Introduction

Role-play is best used for skills development, or for increasing personal awareness. It is particularly useful for specific types of history taking, for example, using open-ended questions, characterizing the chief complaint or taking the sexual history. When students are overly cognitive or cerebral about a specific interviewing skill, moving from ‘mental’ to ‘motor’ by using role-play is helpful.

How you introduce role-playing will have a significant impact on how it is received. Most people are not comfortable with role-playing themselves and as a result have a hard time being enthusiastic about teaching or supervising a role-play. If you can give an example of how it has been useful to you or to your students in the past, it helps frame role-playing positively and students are more likely to engage. Often students are anxious about demonstrating their skills in front of the group and acknowledging this up front is important – tell them that most faculty still get anxious when they have to do a role play in front of students or peers. If students are resistant to doing a role-play, make it clear that this approach has been demonstrated as the best way to practice skills and that all will be asked to participate. Rarely, you may need to “volunteer” someone to start if they don’t step up themselves. Give lots of positive feedback to the first volunteer for being courageous.

For most of the sessions, we provide short scripted role-plays. Please feel free to add your own. Tell students that they can “ad lib” the information as they see fit (e.g. making up information that has not been provided but really does not change the learning goal).

Setup

Brief, clear set-up is critical to the success of the role-play. Simpler exercises are better, especially in the beginning. Your goal is to make the exercise feel as contextual as possible. In a content-based workshop on a specific communication skill, e.g. practicing empathic statements, setting up a role-play includes a brief didactic ahead of time. Setting up a role-play can also be spontaneous. If discussion in small group on a communication skill becomes very cerebral, you might challenge the group by just saying, “let’s do it, who wants to give it a try?” If a learner asks you about a communication challenge they experienced or witnessed with a patient, you can discuss potential ways to respond, 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 as the “patient”, dial the level of difficulty of the scenario to the ability of the learner, and provide effective feedback.

Safety

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 overwhelms the student. If all students want a chance to practice, then divide the class into triads/dyads, thereby reducing the potential for humiliation.

Setup Directions

Establish Learning Goals

Choose a volunteer. It is useful to briefly engage in conversation with the hot seat learner first, to provide safety and structure. You may want to sit next to the hot seat learner for this purpose.
Clarify Case Details
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
- Ground Rules can include the following
- Facilitator or student in the hot seat can call time out (or anyone can call time out)
- Person in the hot seat gets to debrief 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: not getting it right IS the point of the exercise. Point out how much we all learn from our mistakes, giving an example from your own experience as a student. Isn’t it better to mess up with a friend than in a real situation? Consider modeling the exercise by being in the hot seat yourself and not being perfect.
- It is OK during role-play to modify the data a little – that means students don’t have to stick to the script exactly as long as the chief complaint and big picture details (smoker, unemployed etc.) are not omitted.

Set a Time Limit
Usually 3-5 minutes is adequate.

Assign Roles to Observers
e.g. observe nonverbal communication, empathic statements, use of open ended questions, etc and ask observers to take notes. Consider having the hot seat learner choose the other members of the role play

Running the Role Play

Time Outs
The times to call a time out include the following:
- 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 that can’t wait
- If you have accomplished your goal
- At the prescribed time limit
- If the group or student begins to laugh - ask, “why are we laughing?”

It is fine to stop the role-play on the early side, unless it is running seamlessly. It is particularly important to call a time out if the student is floundering badly. When the student seems frustrated, angry, or anxious, stop the role-play and check-in. Ask how they are doing, elicit suggestions from observers about how to handle the situation and allow the student to continue, if they choose. If instead you wait until the exercise explodes, you will potentially humiliate your student and confirm negative attitudes toward role-playing.

If the role play is with a standardized patient (SP) and you feel the SP is shutting down or not engaging with the student for a prolonged period of time, call a time out and ask the student first and then the group for suggested questions before you restart the role play. While it is important not to call a time out too quickly, letting it go for too long can cause frustration on the part of the student.
Debriefing

This applies to both time outs and the end of the exercise.

Check in with the interviewer
⇒ Emotional Check-in: How’s it going? How are you doing/feeling?
⇒ Self-Evaluation: (try to prevent the inevitable drift into self-criticism) What are you doing well? What would you like to do differently?

Check in with the “patient”
⇒ What do you think the student is doing well?
⇒ What is your emotional response to them?
⇒ What would be useful for you to hear from the interviewer?

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.

Feedback

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.)

Rewind & Replay

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If necessary, tighten up the role-play to enable the time to be spent on practicing the skill(s) at hand. This is very important thing to remember; the more re-playing, with an explicit focus on the skills being practiced, the better.