience with role play in general. If the role play is intended to showcase a particular skill, ask specifically what skills or tools the learner will use in the role play.

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- **(If applicable) Clarify the details of the case**, and ground the scenario in the learner's experience, if possible. Asking for trigger stories can be very helpful but don't get bogged down obsessing about content.
- **Establish ground rules:**
 - Facilitator or participant in the hot seat can call time out
 - Person in the hot seat speaks first
 - Work with resistance: "of course this isn't real," or "it isn't possible to recreate the situation exactly, but let's try something."
 - This is neither a performance nor an evaluation: screwing up is the point of the exercise. Isn't it better to screw up with a friend than in a real situation? One participant starts role play exercises by saying, "don't you dare do a perfect interview." (Consider modeling the exercise by being in the hot seat yourself and screwing up a little - or a lot.)
- **Place a specific time limit on the exercise** - usually 3-5 minutes is adequate
- **Elicit roles for observers in the room** e.g. observe nonverbal communication, empathic statements, missed opportunities and ask observers to take notes
- **Consider having the hot seat learner choose** the other members of the role play
- **Possible variations:**
 - a. **"reversal"**: have learner take the opposite role (e.g., learner in role play about a difficult patient might take the role of the patient, to increase awareness about what that patient might be thinking or experiencing)
 - b. **doubling**: have the learner in the "hot seat" choose a coach to sit behind him/her, to whisper hints or to provide physical support in a threatening situation. This is where a co-facilitator can be very useful, so you're not coaching and facilitating simultaneously.
- **Don't spend too much time in the set-up phase.** Don't allow the process of identifying exact details about a scenario takes the place of doing the role play itself.

RUNNING AND DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

- **When to call time out?**
 - if you perceive the learner is having difficulty
 - if the learner is struggling or gets stuck
 - if there is a pertinent teaching point you'd like to make
 - if you have accomplished your goal
 - at the prescribed time limit
 - with laughter: ask "why are we laughing?"
- It is fine to stop the role play on the early side, unless it is running seamlessly like a scene from a movie. This is particularly important if there is significant negative emotion associated with the role play situation. Timing out when the learner seems a little frustrated, angry, or anxious will provide a good check-in and useful modeling in a real situation. If you wait until the entire exercise explodes, you will only succeed in making your learners hate role play.
- **Debriefing - this applies to both time outs and the end of the exercise:**
 - a. **Check in with the person in the hot seat first**

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- How's it going? How are you doing/feeling? (emotional check)
- What do you think you are doing well? (try to prevent the drift into self-criticism)
- What would you like to do differently?
- b. **Check in with the non-hot seat participant(s)** in the scenario next
 - a. What do you think the hot seat player is doing well?
 - b. What is your emotional response to the hot seat player?
 - c. What would be useful for you to hear from the hot seat player?
- c. **Check in with observers.** Observers often have a great deal of feedback, and it is frequently useful to limit the amount of feedback to one or two points per observer.
- d. **Save your feedback for last.** Pay attention to how much feedback the interviewer has received and try and prioritize the most important point. It is often useful to ask the interviewer how much feedback s/he can hear at the moment, and give him/her the opportunity to “time out” from further feedback. (The extra feedback can be converted into a separate exercise about what *observers* learned from viewing the role play.)
- e. **Rewind and replay the exercise** - if necessary, tighten up the role play to enable the time to be spent on practicing the skill at hand. This is possibly the most important thing to remember; the more replaying, the better.
- f. **Consider asking another participant to be in the hot seat** (the “rolling” role play), or switch roles for each person practicing so they can feel what it's like to be on the other side of the coin. You may also choose to switch scenarios.
- g. **Ask for take-home points at the conclusion of every participant** (not necessarily observers) **in every exercise.**