

EDUCATION METHODS



ROLE PLAYING

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INTRODUCTION

This note is a practical guide to what role playing is and how to do it on trade union courses.

'Role playing' is not just a method of education: it is something you do every day. One minute, you're a parent, seeing the kids off to school. Then you're off to work, and you're a driver, passenger, or pedestrian. Go to the branch meeting and you are a union activist. So in your daily life you take on a number of different roles, and get used to switching between them.

Why use role playing?

Used properly, role plays can help you to run a lively, active, and effective course. Role playing involves everyone, helps them to develop skills, and gives them practice in applying information to problems. Because your course is a 'safe' environment where you do not pay a price for making a mistake, a role play can give people confidence in trying out new ideas. So you could try to get participants to improve the way they run union meetings; talk to members, management, or journalists; or work on a negotiating team.

Role Playing

AIMS

As with all educational activities, the key element in planning is being clear about the learning aims. You should think about which skills will be developed during the role play, and about the themes which the role play will be based on. Deciding on the aims and the themes is the first stage in mapping out the type of role-play activity you will be using. Make a note of the skills and issues you want to cover: this will help you when you come to developing and running your role play. The aims of the role play must be discussed with the participants, so they know why they are carrying out the activity, and what they will get out of it. This will help at the end, with the review and assessment. Being clear about aims will also help to avoid the temptation for participants to get involved in amateur dramatics during the role plays.

RESOURCES

The main resources for use in role play activities are examples and case studies, including those drawn from participants on the course. Throughout the course, problems identified can be used as case studies. Using real problems has the advantage that there are no clever tricks, or "right answers" built into the role play. The answers have to come from the participants' assessment of the issues and how they apply the trade union approach to them.

TYPES OF ROLE PLAY

Interviews, negotiations, and meetings are all situations which can be role-played on trade union courses.

The different types of role-play involve different degrees of change in role by the course participants. Sometimes it is helpful to be very deliberate about these role changes - for example, asking that someone who has not chaired a meeting before be asked to do the job. However, large shifts in role can cause problems, and should be avoided. Don't ask a new steward to take on the role of finance director, for example:

TYPE OF ROLE-PLAY	SHIFT IN ROLE
• Meeting	Low
• Interviews	Medium
• Negotiations	High

MEETINGS

This type of role play involves small groups reporting back to a simulated trade union meeting, rather than to the tutor. A role played meeting can help to encourage the skills needed to participate, report, and chair effectively. On a health and safety course, you might convene the union's 'Safety Advisory Committee', or on a pensions course the 'pensions Information Group'.

VALUE

Meetings help to develop a wide range of skills, including:

- chairing a meeting effectively
- making notes and minutes
- making a point clearly
- giving reports concisely
- proposing and debating motions

COURSE MEETINGS

A useful development from role play methods is the use of a "course meeting". A course meeting enables you to make links with basic methods of trade union organisation and to encourage skills development. You should establish the habit of a short course meeting early in the course, towards the end of the day.

USES

A course meeting could:

- allocate tasks for workplace reports and 'Things to find out'
- review the tutor's plan for the day
- deal with practical problems and the jargon list
- review the work of the course
- make suggestions about issues to emphasise on the course
- look forward to the next day of the course.

It is useful to keep a note book and to make sure that course members take turns in minute taking and in chairing.

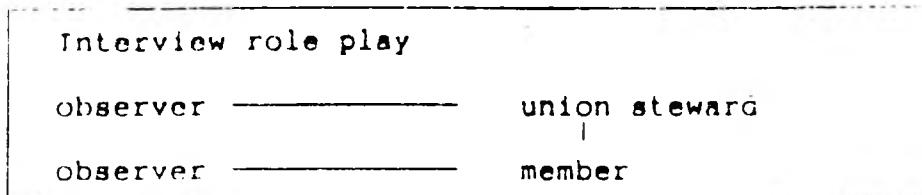
Course meetings can help participants to understand the use of meetings in trade union organisation. This means finding out the limitations on decision-making which arise from a meeting's position in the trade union structure. Course meetings cannot make union policy, nor can they overturn the aims and themes of the course, set by the TUC or your union.

INTERVIEWING

Interview role plays have proved valuable on a range of TUC and union courses. They involve skills like putting the union case, getting the facts for a grievance or discipline case, and handling members' problems.

OBSERVERS

An important method for interviewing - and with it the use of 'observers', drawn from course participants. The task is to watch how the interview is conducted, and to comment afterwards on how it went and how it could have been improved.



PARALLEL GROUPS

The best way to organise interview role plays is to allow every member of the course a role as member, union steward, observer. Then split the course up so the interviews take place at the same time around the room. After the first round, roles are reversed so that the union steward and member become observers, and vice versa.

PUTTING THE UNION CASE

A simple but very effective use of interviews is a role play 'Putting the union case', which encourages arguing and persuading skills. It can be used to persuade, for example:

- a non-member to join the union
- a member to become more active
- member to vote to set up a political fund

NEGOTIATING

Negotiating role plays can be simple and informal, such as taking the interview with a union member over discipline and stage further to a meeting with a supervisor. Or they can be more formalised and elaborate, using detailed case documentation which the groups have to digest as part of their preparation.

Our general advice on using role plays in trade union courses is that they are kept brief and simple. The more that the participants have to 'shift' their role, the more problems are likely to arise, and the greater the danger that the role play takes over from the learning aims.

Two useful ways of organising negotiating role plays are:

1. Linked interviews and negotiations

In this type of role play you first play the roles described earlier. Then the 'I' and 'You' roles are supervisor and another manager.

An alternative is to start with the interviews, then to have a team of reps (having agreed the unit) negotiate with a team of managers.

Observers are used in both stages.

2. Union teams negotiating with management

Union-side and management-side meetings are held to prepare for the team negotiations, within strict time limits (you have 45 minutes to discuss and prepare). Following the negotiation, the whole group meets to discuss the lessons learned. Reports from each group from the usual starting point.

PARALLEL NEGOTIATIONS

Where you have a large course and two rooms available, it is useful to run the same role play with two separate groups. This will help you to involve everyone, and to assess and compare results from the two groups. Reports from each group should create a constructive and practical atmosphere, without dampening the tendency to over-play.

ASSESSMENT

We have already made a number of comments about how to review your role-play. The key point is to draw on the experience of the role-play in order to learn some lessons. Each role-play session, therefore must allow ample time for a review. Carrying out the role play may be 'good fun', but little will have been learned unless there is an opportunity to sit back and comment on what happened critically.

The most useful techniques for review sessions include:

1. Reports from observers

At the beginning of the review, observers are asked to list what they found to be the strong/weak points of the role-play they observed. This technique is especially effective if the observer has had the chance to be an observer. The latter has the benefit of creating an atmosphere in which constructive criticism - seen through an observer's report - is seen as

helpful. An 'observer' checklist' or an agreed structure to structure the report and focus attention on what

2. Comments by role players

It is always useful to ask participants to evaluate their performance - what they thought went well, what weak points, and what they would do differently. Avoid the temptation for participants to analyse their case or their actions - that's the job of the review!

3. Lessons learned - Do's and Don'ts

After the reports and comments, a useful way of summarising is to ask all groups to help compile a list of what emerged from the role play. A practical and highly participatory way of doing this is to ask them to note down their 'Do's' and 'Don'ts' on posters.

Checklist

Using role play

- * Look out for real examples and problems that can be used as case studies and role plays
- * Explain your aims clearly and discuss with the Participants
- * Use observers constructively and try to alternate the course so everyone has the chance to be an observer at some time
- * Consider using parallel role plays if you have the space
- * Always allow proper time for review and discussion. Take comments from participants and observers, and conclude with a summary such as Do's and Don'ts.