

## Role-play as a pedagogical method to prepare students for practice: The students' voice

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In this article we discuss how and why role-play supports students in gaining insights into complex leadership situations. We give voice to the students by illustrating their experiences in a role-playing activity involving a human resource management issue designed, performed, and evaluated as part of a management program. The results show that the role-playing supports the students by stimulating them to understand the issue from various perspectives, hence performing an overall change of perspectives. The role-playing exercise also enabled the students to create a collective understanding of the situation. The active social interactions and conversations of role-playing contributed to establishing a sense of community among the students. We argue that role-play could be a viable and forceful pedagogical method whereby teachers give their students the opportunity to prepare for practice. However, to implement role-play as an alternative method of learning requires that the method is a part of the institutional learning space.

*Key words:* Active learning, Role-play; Pedagogical method, Leadership in practice, Management program

### INTRODUCTION

The significance of active learning is becoming increasingly acknowledged as a way of increasing the involvement, motivation, and responsibility of students in higher education. These aspects are discussed in various deep learning approaches (Kivinen and Ristelä, 2002; Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse, 1999; Willmott, 1994). Several, such as Kolb and Kolb (2005, 2010), Kayes, Kayes and Kolb (2005), and Bassey (2010), stress that concrete experiences are the basis for students' reflections in higher education. Role-playing is a pedagogical method that belongs to active learning. The pedagogical method is, mainly, described as suitable for achieving understanding an issue and "forcing" students to be independent. However, the method is rarely proposed when students have to learn something quickly and based on a large number of facts (Andersson, 2005). Several academic disciplines use role-play to incorporate active learning into teaching such as psychology, law, history, medicine, nursing, and business and administration. Numerous studies have reported that role-play is positive for students' learning; for example, the method provides the opportunity to get a deeper understanding of an issue and stimulates further interest in the subject (Rao and Stupans, 2012; Ruhanen, 2005). McCarthy and Anderson (2000) have compared the effectiveness of learning based on role-play with more traditional teaching methods, and argue (2000, p. 290): "Our results suggest that using certain active learning techniques in the classroom may well enable students to absorb and retain information just as well as, if not better than, the more traditional methods." Another argument is that role-

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playing provides a variation of the usual teaching methods, and helps balance between theory and practice in a course (Sogunro, 2004). The use of active learning techniques increases the possibility of suiting students with different learning styles. Role-play provides a high degree of student participation or, as Howell (1991, p. 69) expresses it: “.../ in a role-play, all students are actively involved.” Further benefits are that role-playing can give insights into a future profession (Edalatjow, 2007), and particular issues from working life (Rao and Stupans, 2012). Armstrong (2003) and Ruhanen (2005) have found that role-playing can provide students with a broader set of skills for future employment.

The aim of this article is to discuss how and why role-playing can contribute to students’ insights into complex leadership situations in working life. In the article, we focus on role-play as a pedagogical method in management programs. A key subject in management programs is leadership. Leadership is an elusive phenomenon. Current research into leadership emphasizes that it is essential to understand the ways leadership is practiced in everyday work situations (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Raelin, 2011), stressing a reflective perspective on leadership. Being a leader in an organization entails working with human relationships in various contexts (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2008; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992), and handling multifaceted and complex situations in everyday working life. Leadership is not performed in isolation, but in relation to others (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010; Fairhurst, 2009). Leaders thus need to acquire deeper insights into the dynamics and processes of relationships; in doing so, they must also try to understand the other actors’ power, feelings, and opinions (Arenas, 2006; Hendry, 2006; Monks, Barker and Mhanachain, 2001). Furthermore, the ability to view something from the other actors’ perspectives or mindsets might be considered a crucial part of leadership competence (Planander and Westrup, 2013; Sogunro, 2004).

Hence, students need to acquaint themselves with the everyday situations of leadership and to acquire experience on the basis of their own practice (Huxham and Beech, 2003). Lizzio and Wilson (2004, p. 471) argue that: “One approach to meeting the challenge of preparing capable professionals is to involve students in processes that enable them to develop their abilities to adaptively and robustly learn from experience.” However, management programs often focus on rational and instrumental dimensions at the expense of values and moral considerations, or aspects of human relationships (Dunne, Harney and Parker, 2008; Gagliardi and Czarniawska, 2006). Finding pedagogical methods that support the broadening and deepening of the students’ understanding of the complexity in leadership situations is therefore important (Gherardi, 2009; Pfeffer, 2009).

The empirical data in this study is collected from one role-play event that was designed, performed, and evaluated in a BS program in Service Management at the Department of Service Management of Lund University, Sweden. At the Department, various role-plays were conducted between 2008 and 2012 to implement a more active learning approach. These role-plays involve subject as service encounters, diversity, and various aspects of human resource management. In this article, the actual role-play concerns a human resource management issue where a management meeting constitutes the context. The role-play was implemented as a part of finding pedagogical ways that could help students reflect on and discuss a particular issue from several different perspectives while practicing different roles. This is a way of creating an understanding of the complexity in leadership situations.

The students’ opinions are an important part for us to be able to discuss how and why the role-play could be considered as a valuable method. This study is based explicitly upon the stu-

dents' own experiences; we are giving voice to the students' opinion of the role-play. Based upon the students' own experiences, we discuss how and why the pedagogical method contributes to their increased understanding of the complexity in a leadership situation. We as teachers were actively involved, as instructors, in the planning and execution of the role-play.

The article is structured in the following way: First, the theoretical frame of role-play is presented, followed by a discussion on the methodological issues of the study. Then, the findings of the study are presented and the results discussed. The article ends with our reflections on the implications of role-play as a pedagogical method used in higher education.

#### THEORETICAL FRAME OF ROLE-PLAY

Role-play can be defined and implemented in several ways (Rao and Stupans, 2012). The common denominator is that participants assume different roles in which behavior and events become starting points for making visible, and learning from, what happens in various situations. An example of a common definition of role-play is that of Sogunros (2004, p. 356): ".../ as a learning activity in which participants act out a set of defined role behaviors or position with a view to acquiring desired experiences". Sogunro (2004, p. 358) also underlines that the deeper understanding achieved by role-play is mainly due to that the number of perspectives increase: ".../ role-playing encourages participants to view situations or problems from various perspectives other than their own." According to Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997), role-play describes activities where participants are involved in "as-if" situation, by way of simulated actions and circumstances. The participants are expected to act "as-if" specific conditions and situations exist, with different roles implying various types of behaviors, goals and arguing. The distinct role descriptions and prerequisites for those who take part are set up in the preparatory work of the role-play (Grysell and Winka, 2010a).

Role-play underscores the element of interpretation, in addition to highlighting dilemmas and values, which may otherwise be difficult to elucidate and understand (see, for instance, Bryant and Darwin, 2004). Usually, role-playing is mentioned as a pedagogical method that raises the awareness of the effects and consequences of how we act and communicate during social interaction (e.g., Daly, Grove, Dorsch and Fisk, 2009). The method is often used in situations where attitudes and feelings are in focus, which, as Grysell and Winka (2010b, p. 19) argue: "Values and attitudes are visible to a greater degree through body language than through verbal language. In activities, feelings, values, and attitudes are visible and can be interpreted in words, and you can thus understand the context." Moreover, role-play could also be used to develop skills in conflict resolution (Alkin and Christie, 2002).

Alkin and Christie (2002) describe role-play as a pedagogical method providing the opportunity for student-to-student and student-to-faculty partnerships in the classroom. They call the students the participants, and the instructors the facilitators of learning, emphasizing that role-playing is learning by doing in a safe environment, i.e. a classroom characterized by community sharing. Role-play makes certain demands of the teacher; though the learning effects are usually described as larger than the effort. Howell (1991, p. 75) expresses this as follows: "Whilst the preparation of a role-play may entail some extra thinking beyond the actual content of the topic, it is nevertheless well worthwhile in terms of student response and ongoing interest." However, the teacher must have a strategy and a clear purpose when choosing the type of role-play in order to get the most out of the role-playing at hand (Rao and Stupans, 2012).

In the literature, there are practical guidelines for teachers about how to set up and manage role-play (Howell, 1991; Nilsson and Waldemarson, 1988). The guidelines highlight the necessity of clarifying: Why use role-play? When to use role-play? How to organize role-play? It is also important that the teacher has strategies to deal with unexpected or difficult situations (Grysell and Winka, 2010c). For example, when students do not want to participate because they believe that the method is childish or unscientific, when students use an exaggerated demeanor, or when embarrassment or tensions between the participants is created. Such strategies can be developed by, for example, the teacher him-/herself, the role-play participants, or even learned from others by acting together with a more experienced instructor during the role-play session. Other advice in the literature suggests that the teacher should gradually become better acquainted with the method, and gain more experience before performing more profound and complex role-play.

#### METHOD AND MATERIAL

A management meeting constitutes the context of the role-play, and the actors discuss a human resource management issue and its possible solutions. The category of role-play is called the "Acting" model, and focuses on developing students' practical skills by "acting out" a small group scenario (Rao and Stupans, 2012). The role-playing activity was conducted during the second year of a university BS program called Healthy Organizations. It was performed on two occasions: once in 2009 (17 students), and again in 2011 (24 students). A similar role-playing arrangement and procedure was also conducted on one occasion as an elective course, called Management and the Healthy Workplace in 2009 (43 students, divided into two groups), during the third year. In total, 84 students were involved in the actual role-playing exercises.

In order to gather the students' experiences of these three role-playing activities, we used an assessment technique at the end of the session that provides rapid feedback (five minutes) from the students: the "minute paper" (Ramsden, 2003, p.143). The students' answers of two open-ended question sets represented what they experienced in the "here and now," and do not incorporate any deeper reflections or explications. We used this assessment technique to capture the students' personal and spontaneous thoughts. After the role-playing exercise, the students responded to the following prompts, offering what they believed might be achieved using role-play: (1) *Do you think that the role-play helped you to understand more of the issue? Why? If not, why?* (2) *Do you think it was instructive to take on various defined roles? Why? If not, why?* The answers, collected and interpreted by us, constituted the basis for the material being presented and discussed in this article. In answering the two general questions, the students expressed various aspects of opinions and experiences. These aspects were sorted and organized into categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). From these categories, key themes emerged.

#### FRAMING AND INSTRUCTIONS

The actual role-playing exercise concerns a management meeting at which there is a discussion relating to a specific human resource management issue at a fictitious company. The starting point is that the management team has noticed increasing levels of inefficiency and absence due to staff illness, as the company faces growing competition and reduced demand for its services. The company's management team has decided to hire external consultants who specialize in managing human resource management issues at organizations. The role-playing activity begins with the consultants' presentation to the management team. After the presentation and an opportunity to ask questions, the management team discusses its opinion of the consultants' proposal.

The design of the role-playing exercise itself follows Nilsson and Waldemarson's (1998) instructions, and involves three main steps: preparation, performance, and feedback. The teacher begins the role-play session with a brief introduction describing what the role-play consists of and its aim, taking into account the actual human resource management issue that is to be solved. Following the description of the company's situation, the students are divided into smaller groups. Half of the groups form external consultant teams and the other half form management teams. The management team consists of the General Manager, the Personnel Manager, the Financial Manager, the Marketing Manager, and the Operations Manager. As Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) notes when discussing "as-if" conditions in role-play, different backgrounds, tasks, and aims are inherent in a professional role, and guide the actors' beliefs and actions.

The script, as distributed to the students, is not complete; they have to spend about 45 minutes to prepare a more developed script. The external consultants are asked to develop and present a concept for increasing the staff's work efficiency and reducing absences. The management teams prepare in accordance with the following instructions (see Figure 1.):



Figure 1. Instructions for the management team

One consultant team and one management team start performing a role-playing activity which takes about 45 minutes. Next, all the students in the class give feedback, discussing the situation, and “what’s going on.” After a break, the next role-playing activity starts. At the end of the session, after all the role-playing activities have been performed and discussed, the students respond to the two questions in the minute paper.

#### FINDINGS

Above, we have described a role-play performed in order to deepen the students’ insights into leadership practice. This was addressed in such a way that the students had to solve a human resource management issue and use their theoretical knowledge from the course in this field. In addition, the students also became acquainted with the working situations of a management meeting. This section will highlight the students’ experiences of what they achieved via role-playing, thus constituting a basis for further discussion and implications. In all, 82 of the 84 students were very positive about the achievement of the role-play and the defined roles. Some of the students’ responses, as expressed in the minute papers, are quoted below (translated into English), and thus serve as illustrations of how their answers were expressed in general.

On the first question of what the students believe the role-play achieved – *Do you think that the role-play helped you to understand more about the issue? Why? If not, why?* – they answered that the role-play had a beneficial effect on learning. They believed that they learned more than in a traditional learning situation:

You learn more when you have to act.

It’s a whole lot more rewarding doing something in practice than just reading the theory; you remember what was said better afterwards.

The students said that the role-play allowed them to stage situations that can actually take place at an organization. Many of them emphasized that the learning situation while role-playing was far more realistic than during traditional learning methods:

More reality-based situations become more instructive.

It provides a good picture of the reality; it’s how it works.

According to the students, the staged situation resulted in many beneficial effects: they took a more active part in activities; they listened more actively; and they paid more attention to what was taking place:

It creates more commitment and more active listening; the entire situation becomes more vivid.

Better understanding of the questions and more active participation.

The students emphasized that the role-play encouraged them to take an active involvement with the exercise. They noticed that the involvement increased their ability to understand dif-

ferent interpretations and various solutions to the problem. The effect was due not only to their own interpretation of the situation and their actions, but also to others' interpretations of the situation and their actions, which contributed to thoughtfulness. The students became aware of proposals that they had not considered:

Many new ideas that I hadn't thought of; you become more creative.

I had many different creative thoughts, while seeing various ways of handling the questions. We learnt from each other.

The students believed that acting stimulated their creativity and enhanced their learning. The students emphasized that the role-play forced them to reflect and think as a unit while searching for an understanding of the whole situation. The management team at the company faced a complex problem for which it had to find a solution, and the consultant group had to convince the management team to accept the proposed solution:

It creates good cohesion (unity) within the group, which leads to enhanced performance.

A good way of boosting the sense of community within the group. I dare to take more space and participate more actively.

The students believed that the role-play was fun as well as motivating, something which had a significant impact on the learning situation:

I was better informed about the issue at hand, I listened more effectively, and it was interesting, fun, and rewarding.

It's fun – I feel more motivated and listen more actively.

To the second question – *Do you think it was instructive to take various defined roles? Why? If not, why?* – they answered that they found it very instructive. They believed that performing a role in a management team, or acting in the role of a consultant at a meeting with a management team, was an effective way of training for the future:

Good practice before getting into leadership situations in real life.

It's a way of preparing for working life.

The students underlined the fact that occupying a defined role gave them a distinct focus, which provided them with an opportunity to reflect in greater depth on arguments that specifically related to their own role within the management team, or as consultants. Simultaneously, this focus allowed the participants to find questions that were relevant to the consultants or members of the management team who represented other roles and perspectives:

It was good that different approaches came up. Otherwise, everyone might easily have taken the same perspective.

Each member is forced to expand his or her own views and to increase his or her understanding of the other side.

Some students said that a defined role restricted their actions during the discussion. They also believed, however, that the restriction contributed to their distinct roles and became a part of the whole that was generated by the discussion. The students stressed that it became obvious that the same problem might be considered in various ways, depending on perspective:

You get an insight into the ways in which different managers discuss things in a certain context. You can be more critical and see the proposed measure from another perspective.

It's important to discuss the problem from different points of view. You see various ways to attacking the problem.

It was not only the understanding of their own role and its perspective, but also other roles and their perspectives which provided additional dimensions for the company's problems and proposals as regards handling the situation. These insights provided the opportunity to see and understand the problem from several perspectives, and to be aware of the importance of changes in these perspectives. In the light of several perspectives on the same problem, the students were able to discuss that problem on the basis of the complete picture leading up to a decision being made by the management team:

Good to see that focuses may vary depending on which responsibility you have, and that you can get on well with other opinions.

Compromising is important.

As shown above, the students' opinions incorporated several aspects concerning what they achieved using role-play. They articulated that the role-play was perceived as a real-life situation. The students insisted that the role-play had forced them to consider different interpretations and perspectives. Furthermore, the challenge of understanding the complete situation was an aspect that the students mentioned. It was also evident that active listening and awareness was stimulated by role-playing, as well as their creativity of finding various solutions for the actual problem. In addition, they also pointed out that role-playing was fun and educational. Those aspects indicate that the students felt that the role-play supported them in getting insights into a complex leadership situation.



## DISCUSSION

In the previous section, we gave voice to the students while describing and illustrating their experiences of the role-play exercise. In this section, we use the theoretical frame of role-play to discuss how and why the students' insights into the complex leadership situation were enabled by role-playing.

First, the students not only focused on their own interpretation of the situation, but also became conscious of other students' interpretations and perspectives regarding the human resource management issue. The role-play exercise made the students realize that the competence of understanding a problem from several different perspectives was important. Being able to understand a problem from several different perspectives during a learning situation, as well as in real working life, could be seen as performing "change of perspectives." Hence, we argue, that the change of perspectives enabled by role-playing leads to a more reflective view, while also offering a chance to achieve deep understanding as well as leadership competencies (Sogunro, 2004). The students become aware of the potentially different meanings of a single situation, that the situation might be interpreted from various perspectives, and that the problem might have several solutions. The value of different points of view and argumentation is of importance. The role-play could be seen as a method of stimulating a "reflective practitioner" (Huxham and Beech, 2003) in a safe context (Alkin and Christie, 2002). This helps the students to be aware of the prescriptive nature of management theories, as well as the complexity of real life: there are no set answers.

Second, defined roles were provided in the instructions for the role-play, but the script had not been completed. Since the students were supposed to complete it, they were forced to actively engage in its preparation. A role-play includes different roles which imply different perspectives as regards to goals, arguing, and so forth. Furthermore, Yardely-Matwiejczuk (1997) notes when discussing the "as-if" issue, that given conditions of the situation and expected behaviors relating to different roles are included in role-play. The interactive nature of role-playing also forces the students to act and react spontaneously in their roles. The social interactions that emerged during the role-play exercise created a complete situation – wholeness. We argue that this wholeness creates a "collective understanding" of the situation among the students. The collective understanding, not just individual understanding, is an essential part of the process that contributes to the students' engagement and insights to the complexity of the situation.

Third, the conversations between the students were a significant part of the role-play. The conversations took place before, during, and after the performances. The role-playing facilitated discussions and provided insight into various behaviors and ways of communicating. It was evident that the role-playing exercise generally stimulated social interactions and conversation between the students, thus helping them to overcome basic shyness. The students also had a positive basic attitude towards the active participation that role-play requires. In this way a "sense of community" is created among the students (cf. Alkin and Christie, 2002). Role-playing was perceived as fun and the students felt that they were learning something and took an active part. We argue that the students' responsibility for their own learning is thus explicitly augmented by role-playing activities; thinking that something is pleasurable is a significant part of the learning situation (Kolb and Kolb, 2010).

In addition, the teachers did not need to use their strategies (Grysell and Winka, 2010c; Rao and Stupans, 2012) of handling unexpected or difficult situations during the actual role-playing activities. This could, in part, be explained by the fact that the teachers began the role-play session with an introduction describing what the role-play consists of and its aim.

In summary, the study shows that the role-playing activity supported the students in getting insights into a complex leadership situation by stimulating change of perspectives, a collective understanding, and a sense of community. Moreover, the results of this study support that role-playing learning activities can provide insight into situations occurring in working life, which is in line with what has been regarded to be one of the method's advantages in current research. In other words, role-play also functions as a forceful pedagogical method in a management program.

However, the results from the study should be considered in light of the study's limitations. One limitation in the study is that we have investigated the students' experiences of the role-playing without connection to students' results from the overall course. A second limitation is that the assessment technique we have used gives the students a short time to respond to questions, and the students had no opportunity to think about the question at length, or to discuss it with each other. Other studies may, therefore, need to be done at the department of Service Management, to investigate the link between the method and the results of the course, and to investigate the students' opinions based on an assessment technique where the students come together to discuss over a longer time, their experiences with each other (e.g., focus groups).

#### IMPLICATIONS

As expressed in the discussion, role-playing contributes to a change of perspective, a collective understanding, and a sense of community within the student group. These cognitive dimensions occur through the interaction process within the group, through which a learning community developed (cf. Wenger, 1999). Peer-to-peer situations and other forms of cooperative learning (e.g., group works, guided discussions, etc.) may be seen as more directly hands-on and corrective, but passive nevertheless. The learning community developed during role-playing activities provides students with a context that stimulates active learning and the opportunity to learn from their own experiences. Also, role-play allows the students to detach themselves from their individual selves, which may otherwise be perceived as emotionally laborious when it comes to discussions, feedback, and self-insight (Lizzio and Wilson, 2004). The "as-if" conditions enable this detachment, but also make the situation more real and vivid. At the same time, role-play also forces the teacher to be actively involved in the students' learning process. We therefore argue that role-play could be a viable and forceful pedagogical method whereby teachers give their management program students the opportunity of preparing for real-life practice.

Finally, pedagogical methods of teaching, such as traditional lectures (which include only a minimum level of student participation) and other "top-down" (teacher-centered) models, are still of obvious value to students; on the other hand, alternative methods of learning, such as role-playing activities, are not always perceived as being of equal status by educational institutions (Lueddeke, 1997; Valk, 2009). We would thus like to draw attention to the importance of creating structures within these educational institutions that support the various students' ways of learning (student-centered approach), linking up with Kolb and Kolb's (2005) discussions about the learning space. Introducing role-play as a common form of teaching in the field of active learning requires institutional prerequisites; the educational institutions are responsible for supporting this pedagogical approach just like other forms of learning. Otherwise, role-play may become a pedagogical method which is fun and educational, but which only represents an odd and different element of learning (cf. Andersson, 2005). Therefore, we will underline the importance of continuous collective dialogue at the institutional level (cf. Mårtensson, Roxå and Olsson, 2011) concerning different pedagogical methods, as well as the different kinds of learning situations, which must be highlighted more in higher education.

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