

THE REALITY OF ROLE PLAY: PRE- AND POST-9/11 A TEACHABLE MOMENT

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On Monday, September 10, 2001, the author entered her macro social work methods class with a role-play assignment asking the students to be citizens of a rural community in West Virginia. Having given such assignments for more than 15 years, she was comfortable that networking, coalition building, Roberts Rules, and formal processing would be the expected outcomes. They were to meet again on September 12. The world changed on September 11, and the assignment became real in a way that the author could not possibly have anticipated. The learning outcomes also went far beyond her predictions.

I have taught for nearly 17 years, and experiential learning activities are part of my usual repertoire. I rarely use the same materials twice since I typically try to incorporate current events into the classroom activity. The official title of the role play activity I designed for class on Monday, September 10, 2001, was "Planning a Meeting: Part A." On that day, I asked my macro methods social work students to draw their assigned roles from an envelope containing a variety of citizens in a small, rural community in West Virginia. I hoped to use that first class period to build coalitions, practice networking, assess resources and needs, and so forth. The following Wednesday, September 12, the class was to meet again to have a town meeting using Roberts Rules of Order to discuss the issue they had been assigned: an influx of Afghani refugees. My hope was that they would reach some resolution. I was an observer during both sessions, taking notes and watching for teaching moments related to the text information we had read.

The current events for that day included an anti-Arab sentiment that had been growing (in my observation) among my students over the past several years. In addition, I had designed a somewhat stereotypical rural community. Most of my students were familiar with a rural environment, so I was hoping the

transition to another state and to a slightly different lifestyle would be easy for them to accomplish in a role play. As with all role plays, there are elements that become real—some are anticipated in the design; some are not. What were unanticipated in this particular design were the events of September 11, 2001. I could not possibly have predicted the enormous consequences of one day's activities on what was supposed to be an ordinary day in the classroom.

Description of the Situation and the Roles Situation

You live in the community of Staples, WV. This community has recently received an influx of refugees from Afghanistan. Very few of them speak English, and of those who do, only one or two speak fluently. They have school-age children (K-12), and they need employment, housing, furnishings, clothing, medical and dental care. The major employer in your community is a chicken farm and processing factory, but there are few openings. You will role play a resident of this community with a particular point of view and role responsibility. Make every effort to stay in that role when you are in COPA class.

Roles

1. You are the mayor and direct all the meetings. You are concerned about getting re-elected and seek a compromise solution that won't cost the community big bucks.

2. You are the owner of the chicken factory/processing center. You don't want to have to spend your time getting people assimilated to America. You just want someone to pluck and cut-up. Your concern is profits. You also want to appear to have the best interests of the community in mind.

3. You are a real estate manager. You know there is limited housing available. You recommend bringing in trailers to house the refugees. You are opposed to building new apartments due to the cost and insecurity of employment of the refugees.

4. You are a school teacher. You want to educate the children, but you are quite concerned about the language barrier.

5. You are a minister. You believe that you should help your fellow man/woman/child. You are supportive of full-fledged community involvement, including seeking contributions from the wealthier segments of the community.

6. You are a member of the city council and run the car dealership. You'd be open to some new residents, but not if they drain the system.

7. You are a member of the city council and own the restaurant. You don't care one way or the other whether new people come to town unless they intend to stay and build the economy.

8. You are a member of the city council, a single-parent mother who has suffered ostracism from the community at various times over your parenting alone by choice. (This community is a very religious community that has shown little tolerance or support—you've been backed primarily by women.)

9. You are a citizen of the town. You are opposed to any immigrants setting up their household in your community because you

consider them a drain on the resources of the area (already limited and stretched).

10. You are a citizen of the town. You support refugee placement and services. You are willing to work on housing or whatever issues arise.

11. The rest of the class members are citizens who can do whatever they wished.



Day One: Role-engagement, Networking, and Coalition-building

This class period was spent learning each others' roles and points of view. Coalition building had definitely begun. By the end of the class period, it felt obvious that the community would decide to openly welcome the refugees, developing services and resources that were necessary for their successful integration. The minister was a powerful member of the community and had convinced just about everyone that it was their responsibility and privilege to help someone in need. The community saw nothing as an obstacle, not language, religion, or numbers of immigrants. They were organized into groups who were working on housing, employment, education, and needs for daily living. The future of the immigrants looked assured. However, September 11 intervened.

Day Two: September 12, 2001

After the events of September 11 and hearing of other faculty approaches to the necessity of dialogue, I debated about whether to proceed with the activity as planned. I was leaning toward an open discussion since I had assigned roles that might be difficult to maintain, and there was no guarantee that the underlying thoughts and feel-

ings of individuals would emerge. I know from experience, however, that while role plays are contrived, there are both elements that are real and those that become real. I decided to trust this process and continue with the activity into truly new and uncharted territory. I was fully prepared to be not only professor but counselor, if needed, which is a role I summarily reject. For all intents and purposes, the fictitious West Virginia community was going to be created in our classroom.

When I got to class, students began begging me not to go through with the role play. They wanted an open discussion of the events and their thoughts and feelings. I told them that Roberts Rules would allow us to discuss these painful and complicated issues with an objective format. Inside, I hoped I was right. I also desperately wanted to know that my social work students would be non-judgmental, unbiased, receptive to alternatives, and sensitive to diversity. I was afraid that they would be either too conservative or too close-minded. I had to struggle with my own expectations of student attitudes and behaviors. A part of me, too, was wondering just what might emerge in the course of an hour and a half of the most intense discussion we had entertained up to that point. I questioned my own adequacy to "let it happen." I knew that whatever was said in that classroom needed to be said. I also knew that we had developed relationships and created a safe environment for controversy. My hope was that with little encouragement, the reality of role play would take over.

The mayor called for open discussion of the issues or concerns that citizens felt it necessary to discuss. The first issue was employment. The owner of the chicken factory thought she might be able to employ the refugees if they learned to speak English. The restaurant owner thought she could hire two adults and promote two of her current employees in some way. A citizen suggested a clothing drive. Housing then emerged as an

issue, and the real estate agent offered to bring in some trailers for housing. Speaking English began to emerge as a huge issue. A controversy occurred about whether one had to speak English to pluck a chicken. This issue was revisited several times.

Someone then suggested that the community needed to learn more about the refugees before making any decisions. Suggestions included utilizing the Afghanis who lived there to do some cultural education sessions. A visit to the local library was offered. Hosting a chicken feed inviting everyone to encourage interaction was also mentioned. Someone asked why the owner of the chicken factory needed to "get to know them" when she was already giving them a job. The response was, "it's a better working environment if you know your employees." The owner responded, "Not even all of my current employees are all friends. Why do they have to be friends?" A citizen then interrupted, "In light of recent events, could we address safety issues from this population?" The minister responded, "They're refugees fleeing the activities that went on. They weren't involved." The citizen replied, "But there are new issues now between the races. What are we going to do—if—what if the community breaks up and go against each other?" The minister firmly said, "That's why we have to work together."

The chicken factory owner asked, "Do you know for a fact they didn't have anything to do with yesterday?" A citizen exclaimed, "They're refugees! They wouldn't leave their families, their homes..." Tensions were building at this point. I made a note to discuss the issue of the word "races" to describe the observed differences between populations.

The realtor then asked, as if to clarify or stay away from such a volatile topic, "Are we causing them danger from others in this area?" The restaurant owner offered, "It could be the same for all newcomers—Iceland, if I could pick a place." The realtor pursued with

"But they **are** Afghans and responsible for terrorist attacks. It's just them that are blamed for that." The minister, trying to be reasonable, stated, "Community, let our formal government deal with perpetrators." The chicken factory owner wouldn't accept reason, however. She stated, "We have no clue who to trust. Anyone could be involved." "We have to take into account that they've learned their whole lives that we're bad," said the minister. A citizen agreed. "All the more reason we need to support them—to show them how good we are." Another citizen disagreed, however. "Okay, if those here at the moment are okay, what if our community is known as a safe place for these people—we'll get more and more and more—good and bad."

The teacher said, "Let's not argue value systems. Let's agree on something. How can we provide for our safety? What about police? Help solve my problem—deal with real concerns. How will we deal with these issues?" The minister responded, "We hope to implement a plan where community members—peer mentoring, adult basic education—work with one or two Afghans." The restaurant owner objected, "You don't have to know English to drive a car. Do you have to know English to cut up a chicken?" The teacher restated her position, "We just need to make sure these people are provided for—that my own children don't get lost. I can slow down, but this is a community effort—as long as parents know I'm slowing down." "Would anyone be willing to tutor/teach these students? I don't want my child to slow down or wait for these kids. That's not fair," said a citizen. "How long will people give and give and give? When will it be taken care of?" I made a mental note to talk about the use of "these people" and the way people were dancing around the elephant in the living room.

The outcome of the role play was that the town decided not to provide any assistance to the refugees. The reasons given were that they could not protect them from angry

community members; they might be part of the terrorist network; and the community just "didn't have the resources" to divert to the refugees.



De-briefing

I did not display great wisdom because I did not allow sufficient time for processing what had just happened, and I didn't have to address the elephant in the living room. The students did. They were really emotionally distraught for several reasons. First, they openly admitted that it was extremely difficult to get into their roles. They were surprised at the intensity of their anxiety at the thought of being in a small town that might turn into a pocket of terrorists. The people most open to accepting the refugees admitted they wouldn't have supported their arrival. They kept thinking about the current Afghani residents, wondering if they had a connection to the 9/11 incidents. We spent some time talking about those feelings, trying to understand the reality for people who might "appear" to be from the Middle East, and resolving to be active in urging tolerance, acceptance, and openness. Second, the students were dismayed at their own honest reactions. They had hoped they would be more tolerant, but when their role required opposition, it was easy for them to oppose the arrival of the refugees. Many repeatedly apologized for thinking or saying things that appeared intolerant. The greatest challenge for me was to help them deal with the guilt they expressed about their feelings.

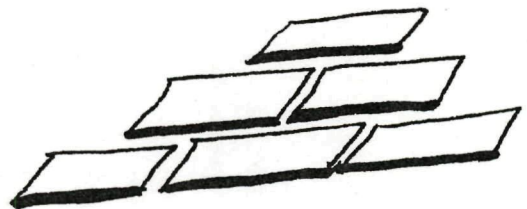
I was surprised at the openness of the communication which continued intermittently

for several more class sessions. We talked about the learning value of role play, which up to this point had been marginalized in a macro methods course. We talked about language usage, the influence of the media in shaping our reality(ies), and the difficulties of encountering the other. We also talked about linking theory to practice. It's one thing to read about networking in a textbook and quite another to try it in even a fictional encounter. The students expressed surprise at how this one activity addressed the text and the "real world" in a way that they couldn't have imagined. Several became involved in assisting refugees to the state of Nebraska at a local neighborhood center, directly as a result of this activity.

Obviously, I could not have predicted that this particular activity could become so real. In hindsight, I would have videotaped the entire activity from start to finish. I am also painfully aware of the stereotypical roles I assigned. I didn't really think of this at the time (other than making the minister more "liberal" and having the school teacher worry about bilingualism). I was merely trying to get the students to "think out of the box." In the end, it didn't matter that the role play was supposed to happen in West Virginia. It actually happened in Smalltown, USA—right in that classroom.

I will always be grateful that I had the courage to continue with the role play as assigned. I don't think we could have had a better vehicle to begin to address deeper or hidden feelings and concerns about the recent terrorist events. The role play provided the right amount of structure and freedom that allowed people to vent their views. The real learning happened when students realized that they "were" the minister, the chicken factory owner, the citizen, and so forth. This is the value of role play. I know from subsequent communication with those students that this experience provided a deeper learning than they originally expected. I also learned that

it's not enough to trust the process. I had to examine my own beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about the students and the events. Just as the students did, I had to operate on several levels: teacher and citizen, social worker and taxpayer, believer and skeptic. That is when I realized that while most literature on role play emphasizes student learning, instructor revelation should be a part of the processing after the role play, too. There is value beyond the moment in role play as a pedagogical methodology if one takes the time to reflect on the procedure.



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