

Class Role-Plays

Ethical role-playing is another activity to encourage students to apply the ethical reasoning and decision-making processes they are learning in class to concrete ethical situations or practical problems. Students demonstrate mastery of ethical reasoning and understanding of the various ethical theories by applying them to ethical challenges in a fun role-play with other students, which also allows them to develop and practice interpersonal and communication skills. In fact any thought experiment or case study can be turned into a role play where students might more easily uncover their hidden assumptions, implicit biases, and harmful stereotypes, while increasing empathy for others.

In a role play, students are assigned a part to play and act out in order to rehearse moral behavior and explore different perspectives. There are many different ways to design a role play activity. You may create the role play scenarios yourself with general instructions, like background information and some initial dialogue for the students to begin with, after which they ad-lib the scene as it unfolds. You might give the students a basic premise around which they act out how the scene might unfold. For example, you may say, “Your roommate loudly criticizes you in front of other friends. What do you do?” Or, you may have the students create their own scenarios and write the initial script themselves. For a wonderful example of this last approach and its benefits to moral education see the article by Deborah Mower, “Scripting Situations in Moral Education” in *Teaching Ethics* 11.1 (Fall 2010).

However you design the role play, it is important that you have the students act out the application of the different moral approaches they are learning. Perhaps you have them act out the scenario the first time as they think it would naturally happen. Then have them act it out by applying virtue ethics, or care ethics, or utilitarianism, or deontology, etc. It is important to make it a safe environment for the students, so you might want to establish a few ground rules and expectations before beginning. Role plays work best when you assign the roles and have, as one of the roles, an observer who watches the scene as it unfolds and provides feedback to the other participants. Also be sure to rotate the roles among the students as the scene is replayed.

To create a role play is quite simple: **first** identify the situation, including the place, people, and triggering event so the scene is clear; **second**, assign roles, be sure to include the observer role; **third**, act out the scenario (you will act it out multiple times with different moral approaches and rotating roles); **fourth**, debrief and discuss what was learned. An additional benefit of role plays, as Mower points out, is they can help students become aware of their own unhealthy cognitive scripts and learn to rewrite them to better govern their ethical relationships with family, friends, community, and the world around them.

Here are a few examples of role play situations you can use.

What Lives Matter?

You, Mallory, are having dinner with your friend Ross and his family, who you've just met. Ross's family member, who is white, out of the blue says he can't understand all the protests about Black Lives Matter. The protests really upset him. He says, he's not a racist, and he wishes they would stop calling him one. "All lives matter," he says, "and minorities need to stop playing the victim card." You're upset because you support BLM, but you don't want to offend anyone or cause trouble for your friend Ross.

The triggering event: The family member's comments about the protests surrounding Black Lives Matter.

Parts to assign:

Mallory:

Ross:

Ross's family member:

Observer:

(After a few minutes, you may want to switch roles.)

Grant Money

A large grant is available for women students who change their major to a science with the intent of motivating more women to study and graduate in science majors. You are an English major with no intention of changing majors. However, you were told that you could switch majors just for the year, while taking GE courses and then switch back when the year is over. So you could get the money and still pursue an English major.

The triggering event: An opportunity to receive needed grant money while only pretending to change your major.

Parts to assign:

You-the English major

A friend who is advising you:

Observer:

(After a few minutes, you may want to switch roles.)

Demeaning Spouse

Your spouse or roommate has the habit of loudly demeaning you in front of others. You're having friends over for game night, and your spouse or roommate begins to demean you in front of the others.

The triggering event: Being demeaned loudly in front of others by someone you care about.

Parts to assign:

You:

Your spouse or roommate:

Friends who are present:

Observer:

(After a few minutes, you may want to switch roles.)

Bad Group Project

In one of your college classes, a large portion of your grade is determined by a group project. There are five people in your group, but only you and one other student do most if not all of the work. The other three are taking advantage of you two, and the professor doesn't seem to know what's going on.

The triggering event: Fellow students not pulling their weight in a group project.

Parts to assign:

You:

The other responsible student:

The three irresponsible students:

The professor:

Observer:

(After a few minutes, you may want to switch roles.)