Classroom Learning Communities (LCs)

Example: LC Role Play Activity

Note: This role play activity was developed at UCM for use in the course "Introduction to Academic Skills II". It is included here as an example of how Learning Communities (LCs) can be supported or scaffolded through reflection on the roles students can play in group work and conversation. In this document, you will find the following information:

- Activity description from the course's student manual
- Instructions from the course's tutor manual

Please also note that these instructions reference the first five steps of problem-based learning (PBL). The steps (developed at Maastricht) are:

1. Read the problem task and clarify any unclear **terms**.
2. **Define** the problem statement based on the problem task.
3. **Brainstorm** and discuss the problem statement based on prior knowledge or information from the problem task. The note taker takes notes of the discussion.
4. **Cluster** the notes on the board into several topics and identify knowledge gaps.
5. Based on the structured notes on the board, **define learning goals** that guide the research.
6. **Self study**: Students do their individual research and find information to answer the learning goals. Sources of information depend on the aims of the course but can for example be from a provided reading list, lectures, or individual research.
7. During the **post-discussion** the students discuss their findings and answer the learning goals. They may see if they can now better address the initial problem statement.

See the PBL section of the CREATES Toolkit for Co-Creative Learning for more information about the steps.

Activity description

Role-Play

You have been working in tutorial groups for over two months. You might feel that, by now, you get the hang of it, you feel quite comfortable in the role you have adopted in these groups, and you did pretty okay-ish on your exams, so you must be doing something well. No doubt, you also recognize the awkward silences when the discussion leader asks whether everyone is done reading, or the unsatisfying feeling that someone who does not contribute starts writing as soon as you start explaining. So even though you are doing fine, there might still be some things to improve upon in a tutorial environment – not necessarily as an individual, but as a group.

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Role-plays have the potential to provide you with an "almost real" experience that let you to try out strategies in a safe environment, and allow you to benefit from the practice, where at the same time mistakes can be made with no drastic consequences.

In this role-play exercise, you choose an informal role you want to play (see descriptions below). That can either be a role you feel comfortable with, or a role you do not identify with at all, but want to try out just because it is fun. One student will act as a discussion leader and one as a note-taker; these people do not take on a specific informal role, they just acts as themselves. As a group, you will discuss one of the tasks below. The discussion leader needs to bring the discussion to a desired end: a list of learning goals that the whole group agrees to. The group members will act out their informal role, thereby either helping the discussion forward, or disrupting the group process. Try to keep the role you play as authentic as possible.

Roles

Pick an informal role you want to play, either a role you feel comfortable with, or a role you do not identify with at all, but want to try out just because it is fun. Tell your tutor, but do not tell your group members. Having them guess afterwards what role you played increases the fun.

Structuralist
Your biggest concern is that other members of the group should contribute effectively. If a state of confusion arises within the group, you try to channel the contributions in such a way that the discussion can proceed in an orderly fashion and you suggest ways in which problems can be tackled.

Pacifier
You feel responsible for the good personal relationships between the group members. You want to encourage a good working atmosphere and you step in as a mediator when rivalries occur in the group, or when there are personal confrontations between members of the group.

Windbag
You have an opinion about everything and constantly want to express it even if no one else is interested. You are not really interested in what other people say; you butt in with your own remarks whenever someone else pauses to draw a breath. Your presence is not so much noted because of your valuable ideas, but because of your constant, irrepressible contributions.

Joker
You constantly have a joke up your sleeve to jolly the group along. In tense moments, this may diffuse a difficult situation. However, you persist in telling jokes when the discussions take a serious turn, which blocks progress and interferes with group function.

Sniper
You have a tendency to shoot down the contributions of others. You disagree with most of what is said and make this very clear (verbal and non-verbal, e.g. by shaking

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your head, by adopting an indifferent posture, or by sighing). You ask questions for which you already know the answer, and you feel satisfied when the others cannot answer it.

Prober
You worry that the tutorial group might skip certain important issues. You believe that the subject should be looked at from every single angle. By constantly asking for and referring to details, you get in the way of group progress. Since you crammed your head with facts and have a thorough knowledge of the issue, you can also help the group progress by explaining problems relating to detail.

Whiner
You constantly give the impression that the issues have not been tackled or analysed properly. When the rest of the group agrees, you make some whining remark about a minor inaccuracy. One moment you are complaining about the task, the next about someone else's attitude.

Tasks
(Choose one to discuss)

Task A: Little Luana in the park
It is a beautiful day in spring and eight year old Luana is playing outside in the park. In the middle of the park is a small pond but Luana has been told not to go near it. Her nanny is taking care of Luana's younger brother when all of a sudden she hears a big scream. A passer-by sees the body of a small girl floating in the water, jumps into the pond and succeeds to get her out of the water.

The girl has been submerged in water for more than 15 minutes. As soon as she is pulled out of the water mouth-to–mouth resuscitation is applied. Everyone is astonished to see that the little girl is still alive.

Task B: Not me! The phenomenon of unrealistic optimism
In a study 85 heterosexual students (males and females) were asked to estimate the chances that they would contract a sexually transmittable disease. Then they were asked to give an estimate of the chance that another student of their age would acquire such a disease. The results were as follows:

	Estimation of Risk	
	Self	*Another Student*
Syphilis	11.1%	25.9%
Gonorrhea	12.5%	19.2%
HIV	9.4%	22.9%

Task C: Education is not a Substitute for Intelligence, or is it?
Everyone knows what it means to be intelligent, right? An intelligent person is someone who does well in school, gets high grades, and so on. Well, that's the easy answer. We also have

lots of descriptions for people which appear to have at least a similar meaning to being intelligent, such as 'streetwise' or 'shrewd'.

There are further complications. Getting high grades in school counts as intelligence, but what about people who get high grades when doing mathematics but score pretty low on languages? Does intelligence have different aspects, and if so how many? As many as there are topics taught in school? If you include gymnastics, then an Olympic gymnastics performer could be called very intelligent.

To be intelligent implies the existence of the opposite, and the adjectives 'less', 'more' and 'most' refer to gradations of this. How dumb can you be? Or how smart for that matter, and how is that decided?

Tutor instructions

Take a few minutes to check whether students understand what is expected from them in these role-play exercises. As a group, decide which of the example tasks will be discussed first. You should make sure you have sufficient time to do one mock-pre-discussions (i.e. approximately 30 minutes for the pre-discussion and 10 minutes for reflection).

Ask or appoint volunteers to be discussion leader and note-taker. These people leave the class for a couple of minutes. Ask the other group members to select a role they want to play (which can also be no role; they 'play' themselves). Write down who takes on which role – make sure the roles are somewhat evenly distributed. Invite the discussion leader and note-taker back in, and have the pre-discussion begin. Make sure students keep it real and relevant.

Note that (some of) the example tasks can be approached from different angles. It is the task of the group, guided by the discussion leader, to decide which approach they want to take. They can decide to discuss the task in light of a specific discipline, or have all students shed a light from their individual concentration (like true liberal artists). As a tutor, you can wait and see what happens. Students might clash in their eagerness to find the 'right' approach, allowing the pacifier to play his/her role. If it brings them nowhere, you may want to step in to get the discussion going.

As a tutor, you can take on different roles during the exercises:

Facilitator – you act as you would normally do during a pre-discussion. In general, you refrain from intervening; if necessary, you ask a question to get the discussion going.
Spectator – you watch the role-play and offer comments and advice at the end.
Participant – it is sometimes appropriate to get involved and take part in the role-play yourself.

Debriefing the students after every exercise is one of the most important parts of these role-play exercises. Encourage the students to give each other constructive feedback, and provide them with extensive feedback. Evaluate the group dynamics (did everyone participate? Were students given the chance to speak up, finish their sentence? Did people

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actively listen, or did people start a new topic, simply dismissing the previous speaker?). Based on the outcome of the evaluation of the group dynamics, the group can list a couple of attention points they want to focus. This list serves as input for the next exercise, and should be evaluated afterwards.

There are many ways to provide feedback when using role-play. It is rarely appropriate for the tutor to jump in and correct every mistake. This could be incredibly demotivating. It is essential to provide feedback and suggest improvements immediately after every exercise.

> Self-feedback – Ask students to keep track of what they think is going during the role-play. At the end of each exercise, ask students to write down what they think they did well and what they could improve on. Have some of them share these thoughts with the group. Self-correction is a valuable tool to change behaviour.

> *Peer-feedback* – Fellow students may be able to provide valuable feedback to their peers, especially with respect to group dynamics. Encourage students to share their observations. How were the dynamics in the group affected by something that was said or done? You could ask the discussion leader and note-taker to indicate in advance whether they would like to receive feedback on specific issues. You could assign one or two students with the task to pay extra attention to these points. Be careful to keep peer-correction a positive and profitable experience for all involved.

> *How-did-it-make-me-feel-feedback* – Some people feel uncomfortable correcting a fellow student, whether it is on content or on behaviour. It can be very insightful to hear from someone how it made them feel when you corrected them. E.g. hearing someone admit that they realised you were right when you told them to shut up, that it did not make them sad or angry when you tackled them on their conduct, may help you to cope with similar real-life situations in the future.

> *Tutor-feedback* – only after the students have provided themselves and each other with feedback, do you add your feedback.

Some critical moments that occur frequently in tutorial groups are listed below. Pay attention to these situations when they happen.

"Shall we skip clustering?"

Students by now will have likely experienced the pre-discussion where someone suggested skipping the cluster-step. Students do not see the benefit of clustering, because it is usually an unnecessary step, since most note-takers (un)consciously cluster while taking notes. Still, clustering can be highly valuable, but should be seen as a prelude to formulating learning goals, not as a single, separate step.

Students have a tendency to cluster according to topic. Instead, suggest students to cluster their prior knowledge according to theories, experiences, examples, etc. Additionally, invite students to formulate learning goals while clustering. It makes most sense to write down a learning goal as soon as it arises from a cluster, than to try to remember it until you reach step 5.

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Not-so-active note-taker vs. over-active note-taker

Some note-takers write down the problem statement, jot down three or four random words, and then wait for the learning goals. Other note-takers try to keep track of every word that is said, and frequently disrupt the discussion to ask the previous speaker to repeat their statement. There are also note-takers that manage to fill the entire board within 15 minutes, running out of space, and solving that issue by erasing notes. In all cases, the note-taker should receive feedback, preferably during the exercise. Depending on the situation, you can mention a few things such as:

- The group first discusses the problem statement that will be used; only then does the note-taker write this down
- Students do not wait for the note taker to write down comments; s/he keeps up with the group
- As a note-taker your position is usually with your back to the group – if you want to add to the discussion, make sure to add your keyword/comment to the notes on the board
- Reserve space on the whiteboard beforehand for problem statement and learning goals
- Write small enough and use only keywords initially
- Do not erase information

Vague, generalised learning goals

Tutorial groups sometimes settle for vague, generalised learning goals. This requires each group member to interpret and reformulate the learning goals in their own way. Different members may study different things, and as a result, the post-discussion has no clear focus. This results in wasted time for group members, both during the tutorial and their individual studies. Force students to formulate clear and precise learning goals, and double check whether all group members interpret the learning goals in the same way.

The passive student – not participating to the discussion

Some students are present in the tutorial room, but do not actively take part in the discussion. Stress the importance of collaborative learning, even if this is 'only' role-play. Not taking active part in the discussion, results in missing out on a learning experience. It is also a disadvantage to the group, since it leads to an incomplete overview of the knowledge present in the group, and thus unnecessary learning goals, resulting in the risk of wasting time in the individual study of the group members.

Tutor instructions for the tasks

Here you have the tutor instructions for each of the 3 tasks. This is for you to have a background on some of the take-aways from each of the role plays. It's not important that students get the exact problem statement or learning goals described below. Instead it's important that they realize the ways in which PBL sessions can go wrong and that they are able to reflect on ways to redress the course of a tutorial session.

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Little Luana in the park
The main objective of this task is to show the importance of a context or framework in order to be able to direct and limit the discussion and brainstorm.
Step 1: Clarify terms
Step 2: Define what the problem is about and formulate a problem statement. Note: this task lacks context. It could be part of a course in health science, sociology, physics, psychology or law. The point of this task is this: if you don't know the context of the problem, it is very hard, if not impossible, to define the direction in which the discussion should go. This task is reasonably ambiguous in the sense that it could be used as a problem task within different educational settings. Students might realize this. The task then is to agree on what context they want to assume and to formulate a problem statement accordingly. Without a problem statement, the discussion will go in all directions. This makes this task a good exercise in group decision-making. It will give students ample opportunities to have chaotic and unstructured discussion which they need to redress.
Possible contexts and accompanying problem statements:
· Health Sciences: *How can Luana still be alive after being submerged in water for more than 15 minutes?*
· Sociology: *Do people tend to help when an accident occurs?*
· Physics: H*ow is it possible that a body floats in water? Why is mouth-to-mouth resuscitation efficient?*
· Psychology: *Why did Luana not do as she was told?*
· Law: *Who is responsible for the fact that Luana could fall in the pond?*

Step 3 and 4: it's very possible that students don't really make it past the problem statement. If they do, i.e. if the settle for a certain context (health science, sociology, etc.) simply allow them to continue having the brainstorm and the clustering.

Step 5: Possible learning goals: depends on the topic they choose. The most important thing is that they use the clustering process to formulate clear learning goals.

The phenomenon of unrealistic optimism
Step 1: possible difficult words: none
Step 2: Possible problem statement
· *Why is there a discrepancy between the perceived risk and the estimated risk of obtaining an STD?*

Step 3 and 4: Brainstorm and clustering.
Step 5: Possible learning goals
• *What is unrealistic optimism and why do we have it?*
• *Does it have an effect on our behaviour?*
• *How can we reduce it?*
• *Is it present in everyday life?*
• *Does it change over time?*

<u>*Education is not a Substitute for Intelligence, or is it?*</u>

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Step 1*:* Possible difficult words:

Shrewd: sharp, clever

Step 2*:* Possible problem statement:

- *What is intelligence/ are there different forms of intelligence?*

Step 3 and 4: brainstorm and clustering.

Step 5*:* Possible learning goals:

- *What is intelligence?*
- *How is it measured?*
- *Nature vs Nurture?*
- *What are the different theories?*