USING A ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITY IN TRAINING

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> Role-play activities usually require people to take risks, which is why people often feel awkward and play the scene in an overly silly or simplistic fashion. We use role plays with caution because we believe they only enhance learning when people are willing to take risks, and we want risk taking to be a positive experience.   ~ Carter/Curtis

INTRODUCTION

Role-play activities involve participants in "acting out" or "trying on" new roles directly related to the content and learning outcomes of a training session. A well developed role-play activity provides a powerful learning experience that reflects the real complexities of day-to-day work in the early childhood profession and naturally engages learners in a simulation that requires the integration of their knowledge, skills, and emotions. Acting out a role-play can support learning by a) providing a model for application of new skills, b) allowing participants to practice new skills, c) supporting perspective-taking as participants try on various roles, and d) encouraging evaluation of a range of appropriate responses to the same situation.

> Role-plays are useful ways to look at the practical application of early childhood concepts, as well as explore attitudes and skills that lead to staff conflicts and communication problems.*

ELEMENTS OF A ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITY

To use role-play as a learning tool in a training session, the facilitator must first create an environment in which participants feel safe enough to assume roles and practice new skills in front of their peers. A safe environment takes time to establish. In a safe environ-ment, participants feel very comfortable taking risks and making mistakes.

Facilitating an effective role-play activity requires both thorough planning before the session and clear communication with participants about the scope and details of the role-play activity during the session. During planning, be sure to give thought to the various directions the role-play might take from the initial scenario, and make changes, if necessary, so you have anticipated what to expect and there are no surprises. For example, when participants take on the role of a child, there is often a tendency to act out the most undesirable behavior they have experienced. If you anticipate that this could happen in the activity you have scripted, refine the script or plan to talk with participants about the scope of the child's role in advance.

The trainer's planning process and communication with participants should include: 1) the purpose of the role-play activity in the context of learning objectives; 2) a simple statement of the challenge or issue facing the role-play characters; 3) a description of the setting for the role-play; 4) a description of each role to be played and the perspective each player should take in acting out the role; and 5) ample opportunity for debriefing after the role-play activity ends.

Debriefing should involve participants in discussion of both the feelings that came up for them individually and the relationship between what happened and the activity's objective. The facilitator may need to take notes

during the role-play to guide the debriefing.

ORGANIZING A ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITY

To benefit from the role-play activity, all session participants must be involved at some level. Depending on group size, complexity of the concept being explored, and level of safety established, three basic formats can be used to enact the role-play.

~ Multiple Small Groups or Pairs

Participants can be divided into small groups or pairs with participants in each group assuming a role. Some individuals are more comfortable in this arrangement than in a larger group. In addition, small groups give the opportunity for shared analysis during debriefing, since multiple individuals explore the same role.

~ One Small Group and Observers ("Fish Bowl")

A group of participants can act out assigned roles as other participants watch and observe. For this approach to be effective, the observers need specific criteria to guide their observation. The "fish bowl" method gives optimal opportunity for the trainer to observe and guide both the role-play and the debriefing discussion.

~ Trainer Led

The trainer and one or two carefully chosen individuals can enact the role-play while the other participants observe. This method is especially useful when a safe environment has not been established or the topic is emotionally charged.

> Sometimes we do the role-play ourselves, asking for one or two volunteers to take on a small part.*

TYPES OF ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITIES

To offset the varying levels of comfort found in individual participants and in different training environments, there are different levels of intensity of role-play, each one requiring a bit more independence and risk-taking from participants. Interestingly, each requires a different level of preparation from the trainer as well.

Although there are probably other variations, let's look at three general types of role-play: 1) a detailed script that tells participants exactly what to say, 2) a semi-detailed script that offers participants a guide for their role and what to say, and 3) a non-scripted role that allows participants to use new skills to create original dialogue. Each of these types of role-play has a slightly different purpose/outcome as well.

~ Scripted Role-play

Scripted role-play provides a safe, relatively risk-free way for participants to become involved in the activity when they are unfamiliar with one another and/or the content. Scripts are especially useful for meeting either of two goals: 1) demonstrating a new skill in practice or 2) encouraging participants to take on and explore a variety of perspectives.

For example, imagine you are facilitating a training session on the use of encouragement as a positive child guidance strategy. To provide a model of this strategy in practice, the scripted role-play would provide a situation and exact words that demonstrate how a teacher would use encouragement in the classroom as illustrated below.

Child: Look at the dinosaur I made!

Teacher: You made a dinosaur out of playdough!

Child: Yup. I needed lots of playdough.

Teacher: I wonder what part of the dinosaur you made first . . . .

Child: I made the head because that was the hardest and then I made the body with squishy feet and the tail. It took a long time to make the spikes.

Teacher: How did you decide to put spikes on his back?

Child: I saw it in the picture, the picture in the dinosaur book.

Teacher: What else do you know about dinosaurs?

This script would continue, providing exact dialogue of a conversation designed to encourage children to take the lead in their own learning process.

Further, let's say one of your goals is to help participants take this strategy back to the early childhood setting and support colleagues in using more encouragement as well as use it themselves. Again, the role-play

you design would provide the situation and the exact words to demonstrate how to do this. The script might focus on the perspective of other teachers and model strategies to deal with resistance to new ideas and defensive reactions as demonstrated below.

Teacher 1: That workshop on encouragement the director wanted me to go to was this weekend. I have a handout for you and some ideas on how we can get started using these new ideas.

Teacher 2: I'm glad it was you who got stuck with going to that. I sure don't have extra time for workshops or even reading this stuff.

Teacher 1: I know what you mean. I was feeling that way, too, but now I'm really excited about how encouragement could help our kids.

Teacher 2: That's another thing. I've been using praise with these kids for three years now. Is she trying to tell us we've been doing it wrong all this time?

This script would continue, providing exact dialogue until positive closure on the issue is achieved.

~ **Semi-scripted Role-play**

A semi-scripted role-play is effective when participants have some experience with role-playing and have established some comfort level with one another. In addition, the participants need to have some experience with the topic in order to create realistic dialogue. Let's return to the workshop on encouragement and assume this is the second training session in a series on child guidance. The participants are now familiar with the topic and with one another. A semi-scripted role-play would offer some support to participants but also require the application of new skills.

Parent: It seems like Sara used to come home with a lot of cute little stickers on her paintings, and I haven't seen any for a while.

Teacher: I'm glad you brought that up. Do you remember that article on encouragement we sent home a couple of weeks ago?

Parent: A little bit. Was that the one on not telling kids when they do a good job?

Teacher: Yes. It talked about the difference between praising and encouraging children. At first I thought it meant never telling the children how great we think

they are! Now, I've learned that it is okay to use praise and stickers sometimes but there are other ways I can help children develop tools to feel good about themselves, even when I'm not giving them praise or stickers!

Parent: (Continue this script expressing your concerns about the lack of rewards and the love your child has for stickers!)

Teacher: (Continue this script using your knowledge about—and experience with— encouragement.)

Resolution needs to include mutual respect for differing opinions and an agreement to give encouragement a try.

> Most of our role-plays are written about specific situations we have encountered. As we write the parts, we try to build in real complexities people encounter and avoid making anyone a fool or bad guy in the scene.*

~ **Non-scripted Role-play**

A non-scripted role-play offers an excellent opportunity to use ideas or skills in context. In order for this to be an effective training strategy, participants must be very familiar with the topic (not beginners) and very comfortable learning with peers. The non-scripted role-play assigns specific roles and provides a brief description of those roles and the situation to be addressed. The trainer, as facilitator of the role-play, must support participants in their roles, and avoid doing anything that interrupts the enactment. Make notes of any thoughts you want to remember, and wait to provide feedback until the debriefing.

Giving participants even a brief time for preparation can heighten the impact of the role-play. After you give out the "role cards" which sketch out their role's characteristics and the scenario, let participants have time to think about the role/character, decide how that character might act, and plan what he or she might say.

As we return to the workshop series on encouragement, the non-scripted activity might look like this: select three players in your group, a child care provider, a parent, and a four-year-old child. It is departure time, and the child has taken the parent to the art center to look at his painting. The parent uses praise with the child, and the teacher uses encouragement. How might this look and what kind of dialogue might result?

> When we do have participants play all the parts, we provide specific instructions about the role so that each is clear about what is expected. Those who don't assume roles become observers to analyze and offer reflections during the debriefing.*

CONCLUSION

Role-play activities merit consideration when planning a training session. When considering the value of this learning strategy, it is also important to note that some participants may be uncomfortable with the risks involved in role-playing and learning in front of colleagues. Establishing an atmosphere of trust and effectively implementing the activity can help alleviate individual discomfort when you include each of the following elements: a) an appropriate format to enact the role-play; b) clear communication about the scope and details of the roles and activity; c) the right for participants to choose a passive role such as recorder or observer, or freely pass when they are not ready to participate at a given level; d) time for participant preparation, and e) a debriefing after the role-play activity to tie the experience back to the primary learning objectives.

Role-play has important uses in the adult learning environment as one way to translate new ideas into everyday language and everyday practice. In addition, it can be an effective strategy for engaging interpersonal learners. In our efforts to provide professional development experiences that are meaningful and clearly related to the realities of the early care and education field, role-play may be "the next best thing to being there." ~

> The idea behind using simulations as pedagogical tools relies on the idea that experience is the best teacher. If access to such experience in real-time is impossible, an artificial environment may be, if not ideal, at least sufficient. ~ Albert Ip, Australian Educator

RESOURCES*

* Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice by M. Carter and D. Curtis (1994). Redleaf Press: St. Paul, MN.

** Additional and practical suggestions for using and managing role-plays can be found on the Internet. A few of the ideas from the following link (written for ESL teachers by George and Daisy Stocker of Victoria, BC) have been incorporated into this newsletter: www.efl-esl.com/esl-activity/role-play.html.