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Role Playing in Online Education: A Teaching Tool to Enhance Student Engagement and Sustained Learning

by Tisha Bender

Discovering new ways to inspire students is a worthy teaching goal. When students love what they are learning, the process feels meaningful, they retain the information better, and the experience motivates them to learn more. Encouraging a love of learning can be a particular challenge in an online class, however, since the teacher does not see the students face-to-face and therefore lacks the visual cues that typically indicate how much students understand, what excites them, and what they still need to know.

As online education escalates, it is important for instructors to explore teaching techniques that engage students and enhance learning at a profound level. To achieve this goal, instructors must look at the primarily text-based environment of the online class not as a limitation, but as an opportunity. Attentive and highly personal teaching that generates enthusiastic interaction, collaboration, and engaged dialogue among students is desirable in any educational setting. But it is all the more crucial in an online classroom, for it enables teachers to gain knowledge of their students that would not otherwise be available within such an environment.

Role playing is one specific online activity that can contribute to a successful and highly enjoyable learning experience. By providing opportunities for students to create and participate in role-playing scenarios, instructors can gain a sounder knowledge of each student, and students can benefit through increased interaction with the material and with each other.

The Potential for Enhanced Learning through Role Playing

I have used role playing with the online students I teach at Cornell University's [School of Industrial and Labor Relations](#) (Extension Division) and at [New School Online University](#). In both institutions, most students are adult learners. The online environment seems particularly well suited to them, as it provides the flexibility and convenience they need to juggle work and family commitments while continuing their education. Although a few students at the New School work in theater or dance, most do not have a theatrical background. But what students from both institutions bring to the class is their wealth of work and life experiences, as well as a high degree of motivation.

Role playing can be incorporated in any number of learning situations. For example, it can be used to deepen the analysis of a work of fiction, to illustrate case studies and scenarios, and to learn more intimately about different historical time periods. By directly immersing themselves in a situation, the performers come to appreciate the complex experiences of the characters they are portraying. This is a very hands-on form of pedagogy; it is quite unlike listening to a teacher give information or watching a documentary, both of which situate learners at more of a remove from the material.

Susan Haedicke (2002), for example, writes movingly about her participation in *Un Voyage Pas Comme Les Autres Sur Les Chemins De L'Exil* (A Voyage Unlike Any Other on the Road to Exile). Belgium initiated this project, which was held in many European cities between 1998 to 2000, to help the general public gain more understanding of and empathy for the plight of refugees. The project was highly unusual, as it used the idea of *mise-en-situation* (put in the situation). Instead of being mere observers, audience members directly participated in the action as refugees. All participants had to select one dot from a variety of colored dots, which represented various nationalities, to place on their foreheads. The participants then had to go through a number of dark rooms and cells in which trained actors—playing the parts of soldiers, bureaucrats, police,

thieves, and so on—interacted with them, often in very challenging ways. Haedicke recounts her experience: how she had to give up her necklace in order to proceed, and repeatedly fill out forms with information that she did not know; how she found herself standing in the wrong line and had forms torn up in her face; and how she had to do repetitive physical tasks like sweeping the floor.

Role playing can work well in the traditional classrooms of higher education, but it seems exceptionally well suited to an online learning environment. In a virtual setting, many students feel greater freedom to express themselves without the stage fright they might feel in a physical setting. At the same time, role playing provides students with opportunities to creatively interact with their peers, which fosters a sense of community and shared purpose in the learning process.

The technical requirements are few. Most online course software programs can host group areas in which a small number of students can work together—usually on an asynchronous group discussion board or in a synchronous group chat room. Even for the "computer-challenged" instructor, establishing group areas is a fairly straightforward process, and most students need only a simple set of directions to access their spaces. In other words, teachers and students do not need any high-end computer equipment or sophisticated extra features to participate in online role playing.

The Virtual Play: Preparation, Presentation, and Analysis

I generally wait until the midpoint of the semester to schedule role-playing assignments. This gives students sufficient time to become comfortable with the online environment and with their peers. The role-playing process involves three steps: preparation, presentation, and analysis. Here I provide a general overview of these steps with respect to the online setup and execution of a virtual play. In the following section, I describe three assignment models more specifically.

I break students into small groups (of four to five students) and assign each group a topic to explore or story to enact. In the preparation stage, each group discusses the plan for its virtual play in a private online area. I label the asynchronous group discussion board the "Backstage Rehearsal Area." Some students also like to make use of the real-time chat option. Within these areas, students can see only the responses of their specific group members, whereas I can monitor the communication within all groups. I allow approximately one week for these discussions to evolve.

When it is time for a virtual "curtains up!" for one group, I create a new forum on the class discussion board. The forum bears the name of that group's play, and the class members not involved become the audience. The student performers enter the forum asynchronously. The software recognizes them by their user names, so they write their character names in parentheses. I ask the performers to start by quickly summarizing who they are (their characters) and what they did and why; each person must articulate this information in the voice of the character that he or she is portraying. I then instruct the performers to interact with one another in their respective roles, such that they essentially provide an impromptu re-enactment of their chosen story.

The virtual play takes four to five days to unfold fully. Over that period, each of the performing students posts several comments per day in interaction with his fellow cast members; this occurs entirely asynchronously. The audience members—nonperforming students—also log on asynchronously and watch the story develop. Although it is certainly possible to multitask in an online class, performing students generally stay focused on the virtual play. Meanwhile, those in the audience may feel inspired to start preparing for their own performances in earnest.

After the group has produced and presented its play, I create a new forum on the class discussion board called "Analysis." Here the student performers shed their roles and answer questions from the rest of the class. In this way, the whole class can analyze the topic in detail. The analysis stage usually lasts about three or four days, and again, it occurs asynchronously. During this time I give no new class assignments.

Three Role-Playing Assignment Models

I use asynchronous role playing for two basic purposes: to illustrate a specific situation and to conduct literary analysis. I also employ an alternative model in which students interact in real time.

Asynchronous Online Role Playing to Illustrate a Specific Situation

In my Ethics in the Workplace course, I assign each student group a topic that we are studying, such as loyalty to supervisors, confidentiality issues in the workplace, or no-win situations. Group preparations in the Backstage Rehearsal Area—with members creating a scenario to illustrate the topic and choosing their respective roles—are often fascinating. I once read, for example, the following comments:

LISA: Ladies, I have a case that really happened. I don't know if you want to work with this, but here goes . . .

JUNE: Sounds like a great foundation. Another scenario we could use would be . . .

BETTY: Hi J! I think the first scenario will definitely work because our topic is Loyalty to Supervisors. Also, we have to decide who will play the manager, assistant and co-workers. I'm willing to play anyone.

DELIA: Hi ladies, I agree with the first scenario. I would like to play the role of the co-worker. I am not comfortable playing the role of the advisor. Can we negotiate?

LISA: I'll play the role of the assistant. I think I've played that role in real life. (smile) But after taking this course, I'm not going to play that role any longer.

(Throughout this article, student names have been changed for the sake of confidentiality.)

When groups produce their virtual plays on the class discussion board, it is particularly interesting to note how student performers compensate well for the lack of visual and auditory cues by writing in "Ring, Ring, Ring" for a telephone, adding information about facial expressions, mentioning when an actor is having an internal dialogue, and detailing actions through notes such as "They hug each other and sit down at a table." At times the plays generate unexpected levels of direct engagement from nonperformers. For example, although I ask the class to observe the plays silently, one student became so excited that she posted a response right in the midst of a drama—and then, recognizing her mistake, likened it to when a member of the audience claps before intermission. [Exhibit 1](#) contains an excerpt from a virtual play on workplace ethics.

At the completion of the virtual plays, the analysis is generally impressive, with members of the cast serving as discussion leaders. They identify the main themes, issues, and conflicts within their topics and respond to questions and comments from the rest of the class ([Exhibit 2](#)). Many students have commented that immersion in the topic, established through role playing, provides insight into real issues that they have faced and allows them to work through these issues in a meaningful way.

Asynchronous Online Role Playing in Literary Analysis

In literature classes that I teach, I assign to each group a different novel or story, and to each student within the group a specific character to play. This technique has been used to good effect by Gura (1997), who notes the advantages of using the voice and body in the performance of a literary work as a means of promoting greater understanding. Even without physical presence, role playing in literary analysis can work well in the online environment because students become so immersed in the characters they portray.

Using the same format as in the workplace ethics class, I create a separate Backstage Rehearsal Area where each group can discuss and prepare for its presentation. While the group members obviously do not have to create their own scenario, as in the model described above, they still must collaborate with others to stage the online play.

When it is time for a group to present its play, I create a forum on the class discussion board with the name of the story or novel that the group is enacting. I ask each student to start a new discussion thread within the forum, beginning with introductory remarks on who his or her character is. The group members read each other's postings and submit multiple responses within the threads while maintaining their assigned roles and the distinctive "voices" of their characters. In this way, the virtual play unfolds as the students re-enact the story through their dialogue ([Exhibit 3](#)).

After the completion of the virtual play, the performers lead discussion and respond to feedback from other class members ([Exhibit 4](#)). Students have commented that, at this point, it is important for them to shed their roles in order not to be constrained by one perspective when discussing the story. They also have said that they empathize with the characters much more deeply as a result of the role-playing assignment, and that they find the exercise fun as well as educational. Generally speaking, the heightened appreciation that students derive from role playing is reflected not only in their insightful analysis, but also in their responses to exam questions about a given literary text.

Synchronous Online Role Playing

As an alternative to asynchronous role playing on the class discussion board, students can collaborate with one another and stage a virtual play in real time through their group's synchronous chat area (see [Exhibit 5](#) for a sample assignment). When the play is complete, the instructor can copy and paste the archived chat transcript ([Exhibit 6](#)) from the group area into a newly created forum on the class discussion board, so that the rest of the class can read it. The class can then analyze the topic and play, with the student performers leading the discussion ([Exhibit 7](#)).

Students' Reactions to Role Playing

I believe that role playing, using any of the models described above, inspires deeper student involvement with the material. Many students who have taken a subsequent course with me have asked if there will be any role playing in the new class. Similarly, I have received e-mails from former students who said that, because of their experience with role playing, they still hold an interest in the course topic and have continued to read about it.

Not all students anticipate that they will enjoy role-playing assignments. For example, one student from New School Online University remarked (after participating in a virtual play based on the novel *The Neverending Story*), "I thought I would not like doing the virtual play. I have never liked role playing. Then when my character was a bad guy (Gmork) I dreaded it even more. But when I read how philosophical Gmork was I felt a little better. Anyway, I have had fun doing this assignment. Everyone has fallen into character so well . . ." This student's unexpected enjoyment reflects a deeper appreciation of the character he played.

Other students have indicated that to complete a role-playing assignment, they incorporate all that they have learned in class, while also bringing in personal experiences—so that soon the exercise becomes enjoyable, even "addictive." Some have remarked that the assignments are thought provoking, and that they wonder what they would do if faced with the particular situations that evolve in their virtual plays. Many have found role playing not only educational but also enjoyable. One woman attested, "I cannot remember when I had so much fun . . . I found myself laughing with tears coming out of my eyes . . . I wish all classroom assignments can be that enjoyable. I felt so happy about the accomplishments of Linda, Robert, and myself that I insisted that my husband see what was said. I had to because he never saw me laugh when looking at a computer."

Students seem to find particular value in the collaboration that role playing fosters. One student offered this reflection: "The virtual classroom was such a great idea, working backstage, putting ideas together with other classmates, then presenting it to the whole class! I think I had it easy, as the other players kept me involved by their interaction. I complained to myself that it may be hard to understand an online class . . . now I want more . . . How easy (and fun) this class has become!"

The Value of Online Role Playing as Measured by Bloom's Taxonomy

It is gratifying when students develop a love for the learning activity, but how can we tell whether this activity is a valuable one? I propose that learning has value when students assume greater responsibility over the process, and when they are challenged to think and reflect deeply about significant facts rather than just memorize them.

Bloom contends that there are six developmental levels pertaining to the acquisition of knowledge and of intellectual analysis and skills: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. (For greater detail on what is involved in each of these stages of learning, see [Appendix C](#) of Cameson, Delpierre, and Masters, 2002.) Role playing involves a collaborative application of what has been learned; it also requires students to synthesize aspects of the topic in the creative process of formulating the virtual play itself. Furthermore, when analyzing the play after its presentation, students reach a better understanding of the topic. For example, they have the opportunity to identify any fallacies in the characters' assumptions, as well as distinguish between facts and inferences. This can all lead to a sound evaluation, by both the student performers and the audience, in which the value of the performance is assessed in terms of its organization as well as its relevance to the topic in question.

One of the most striking aspects of role playing is the way that students relate education with experience, which, as Dewey (1963) argues, is the optimal path to true learning. For example, in a virtual play on raising children (see [Exhibit 6](#)), a female student played the role of the father. Even though she was not a parent, she drew upon her experience as a teacher's assistant and was able to take this knowledge and creatively apply it to the dramatic situation. Moreover, students are able to make inferences about similar situations in response to the virtual plays—such as the class member who mentioned Enron and WorldCom in response to a performance based on *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (see [Exhibit 4](#)).

Another of the most noteworthy features of role playing is that it leads to sustained knowledge. This is vastly different from facts that are superficially memorized; in role playing, the topic is actively experienced, and the student-performer becomes deeply immersed in it. Haedicke (2002) confirms as much by quoting from the written reflections of participants in *Un Voyage Pas Comme Les Autres*. "Thank you for plunging me into the real life of an asylum seeker," one said. "The whole world you created made us cry a lot. An unforgettable experience," another reported (102). Haedicke herself mentioned that she could feel, "on a visceral level . . . the powerlessness experienced by a refugee" (107).

In my courses, lively discussions ensue after the plays are completed, and many students have commented that role playing helped them to understand the topic at a higher level. One student who participated in a synchronous online play on family dynamics observed, ". . . responding in 'real time' requires a quick answer . . . no time to think about what you're saying, or how you said it. In 'real life', our responses to family members are sometimes the same—said without thought, not thinking about the affect [sic] our words will have on others." I was pleased that the scenario replicated so well the complexity of the topic, thus forming an accurate model for analysis. While immediacy can be of value in synchronous role playing, asynchronous performances give students the opportunity to be reflective and deliberate—and thus to more deeply understand their characters' behavior and motivations.

Grading Each Student's Contribution to a Virtual Play

What is the best way to grade students based on their group work in a role-playing assignment? Given the highly collaborative nature of role playing, an instructor might be tempted to assess the group as a whole, with each group member receiving an identical grade. But I do not advocate this approach. As with most collaborative class projects, some students inevitably put in more work than others, and a group grade may simply be unfair. With the role-playing assignments I have described, the instructor is able to observe the online group's preparatory work and can thereby derive a clear idea of how much each student contributed. It seems fairer to grade each student accordingly.

Another option is to allow students to assess each other's work. The instructor could use this information in conjunction with his or her own assessment; student work would thus be judged from a number of perspectives. A professor at New York University asked students who had been working in groups (albeit in a class on campus) to rank each other according to four dimensions—reliability, participation in group work, intellectual contribution, and contribution to the written project—and to provide these remarks in writing as a private e-mail to him (Jackson 1999). Specific guidelines like these help frame student grades within a particular context and help avoid the possible problem of nebulous and impressionistic assessments. Additionally, asking students to think about each other's performance helps them with the important process of evaluation and thinking about thinking, termed *metacognition* (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, and Glaser 2001).

Along the same lines, I recommend that instructors take into consideration the feedback from the class on each group's presentation. This places some importance on the issues the play raises and the ability of performers to respond to other students' questions. This ability to evaluate is extremely beneficial in further advancing knowledge and understanding, and it corresponds to the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy. Thus the final grade given to any student would reflect the instructor's assessment of that student's preparation for, performance of, and analysis of the virtual play, and it would be slightly weighted by peer evaluations.

Conclusion

Online role playing engages students intimately and creatively in the learning process. It provides them with opportunities to think and learn in a more dynamic, interactive fashion than in the traditional lecture-style format, and it allows them to discover imaginative connections between their personal experiences and the course material. Students also develop presentational skills as they share these connections with their classmates and audience. As such, online role playing asks students to do something with the course material beyond simply memorizing it; it encourages them to identify with characters in specific situations and thus achieve a more meaningful understanding of the topic at hand. Moreover, the power of role playing often leads students to a sustained and passionate interest in the subject matter itself, which surely achieves one of our primary goals as educators.

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