

*Cost index:* Low

*Learner-centered index:* High

*Duration of the learning activity:* 1–2 weeks

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## Activity 81. Online Role Play of Personalities

**Description and Purpose of Activity.** In addition to a mock trial presented in Activity 80, students can engage in online role plays. Role plays typically ask participants to assume or act out different perspectives, personalities, characters, or attitudes. Role play situations can be tightly structured by the instructor or instructional designer or more loosely structured, where the participants might assume multiple roles or suggest fully new ones. One popular online role play simulation platform that was developed in Australia is called Flabusi.

In our own teaching, we have conducted role plays using both asynchronous and synchronous conferencing technology. As noted in Chapter Five, we have done this in many different ways, including assigning students specific personalities to play in the online environment (for example, pessimist, questioner, protestor, comic, summarizer, and so on). In fact, we have designed twenty-eight different personality roles. Sometimes we assign students to one of these twenty-eight roles and other times they sign up for those that are of most interest to them. To add spice to the activity, we often attach names of real individuals to the personality role; for example, Mother Teresa might be assigned to someone in the humanitarian role, Sir Edmund Hillary to someone in the adventurer role, and Attila the Hun to someone who is the warrior. The warrior, pessimist, or devil's advocate role is usually central to student interaction and resulting learning; we find that without such role assumption, students are hesitant to be critical of their peers online. These roles give them license to be critical or negative in their feedback.

Such role play activities may be used in online or blended settings to promote critical thinking, awareness and sensitivity to diversity, problem solving, decision making, and other higher-order thinking skills. In K–12 settings, role plays can be fun and rewarding, such as the replaying of historical events that are being taught or current news stories that relate to the course content. And, in teacher education programs, role plays can foster a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic social system of education. For example, teacher education students might act out the roles of different parties or stakeholders involved in a technology integration project, the sharing of high-risk technology ideas and initiatives with the local community, or events aimed at creating

technology-related policies for a school district or community. Learners in a customer service training situation in the corporate world may play various types of customers with their different problems or complaints. Here, participants may need to choose and defend different responses and solutions for customer satisfaction.

***Skills and Objectives.*** Includes critical thinking, appreciation of multiple perspectives and perspective taking, application of skills learned, feedback, problem solving and problem identification, and overall flexible application of learned concepts and principles.

***Advice and Ideas.*** Carefully select the content or topic for which an online role play would be useful. If funding allows, purchase a prepackaged role play from a publisher. If you do not have significant resources, find a free or less expensive program online or design your own creative role play activity that captures the material being taught in the class. Set up the role play platform in the learning management system (LMS) or course management system (CMS) using the discussion forum or conference to post an initial thread or arrange for a synchronous conferencing meeting in which all participants act out their roles live. We have done that for our own classes and found much success without spending money on software packages.

Define student online roles with sufficient detail and provide guidelines as necessary. Such guidelines may relate to when to post, how much to post, and how to respond to peers. Assign learners to specific roles or have students sign up for them. Give learners as much control over this task as possible, including signing up for roles and perhaps even designing or suggesting new roles. If students do not like a role that they selected or were assigned, allow them to change roles. Typically, we maintain roles over multiple weeks of an activity but change them when the activity changes. Be careful to train those in any negative type of role (for example, devil's advocate, pessimist, idea squelcher, and so on) on how to critique ideas instead of attacking people.

Facilitate the online role play activity with prompts, questions, and task structuring. The latter might involve reminding learners of participation dates, expectations for interaction, and, of course, their roles (whether they are participating as expected). At some point in the process, provide an opportunity for learners to address the conflicts or disagreements between their assigned roles and their own thoughts or viewpoints. In the end, any debriefing with reflections and discussions on the role play activity will reinforce and extend their learning.

**Variations and Extensions.** One variation of this activity would be to use a small set of preselected key roles (for example, summarizer, questioner, coach, starter, optimist, and pessimist) that students sign up for weekly. Then allow the students who have not signed up for one of the preselected roles to pick any other open or unassigned role each week, or, if none are appealing, allow students simply to be themselves. Reflections after the completion of the role play activity can be encouraged to further promote critical thinking.

## Key Instructional Considerations

*Risk index:* High

*Time index:* Medium

*Cost index:* Low (assumes use of free or existing resources)

*Learner-centered index:* High

*Duration of the learning activity:* 1–2 weeks

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## Activity 82. Action Research

**Description and Purpose of Activity.** One way to personalize learning is to assign an action research project using students' new learning acquisitions. In action research, an individual or a team conducts field research to examine one or more questions or issues. While used in real-world settings such as training environments, action research tends to be found more often in higher education classes. Of course, data collected during this field research may serve to alter or advance the original set of learner questions. And the learners will likely learn additional principles and concepts beyond the instruction.

We have used action research in our professional development classes with practicing teachers. At the start of such courses, we provide these experienced teachers with a guide sheet and ask them to brainstorm action research ideas and then to reflect on how they will accomplish the idea that they selected. Next they design a technology integration project while collecting student surveys and other data about its effectiveness. At the end of the semester they present not only their curriculum innovations but also student satisfaction findings and any student learning achievement data available.

Similar action research projects could be developed in any discipline when students who are working full or part-time are in the course. Businesspeople in a leadership training course, for instance, might collect data from their employees on their management practices. School counselors might collect survey data