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The Use of Role-Play in Teaching Evaluation

MARVIN C. ALKIN AND CHRISTINA A. CHRISTIE

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of role-play in creating an experiential learning environment for graduate students enrolled in a comparative evaluation theory and/or an evaluation procedures course. Role-play exercises have been designed for each course that increase student involvement in the learning process, which promotes a deeper understanding of and engagement in course content. The specific exercises used, which are described in detail, require students to think beyond the words they read—to learn by *doing* in a safe environment.

INTRODUCTION

When teaching evaluation theory, how can students be engaged so that they *really* understand the views of theorists? How can students learn to think in ways that allow speculation about the

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responses a theorist might give to particular issues—that is, to think like a particular theorist? When teaching evaluation procedures, how can students be engaged so that they gain the skills necessary to conduct an evaluation? How do we get students to focus an evaluation, engage stakeholders, and develop meaningful questions when the stakeholders themselves may only have a limited understanding of the potential evaluation questions?

We teach two 10-week evaluation courses, one on comparative theory and another on evaluation procedures. The purpose of the theory course is to provide students with an in-depth understanding of prevalent evaluation theories, with systems for categorizing those theories, and with an understanding of major issues in evaluation and in the processes of theory development. The goal of the procedures course is to provide students with the skills needed to conduct evaluations that are useful, by learning to: initiate and focus an evaluation; design and write an evaluation proposal; develop technical skills required to conduct an evaluation; and develop evaluation reports.

This paper describes our attempts to create an experiential learning environment for graduate students in these two courses. Experiential learning environments are designed to increase student engagement in the learning process and, in turn, academic achievement. For us this means moving away from a more traditional top-down pedagogical model to the creation of student–student and student–faculty partnerships in the classroom. We like to think of our students as “participants” and ourselves as “facilitators” of learning. Our belief is that the best way to understand evaluation theory and procedures is through participation. One useful technique that inspires participation is role-play. While it is plausible to picture how students can participate in the practice of evaluation, it may be more difficult to imagine what it means to *participate in* evaluation theory. In this paper, we describe the processes of participation in both courses.

WHY USE ROLE-PLAY?

The need for the development of training courses in evaluation has been largely unmet. Many graduate programs lack courses in evaluation, relying heavily upon research methods courses or informal training for teaching evaluation. The few courses that are taught, however, often employ traditional instructional methods, such as lectures and reading lists. We argue that these modes of teaching are not appropriate for building the skills necessary to conduct evaluation, nor do they foster deep understandings of theoretical perspectives. Moreover, many students prefer to develop knowledge through *doing* rather than sitting and listening. In the case of the courses, we discuss in this paper, *doing* typically refers to role-play. This represents an intentional restructuring of the students’ learning experiences to foster more explicit intellectual connections among students and between students and faculty. This is compatible with the adult learning literature in which it is noted “action begets learning” (Cavaliere & Sgroi, 1992, p. 7). John Dewey’s notion of learning by doing established a methodology of instruction promoted by adult learning scholars suggesting that social and intellectual skills come to the learner through situations characterized by interactivity, not isolation (Carr, 1992).

One, of course, can “learn by doing” through participation in actual evaluations. However, when teaching an evaluation procedures or theory course that takes place over a limited period of time (an academic quarter or semester), the approach of participating in evaluations presents limitations. For instance, there are time constraints and logistical concerns. Arranging appointments with stakeholders, and multiple follow-up meetings to focus the evaluation can

be enormously time consuming. This also presumes that stakeholders are willing and have the time to participate in activities that may reach beyond their commitments to the actual evaluation at its particular stage. Additionally, most evaluations are conducted over a lengthy period of time (a year or more). Thus, students would be involved in only those select stages of the evaluation process that are occurring during the time they are enrolled in the course. Most importantly, however, students in the field lack the security of the classroom learning environment where it is safer to take risks and experiment with new concepts and ideas. Thus, we find role-play to be a viable and productive method for “learning by doing.”

Before describing our instructional processes, let us first define what we mean by role-play. Ladousse (1987) suggests that we look at the words themselves. Participants assume a “role”, that is, they play a part (either their own or someone else’s) in a specific situation/scenario. “Play” means that the role is taken on in a safe environment where participants can express their views in creative ways.¹

To further understand our definition of role-play, we distinguish between role-play and simulation, although we recognize that some argue that such a fine distinction is unnecessary. The use of role-play as an educational or training technique is considered to be part of a wider set of techniques that have collectively become known as simulation. Simulations are complex, lengthy and relatively inflexible events, yet they always include an element of role-play. Role-play, on the other hand, can be a simple, brief technique, easily organized. Role-play is highly flexible, leaving much more room for the demonstration of individual variation, initiative, and imagination (Ladousse, 1987). Both, however, take an approach to learning that is fundamentally different from other teaching methods found in most graduate schools. The key difference is the emphasis on experiencing the course as opposed to simply being lectured to.

Role-play promotes interaction in the classroom and peer learning, which increases motivation (Livingstone, 1983). Classrooms that utilize role-play tend to create environments that are less anxious and fearful. This, in turn, helps to create a classroom characterized by “community sharing” (Adams, 1973). That is to say, students more readily share their ideas and thinking. Because of the lack of anxiety and increased motivation, students tend to experiment more broadly. As instructors, we also act as participants in role-play, rather than simply observing it. Thus, when role-play is a core element of a course, learning is more easily promoted.

Role-playing is most commonly used in situations dealing with attitudes and feelings, for example, to replicate the feelings of someone in a particular social situation. Role-play can also be a tool for cognitive development, although it is not used frequently in this manner. It is also used to develop skills such as coaching, listening and conflict resolution. A quotation attributed to Confucius implies as much: “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.” A more recent insight related to role-play as a kind of “doing” is provided by Thatcher (1990): “Learning is the process of preparing to deal with new situations. It may occur consciously or unconsciously, usually from experiencing real life situations, although simulations and imagined situations can induce learning.”

In the context of our teaching, the purpose of role-play in the procedures course differs slightly from that of the theory course. A common aim of both is to train participants to think on their feet. For the procedures course, it is also to learn how to handle situations as they unravel—a useful dress rehearsal for real life. For the theory course, the aim is to move beyond the simple regurgitation of readings by developing advanced understandings of difficult theoretical notions through communication. Next, we describe how these goals are achieved.

USING ROLE-PLAY TO TEACH EVALUATION THEORY

As stated previously, the aim of the theory course is to provide students with an in-depth understanding of prevalent evaluation theories, with systems for categorizing those theories, with an understanding of major issues in evaluation, and with an understanding of the processes of theory development in evaluation. For the purposes of describing the use of role-play, we focus primarily on the first of these purposes: understanding (*really understanding*) the prevalent evaluation theories. The activities to achieve this goal primarily occur during the first 5 weeks of the 10-week quarter course. Activities in subsequent weeks, which are directed towards categorizing theories and looking at major issues in evaluation, enhance these understandings.

The first 2 weeks of the course present a general overview of evaluation, including historically significant papers, books, and events that shaped the evaluation field. For educational evaluation, this includes such historical landmarks as: Ralph Tyler and The Eight Year Study, Sputnik, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964, the Cronbach article "Course Improvement . . .," and a number of other seminal articles published during the 1960s. For the social science "evaluative research" historical thread, one needs to start with Edward Suchman's early work, some work at the Urban Institute, and, of course, the early textbook writing of Peter Rossi.

The next 3 weeks (weeks 3–5) are substantially more intensive and are designed to foster an understanding of evaluation theorists' thinking processes. During these weeks, role-play is relied upon considerably. Students prepare for the role-play experience each week by doing extensive research and reading on a particular theorist and by writing a short, three-page "theorist summary paper." Theorist summary papers have a specific set of guideline questions to be addressed that help students to understand the essentials of a theorist's point of view. The questions guide the student's writing effort and their contemplation process. Questions such as the following are designed to extend the students' analyses of the theorist's work:

- What does the theorist take to be the ultimate purpose of evaluation? The subsidiary purpose?
- What is the theorist's general approach to carrying out these purposes?
- According to this theorist, what is (should be) the role of the evaluator in "valuing" data?
- According to this theorist, what is (should be) the role of the evaluator in making causal (rather than descriptive) claims?
- What does this theorist view as the role of those affected by or interested in the evaluation? In what ways do they participate?
- According to this theorist, how can we train a person to be an evaluator?

For week 3 (theorist summary paper number one), all students focus on one of three theorists (typically Cronbach, Scriven, and Stake) and they are provided with a partial reading list of three or four references. For weeks 4 and 5, a broad array of theorists are selected with typically not more than one or two students selecting an individual theorist. During this part of the course, students must conduct a much more extensive literature search on their own.

In the first role-play exercise (week 3), the format of the TV game show *To Tell the Truth* is used. Students watch a taped episode of the show prior to engaging in the exercise, so the task is unambiguous. In this classic TV program, a brief biography is read of a semi-famous or unique person whose appearance is not familiar. Three individuals purporting to be this person (one of them authentic) are then questioned by contestants who must guess who is

telling the truth. And so, in the role-play exercise, a variation of the television format takes place in which three students, each portraying to the best of their ability, Robert Stake, for example. They sit as a panel and are questioned by the instructor(s), and students in the class, about “their” theoretical positions. All three of the “theorists” are encouraged to answer the questions and in addition to clarifying ambiguous points/ideas for one another. Having the instructor ask leading questions or point students in directions that are more appropriate eases this initial role-playing endeavour. Each role-playing round lasts for about 45 minutes with four rounds in a class session. At the conclusion of the role-play, students debrief, reviewing what they liked about what they did and what they would do differently. The class then has the opportunity to provide feedback to the role-play participants.²

The first role-play session is made somewhat easier in that it only (and here the word “only” is used advisedly) requires students to internalize the viewpoints of a single theorist and not in relationship to other theoretical points of view. However, some students can be quite nervous about their upcoming participation. They are told that they may not refer to the theorist as “he,” “she,” or by the theorist’s name. The instructors refer to students by the theorist’s name. They *are* the theorist and must attune themselves to thinking in that way based upon what they have read and learned. If they step out of this role, they are corrected. A relatively common “out of role” problem occurs when the student expresses an opinion with a good deal of uncertainty. For example, “Well, I think I would have advocated that. What do you think? Is that right?” In such instances, the instructor might ask them to consider some related stances and how their response would “fit” with these stances. For example, “Well Bob [Stake], you said such and such on this topic, what would that imply with regard to your response on this topic?” Another situation that can arise is a student “freezing” or absolutely not knowing what to say, and remaining silent. In such an instance the instructor might suggest something like, “I seem to recall from your writing” and ask them what they meant by that.

The second role-play format—used in weeks 4 and 5—is derived from an early PBS television show, *Meeting of the Minds*. Again, students view an episode so that the goal of the role-play is clear. *Meeting of the Minds*, a creation of the incredibly talented Steve Allen, brought together a panel of famous individuals (living and deceased) from different eras and different contexts. Actors, appropriately dressed, portrayed the famous individuals. A panel may have included, for instance, Attila the Hun, Marie Antoinette, and Mahatma Gandhi. Allen would select topics that initiate strong levels of disagreement amongst the panel members—and conversations would flourish.

Using the *Meeting of the Minds* format to guide the role-play, the instructor, acting as moderator, directs questions to an “Elliot Eisner,” a “Michael Patton,” and a “Peter Rossi.” Before the questioning begins, “theorists” summarize their evaluation theoretic point of view. The instructor then finds areas that will incite heated interaction. Prompts elicit reaction from other students, which helps to stimulate the discussion. With certainty, by the middle of the week 4 session, students in the audience join in the discussion, spontaneously directing questions from the point of view of an evaluation persona with which they have become familiar. And so, a “Jim Popham” might rise from the class audience to confront “Eisner” on the issue of the use of objectives or criterion referenced testing in evaluation.

A further indication of higher-level student understanding is found in the “style” that students exhibit during the role-play exercise. As students begin to get involved and take on roles, they frequently start to reflect what they perceive to be the personality characteristics of their evaluation theorist (e.g., humanitarianism, social concern, arrogance, dogmatism).

These role-play experiences provide an enjoyable format for “mind stretching.” Students are forced to think about issues from the perspective of theorists, and to respond to issues that they may or may not have read about. Role-play impels students into the thinking process of theorists and thus is a highly effective method for teaching evaluation theory.

Role-play is also used—but in a very different way—to teach an evaluation procedures course.

USING ROLE-PLAY TO TEACH EVALUATION PROCEDURES

The goal of the procedures course is to provide students with the skills needed to conduct evaluations that are useful, by learning to: initiate and focus an evaluation; design and write an evaluation proposal; develop technical skills required to conduct an evaluation; and develop evaluation reports. Role-play is used primarily to teach students how to initiate and focus an evaluation, as well as to develop the skills necessary to present evaluation proposals and findings to stakeholders. To support role-play activities, instruction and exercises are provided largely in small groups aimed at developing appropriate technical and interpersonal skills.

During the first week of the course, students are introduced to the topic of evaluation, which includes a brief history of the discipline. This discussion focuses on the different purposes of evaluation, based upon the various major theoretical orientations. This conversation helps to situate the practical orientation that is taught in the course (user-orientated evaluation) within the larger context of the field.

The role-play process, which serves as the central instructional technique for the remaining nine weeks, is also explained in detail. Students choose teams with which they work for the duration of the course. Working in teams, students develop an evaluation proposal related to a program at a real site, write a “mock” evaluation report and engage in related activities of a program evaluator. Students, in their teams, role-play with key “stakeholders” in order to: focus the evaluation, determine key evaluation questions, select appropriate methods, develop an instrument, and present evaluation findings. Using this format, students benefit from participating in their own role-play exercises. Watching other groups helps students learn how interaction might occur in a variety of situations.

The evaluation procedures course is taught to two groups of students; those working toward a Ph.D., typically in Education, and those working toward an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. The process for choosing the programs on which the mock evaluations are based differs slightly for each degree objective. The Ed.D. program is designed for students who choose to attend school full-time while maintaining full-time employment. Because most students are working in schools or districts, there is an array of programs from which to choose for mock evaluations. Therefore, with this group, during the first session, students discuss the different programs with which they are involved. The instructor then selects seven or eight programs that are suitable for mock evaluations. Students vote on which three or four they would like to “evaluate” and then select their evaluation teams (typically consisting of four or five students). Students working toward the Ph.D. degree typically attend school full-time and work part-time on campus as research or teaching assistants and thus are not likely to be working on programs that are well suited for mock evaluation. For this group, prior to the commencement of the course, the instructor arranges for programs that are being run by the University to be “evaluated.” Examples of such programs include a student initiated academic outreach program, the residence hall earthquake safety program,

and a new reading intervention that is being implemented at local district schools. Each program is described to the students during the first class session and evaluation teams are selected.

Between the first and second class sessions, students read a substantial portion of the course text, *Utilization Focused Evaluation* (Patton, 1997), to develop an understanding of the evaluation process in which they are about to participate. In addition to the reading, students conduct interviews with real program stakeholders. For the Ph.D. student course, the instructor pre-arranges meetings with a small group of important program stakeholders from each program, such as the program director and coordinator. For the Ed.D. course, the student working in the program is the stakeholder interviewed. However, additional key program personnel can be interviewed if the student can arrange convenient meeting times. The aim of the meetings is to develop an initial understanding of the program. Students are given a set of questions to guide the stakeholder interviews. Sample questions include:

- Describe the organizational entity that is to be the subject of the evaluation: what is it? Is it part of a larger organization?
- Describe the program that is to be evaluated. What is the nature of the program, clientele, objective, size, etc.?
- Who are the “key players” in the program. Speculate about other important individuals or stakeholders.
- Why do the “key players” want the evaluation done? In what way might the evaluation process or findings be useful?

The information gathered during the interviews is written up by the team as a two or three page “site description.” Copies of the site description are brought to the second session for class review.

The site description has three purposes. First, it is intended to facilitate preliminary discussions amongst the evaluation team about their program. Second, when shared with the class, it helps to familiarize students with the programs being evaluated by the other evaluation teams. Finally, it provides the instructor(s) with the information necessary to role-play key program players.

The second class begins with a review of the reading and a discussion of the site descriptions. Then, students launch into their first role-play activity. The instructor, adopting the role of a key program player, introduces him/herself and welcomes the evaluation team “back to the site.” We say “back to the site” because this role-play exercise picks up where the initial meeting with the real program stakeholders left off. If the team indicates that more than one key player should be present at this second meeting, the instructor role-plays each of the key players, identifying the individual by name or position before speaking, by saying something like, “Well, as principal of this school, I believe the program” If the class is team-taught (which we have done), each instructor takes on the persona of a key player or, when necessary, multiple personas. As one could imagine, this exercise can be quite fun for both instructor and student.

After introductions, teams by and large begin by asking stakeholders to clarify points raised during the first meeting. The team’s goal for this interview is to help the key players focus their evaluation questions. The instructors, role-playing the key players, purposefully respond in a general manner to the team’s line of questioning, mirroring what typically occurs in the real world when an evaluator meets initially with stakeholders. For instance, the team may ask, “Last time we met, you said you were interested in understanding the long term

impacts of your program. However, with your current budget and time restraints, this will not be possible. Understanding that, what are some of your other concerns?" The stakeholder might then respond, "Well, how about just telling us how the program is working. Is it *really* improving student achievement?" The team then has to work to understand what specifically about the program operation that they are interested in understanding about the program. How will the information gained from the evaluation be used? What benchmarks need to be met in order for the stakeholders to be convinced that the program is working? This role-play interview normally lasts 30–45 minutes (and this interview length remains fairly consistent throughout the course). Students are interested in, and benefit from the observation of the approaches taken by other teams.

Focusing the evaluation can be a long and sometimes arduous task for students, as might be expected given that this can be considered one of, if not *the*, most difficult steps in the evaluation process. Consequently, the role-play interviews during the third class session continue to be centered on focusing the evaluation and determining the evaluation questions. Teams come to the third session with a one-page proposal letter, addressed to a stakeholder, summarizing the context of the evaluation and their current, general understanding of the evaluation goal. The team presents this letter to the key stakeholders. However, unlike the previous week, now the other students in the class are encouraged to ask the team questions as if they were part of the larger stakeholder audience. So, for example, class members might role-play the positions of parents and teachers. At the end of this interview process, the key stakeholders suggest that the evaluation team come to the next meeting with an outline for a proposal. It is looking like this team may just get this contract after all!

During week 4, the evaluation design is further refined, using the proposal outline to help focus the conversation. Role-plays involve determining which methods of data collection and analysis would appropriately address the evaluation questions as well as best serve the needs of the stakeholders. The interview process concludes with the key stakeholders suggesting that the evaluation team bring a sample instrument for presentation at the next meeting. The instructor directs the role-plays to ensure that each team develops a different instrument designed specifically for their program—which allows the class to critique a variety of measures. Typically, teams construct a survey, an in-depth interview protocol, an observation protocol and a process measure.

Role-playing the evaluation process continues the following week with the presentation of instruments and the finalization of the evaluation plan. The full proposal is due two weeks later (week 7). The team presents an executive summary of the proposal, rather than the document in its entirety (which is usually 15–18 double spaced typed pages). The proposal is the largest course assignment, and teams treat the class session as if they were making a formal presentation to an organization in hope of securing a high-paying evaluation contract.

Teams are then asked to "create" fictitious data and to present the results to stakeholders as if the evaluation had been conducted. Students often report this to be a difficult exercise. We believe that this difficulty can be explained, at least in part, by their earnest investment in the evaluation process, which has been cultivated by their consistent participation in role-play. Nevertheless, students find that the exercise provides closure to the course and a forum for great jokes. For example, several years ago, one team had tee shirts made for the class with an off-beat quote they had found in one of Alkin's earlier articles, and required that we all wear them during their presentation of the results—"Let's jump into the data pool!"

FINAL THOUGHTS

Many graduate students enter their evaluation courses practically dreading the weeks ahead. Their preconceived notions, or perhaps even previous first hand experiences of what the course is about, and what it has to offer, tend to be quite narrow. Images of weeks in the library, alone, combing through dense material about how to construct valid and reliable measures are not uncommon. The benefits of understanding evaluation procedures and theory are far from recognition, and the idea of actually enjoying an evaluation course is foreign.

The goal of the courses discussed in this paper is not to train students in ten weeks to become full-time program evaluation consultants or comparative evaluation theory experts. Rather, it is to develop a critical understanding of evaluation as an academic and as a practical discipline. What we hope to produce is an analytic consumer of evaluation, someone who has the knowledge to say, “What other ways can you propose to conduct this evaluation?” or “If we have money in the grant budget to pay for an evaluation, let’s satisfy the reporting requirements expending as few resources as possible, and hire an evaluator who will provide us with some information we can use to improve our program.” Role-play has proven to be an outstanding method for accomplishing this goal.

Why not dispel the myths about evaluation courses by engaging students in fun activities that are also excellent tools for learning? The field has mistakenly relied on the traditional lecture as a means for teaching concepts that are essential to understanding why and how one conducts evaluation, and the various approaches used to do so. Role-play supports creative learning and fosters original and rigorous thinking. The exercises discussed in this paper require students to think beyond the words they read—to learn by *doing* in a safe environment. The benefits of role-play are not limited to the student. Role-play also forces the instructor to think on his/her feet, to be actively involved in the learning process, thereby facilitating the development of a productive learning environment.

NOTES

1. In some instances it is necessary for the instructor to gently correct a student if their portrayal is inaccurate. Typically, this is accomplished by reminding the student of points of view “he” had in particular articles or previous situations.

2. Debriefing is cited as an important feature of the role-play process (van Ments, 1989) and is incorporated into all of the role-play exercises discussed in this paper.

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