"Could that be me?" The use of role playing in a post-secondary class to increase self-awareness, empathy, and the understanding of theoretical concepts.

By Linor David MEd, Professor Community Development Work and Mobeena Hamid, SSW Diploma

Abstract

Role playing in the classroom is a tool that works to stimulate students learning and growth through experiential means. Role playing allows students to adapt new knowledge and skills to the interactions with others, both within and outside of an educational environment. Likewise, role playing also allows students to take on varying characters and identities for a period of time, thus, increasing their level of empathy and understanding for others. This study examines the impacts that role play exercises has on student's learning processes after participating in four skits in a post-secondary setting. The role plays were implemented in a Group Dynamics course, and the students were enrolled in a two year Social Service Worker diploma program at Centennial College. Students completed questionnaires after each of the four skits, and attended a focus group where they had the opportunity to expand on their learning and thoughts of the role plays. The study explores five recurring themes among students who participated in the role play exercises: 1) understanding theories and concepts of group dynamics, 2) dealing with common group situations, 3) seeing situations from different perspectives, 4) applying learned experiences and skills to real life situations, and 5) increased self-awareness. The study found that students described the role plays as helping them gain further understanding and skills in all five areas.

Keywords: Role-play, identities, self-reflection, empathy, active listening, conflict resolution

Literature Review

Active learning is an approach that shifts pedagogy from a banking method where students passively absorb information from a teacher, to using active and experiential teaching methods centered on the learning needs of students. Studies of active learning in higher education shows it increases student comprehension of concepts, increases long-term memory of experiences, and helps to generate personal interest in the subject matter (Krain & Shadle, 2006). Research also shows it is important to use multiple pathways to learning, where role play exercises work to provide students with a different form of learning, moving away from a more traditional one (Cerasani, 2015, p. 9). Role play works to enhance students' learning processes within the classroom, helping students engage in simulated reality and expressing emotions in an appropriate manner (Cerasani, 2015, p. 11). Cozolino (2013) finds that learning will generalize better outside of the classroom if it includes sensory, physical, emotional, and cognitive networks. Each of these systems has their own neural networks containing their own memory systems; so multi-channel learning increases the

likelihood of storage and recall (p. 232). Role playing theoretical concepts is therefore an excellent way to engage the sensory, physical, and emotional networks in the learning process.

This study employed role plays as a way to teach the skills and concepts of group dynamics to post-secondary students in a Social Service Worker diploma program. The benefits of role-playing, as evidence in the literature, demonstrates that it deepens students' conceptual understanding by bringing abstract concepts to life, making classroom knowledge useful outside of the classroom, and teaching empathy or encouraging students to think beyond one's perspective (Krain & Shadle 2006). This point about empathy is crucial because as future Social Service Workers, the ability to create empathy is paramount. In role play exercises, "the student player, in tandem with at least one other player, uses logic, personal beliefs, attitudes and empathy when testing imaginings. The subsequent dramatisation is grounded in empathy, identification, association, mutuality and dialogue" (DiNapoli, 2001, p.105). During role plays, students can test out their hypothesis of how their behaviors will impact others (DiNapoli, 2001), which allows for risk taking in learning and the opportunity to gain new approaches or skills. Taylor acknowledges that empathy can be developed within the classroom by considering four tenets: (a) "seeing the world as others see it, (b) remaining nonjudgmental, (c) understanding another's feelings, and (d) communicating that understanding" (Taylor, 2018, para. 4). By promoting "empathetic models of teaching" within the classroom, it influences a supportive and positive environment that recognizes the diversity of students, such as the LGBTQ community (Taylor, 2018). In this way, role play can serve to assist students with understanding LGBTQ communities through acknowledging the viewpoints of others in a nonjudgmental way (Taylor, 2018), in this case, disrupting internalized heteronormative ideologies.

Moreover, role-play exercises are a form of "simulation," which in effect works to "replicate some aspect of reality" (Cerasani, 2015, p. 7). Research has shown that the impact of role play within the classroom works to increase empathetic responses, such as in conflict driven situations. In this way, role playing prompts students to critically think by implementing different mechanisms to resolve conflict while interacting with others, such as increasing negotiation and conflict resolution skills (Cerasani, 2015, p. 9). Through role play, students are able to embody and empathize with their characters and the characters of others by forming "an understanding of the character's perspective" (Cerasani, 2015, p. 11). A constructed space and time allows students to attempt to understand or sympathize with other character's positions in a timely manner, thus, gaining "a stronger sense of connection" to other parties in the role play (Cerasani, 2015, p. 11). Research also indicates how role play exercises have increased students ability to empathize with different cultures and comprehend the impacts of "acculturation" on many racialized minorities (Zamboanga, Ham, Tomaso, Audley, & Pole, 2016, p. 247). Through the ability to experience another culture's perspective during role play exercises, it demonstrates an increase of different worldviews and cultural competence (Zamboanga et al., 2016, p. 247).

Methodology

The first step in this study was creating a series of role plays using the concepts of group dynamics, which include common group conflicts, tensions that arise when doing group work together in college, and the social make up of Centennial College students as the starting point. The role plays focused on a group of five students with different attributes pertaining to course materials and the lived experience of college students. There was a mother with three children who was returning to college to start a second career, an international student, and students who were just out of high school. Some of the characters displayed strong leadership qualities or struggled with conflict. One of the students identified as gender non-binary. The skits covered four moments of group work as the students struggled to finish an assigned project. The skits looked at the importance of getting to know your group members, identifying and analysing problems, dealing with conflict, and using structure to enhance group performance and other learning outcomes from the course. When doing the role plays with students, we followed closely the three major parts of role plays, as described by Alden (1999): 1) beginning with describing the situation and character parts, and assigning observation and reflection roles to the students not role playing; 2) running the role play; and 3) holding a discussion session where the activity was reviewed. During the role plays, students embodied the same role and characters over the course of four weeks. After each role play, students who participated filled out a short questionnaire that explored five objectives related to role playing, including how well the role plays contributed to their understanding of the concepts, and whether they feel they can apply the skills they learned in the role play to group work. All questionnaires were answered and submitted anonymously by students, where approximately 25 students participated each time. The research investigator also recorded notes and observations of the role plays, engaging in reflective practice to support the information received through the evaluations. Evaluation results were then tabulated to understand if there were any role plays that were less effective than others in order to be improved.

Students were then invited to attend and participate in a focus group to discuss their impressions and learning from the role plays. Although we anticipated for at least ten students to attend and participate in the focus group, the focus group held six students, which consisted of four female and two male students. The focus group lasted approximately one hour, and a different community studies faculty at Centennial College facilitated the focus group in order to receive accurate and authentic responses. All questions probed during the focus group were open for discussion, where participants were able to pass questions that they did not feel comfortable answering. The focus group was also recorded and transcribed for later coding and analysis, and student names were removed and replaced in transcription and report writing in order to protect confidentiality among participants. Through thematic analysis, we identified five main areas where students felt the role plays impacted them the most. The themes mostly corresponded to the outcome indicators we asked on the questionnaire, but also revealed a new theme, that is, how the role plays helped students reflect on themselves and increase their self-awareness.

Results and Findings

In this study, we identified five recurring themes of role play exercises through the focus group material: 1) understanding the theories and concepts of group

dynamics; 2) dealing with common group situations; 3) seeing situations from different perspectives; 4) applying learned experiences and skills to real life situations; and 5) increasing self-awareness and understanding the impacts on others. The above themes demonstrate the effect of role play on a student's learning process and self-development, both within and outside of the classroom environment. In the first week, students were still being introduced to why they were participating in the role plays and what they were supposed to be learning from them. However, over the course of four weeks, we discovered that the engagement of students increased for all five recurring themes to the point where 89-81% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed with each of the statements. In particular, it was essential to discuss and debrief the role plays with the class to help make the connections between what was happening with the characters, and what they were learning. When giving feedback on the role plays, one student wrote, "As far as the role play goes, I really enjoyed it and they're helping me to learn the topics much easier. In a way that when I was studying for the test, I kept recalling to the role play." The study illustrates how students developed knowledge and skills of group dynamics that enables them to adapt strategies of working with others in group settings or environments. Likewise, one can see the positive impact of role play on the students' ability to self-reflect and critically analyze one's past behaviours while interacting with others in society. Following, is a closer look at how students responded to the five main themes identified and mentioned above.

Understanding theories and concepts of group dynamics

Through participating in role plays, students were able to comprehend concepts and theories of group dynamics through acting out lived experiences. For instance, students indicated that they gained a greater knowledge of the concepts of conflict styles and groupthink from the role plays. Students found it efficient to verbally communicate about particular concepts or theories during or after the role plays because it allowed them to share different thoughts or understandings. By the fourth role play exercise, 88% of students indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the role plays increased their knowledge and understanding of group dynamic concepts. The below quote emphasizes how the concepts and theories of group dynamics are portrayed in the role plays and group discussions, therefore making it easier to comprehend.

Jason: *...I like how it you can see the theories through an actual story, like its easier to, like if you actually have characters and like people talking to each other, its easier to pick up on certain ideas we learned in class.*

Moreover, students gained a greater understanding of concepts and theories of group dynamics through a different learning medium. Students appreciated the practical experience gained from the role plays because they had the opportunity to act out and visualize concepts, while placing oneself in a real life situation for the time being. A participant emphasized how the role plays provided a space to have fun while demonstrating the concepts and theories of group dynamics. In this case, the role plays provided students with a space for creativity within an educational environment by moving away from traditional modes of learning in the classroom.

Stacy: *I think it helps you remember the techniques and theories as well because if you (like) doing, like for me, I'm...a hands on doer, so for me it's easier to remember instead of ... just sitting in front of my book and highlighting and... reading. It just helps you kinda get an idea of it and remember it.*

Dealing with common group situations

Although the role plays reminded students about the difficulties of group work, such as group members not contributing enough, it also increased their self-confidence in regards to common group situations, like group conflict. The role plays allowed students to interact with individuals with different personalities in order to decrease conflict levels between and among group members. In particular, students were able to first observe how group members embody different personality characteristics (roles), which often lead to conflict, such as those who are perceived as "lazy," "shy," or "overbearing." By identifying different personality traits within the role plays, students recognized how conflict is inevitable. Instead of avoiding conflict, students developed different strategies of dealing with group conflict, such as controlling one's emotions. In this sense, the role plays allowed students to recognize that each group member brings different skills and traits to the table, where they can only control their own reactions or responses to the behaviours of others.

Cara: *Because now that we, they always teach you how to control, like the only thing we can control is our own selves and our own emotions, we cannot have control on anyone else, what they feel or what they do. So if we just, if it starts from being able to have any power over, the only thing we have is power over own emotions. So if we can do that and take a step back and you know, don't overreact and use our positive skills, like, "I was doing that before, but now I'm doing it," so I definitely see it working more.*

When working to effectively communicate with one another in a group setting, students emphasized how the role plays increased their ability to actively listen to their peers. For instance, students reflected on their past mistakes when communicating with others, where they acknowledged their lack of attentiveness. In this case, the role plays taught students the importance of active listening because of the various roles and characters embedded in each role play exercise. Moreover, a student emphasized how gaining awareness of active listening works to value and appreciate the ideas of group members. This helps students solve group conflicts by reaching a consensus in a respectful and efficient way. For instance, after completing the first role play, only 10% of students strongly agreed that the role plays provided an opportunity for group members to develop better methods of dealing with common group situations. However, by the third role play exercise, the number of responses increased to 42% of students who strongly agreed. This therefore demonstrates how conflict resolution is a process, where students are gaining the experience to effectively develop problem-solving skills over a few weeks of role playing in groups.

Adam: *Like um, for me I would say active listening, you know, cause I'm part of an artist collective. Like a lot of the Group Dynamics stuff I am learning, we're using actively to value each other's opinion, and to come to a consensus. Cause we make a lot of... big decisions together, so ya.*

Seeing situations from different perspectives

By taking on the roles of other characters during the role plays, students were able to see a situation from multiple angles. In particular, they were able to look at many of the identities common to college students, including being an international student, being a mature student, and being an LGBTQ student. They were also exposed to personalities that are common among students, including 'take charge' students, students who are conflict averse, and students who are less confident in doing schoolwork. As they played roles that were unfamiliar to themselves, they gained an understanding of the motives and behaviours of others, leading them to feel increased empathy. In this case, students were able to unpack why certain characters had to leave early during group meetings, or why some characters were not talking in the group.

Cara: *I think the roles, um helps me understand um, different roles that we are playing. Like it helps me analyze it a little bit more. Like if that person was me, I wouldn't be analyzing it. Like when we are doing the roles, I get to analyze each and every role, like why is that person being like that, or why the other person is is not talking or one is being lazy, or what is the cause behind this. These roles have me analyze a little bit more about different personalities.*

When it came to issues of identity and how they impact behaviours in groups, students learned from past misconceptions, particularly when it came to understanding non-binary identities. Although students used the wrong pronouns for non-binary identities, they were able to immediately correct themselves after being exposed and role playing the character who identified as gender non-binary. Students also demonstrated how embodying non-cisgender identities reduced their assumptions and judgments of others. In this case, the role plays provided a space where they began to envision and empathize with the hardships or experiences of other identities. As such, the quote below demonstrates a student's ability to take a step back and analyze why students who identify as transgender, may be more reserved than others.

Stacy: *I think that's part of that character's um, she, sorry, I mean they just don't know how to go about in that group atmosphere. And that's why that character is a little more removed. That character puts less personal stuff out in that group. Because I'm just, that person, they just don't feel comfortable. And I think that's important for us to acknowledge that some people in a group might not come out and say like, "hey, this is my pronoun and this is what I feel comfortable with." And so, every time that we hit that, like I'm sure it hits their self-esteem.*

The role plays also worked to increase knowledge of diversity among students, specifically with appreciating the experiences of others.

Janice: *Aright, one of the things I learned, um, and that's for me, like sometimes I'll be in a group, and I'll be quick to judge. Like that person is not pulling their weight and I'm*

judging them. But then, was it Tracy that was always have to go because of her children were sick?
Stacy: *Yes, and her mom had dementia.*
Janice: *Ya, and then in my mind, I know some people would lie, like, "I have to go, I have this to do." So after we were finished and we were going over, I was like, "I'm pretty sure Tracy is lying." Every time she comes, there's something she has to do. So, yes, it kinda allow me to not be quick to judge people because everybody has their own thing*

In the make believe atmosphere of the role play, where no worries about marks existed for the students, they allowed themselves to be open to the struggles that other students may be experiencing. Following this role play, the class discussion was very rich, and the class explored what they thought people's responsibilities were to the group, and how much a group should support members who are struggling.

Applying learned experiences and skills to real life situations

Participating in role plays also provided students the opportunity to apply their learning to real life situations, both in their school and personal lives. For one, a student emphasized her ability to now take a step back and give everyone a chance to contribute or feel appreciated in group settings at school. She stated how she now works on not being a stage-hog while interacting and working with her classmates during group projects. Another student emphasized her ability to apply her learning from the role plays to her personal life, such as developing more effective techniques, such as active listening, in order to reduce tension and conflict when communicating with her daughter's father. After the third week, when the role play focused on conflict, 97% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they would be able to apply their learning to either group work at school, or their personal lives.

Cara: *Education always um, does reflect in your personality. You know the, every learning that I have done so far, it's been like my second semester, and somehow I have applied it to myself and you know that doesn't just come in a working environment, so definitely, my personal relationships have also improved. Like, somehow you have to put that in your personality, like if you've learned anything positive, of course you're going to apply it. So definitely, I feel like I'm actively listening you know, waiting for them to speak their mind and then always reflecting back to what they've said. Not just quickly saying something and then keep it moving.*

Moreover, a student stated how the increase of empathy she gained from understanding different gendered identities in the role plays, now encourages her to ask individuals their preferred pronoun out of respect. The quote below therefore illustrates how Janice uses the skills she learned from the role plays into real life situations. In this case, taking the initiative to ask an individual their preferred pronoun instead of immediately assuming their gendered pronoun. In this sense, Janice's increased empathy encourages her to consider the feelings of others, where she did not want to offend or upset her classmate because of an assumption.

Janice: *You know it's funny, so you know for GNED 500, cause we're doing it online. I don't know the people, apart from Adam. Ya, so I work with Adam before, so I know him. But somehow, it was troubling my spirit, because I didn't want to say, um, "he" or "she," cause I don't know. So I privately sent a message to this person and I said, "I realized your name is spelt differently. I have a friend by the name of, the same name, and um, it's a girl. What is your pronoun?" And the person said, "he," cause in my mind I was thinking it was a girl, and I was happy that I asked, because some people can be offended.*

Increased self-awareness and the impacts on others

Taking on the roles of other characters during role plays also worked to promote critical self-reflection and "self-monitoring" among students. In particular, students emphasized how watching different characters during role plays helped them self-evaluate negative habits, including stage-hogging, being bossy, and interrupting others in group settings. In this sense, students were able to detect their interpersonal flaws and the impacts of their behaviours by identifying them in the characters during the role plays.

Jason: *Ya, um, I also noticed that like certain issues, like I wasn't too good at communicating in groups. So each type of Group Dynamic role-plays helped me realize that I'm like, "okay, ya, I should have communicated better in that group."*

The role plays encouraged them to think back to times when they faced similar situations and to reflect on their behaviours and how to improve their skills going forward, taking into account how their field of work is very focused on developing good interpersonal skills.

Cara: *I would have to say the same thing, with the role-plays and perspectives. You learn to mostly apply to yourself. "Like could that person be me?" Because everybody ('s), oh like that person's so pushy, that person is so lazy, or that person's so. So next time when I'm in a group, I won't behave like that because these are the responses that everyone's giving. And you always want to apply to yourself because you can always improve your skills, and cause the profession that I chose; I'll always be working with somebody. I'm not going to be working with myself, so, my outlook in life is to always improve my skills. So if this role-play helps me, so I try to take as much as I can.*

When understanding student's self-perceptions, some students emphasized how the role plays helped them step out of their comfort zone. For instance, although the role plays did bring some anxiety to students, several stated the benefits of being put in uncomfortable and new situations, such as performing with unfamiliar group members. In particular, the role plays allowed some students to take on more leadership roles, where they began to take more risks and verbally interact with their peers, both within and outside of the role play and classroom setting. Moreover, while some students felt nervous to take on roles they were unfamiliar with, such as taking on more aggressive roles, others did not feel nervous because they knew they were not portraying their own personality. As such, students understood and reflected on their self-perceptions and/or personalities through the different characters in the role plays.

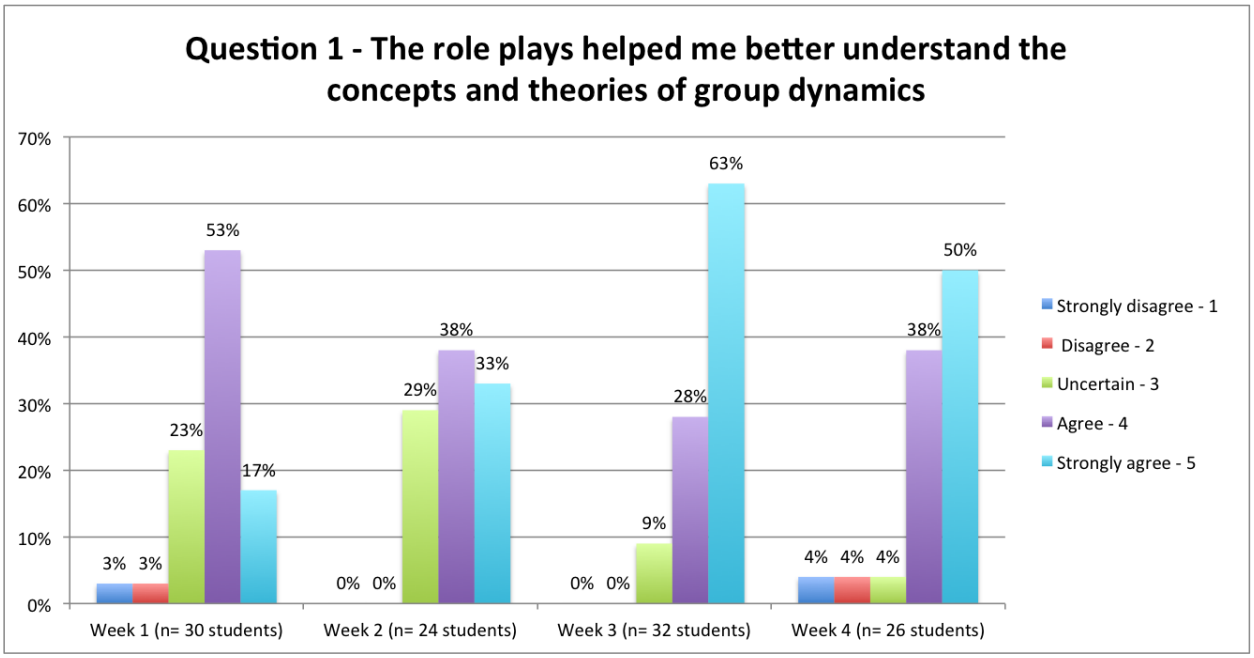
However, some students did not feel comfortable playing some of the roles in the skits, where they maintained the role of an observer. In this way, everybody was therefore able to participate to their own liking or comfort level. Within the characters of the role plays, not everyone had a loud voice, and as part of our debrief discussions, we talked about the importance of all the roles, not only the leadership ones. Moreover, when recognizing elements of themselves or others in the characters, students also felt connected to the work.

Sara: *Ya, it was exciting at first because it's a new semester, it's a new class, so it's like breaking the ice a little bit, and having a little bit of that pressure off of trying to focus on the power points and taking those notes, and then all of a sudden you were just kind of relaxed and we were kind of laughing at the characters and kind of like see ourselves in each character. Like oh my god, I definitely know this character, I dealt with it in the past in another group. So it was a fun type of atmosphere as we were going through it.*

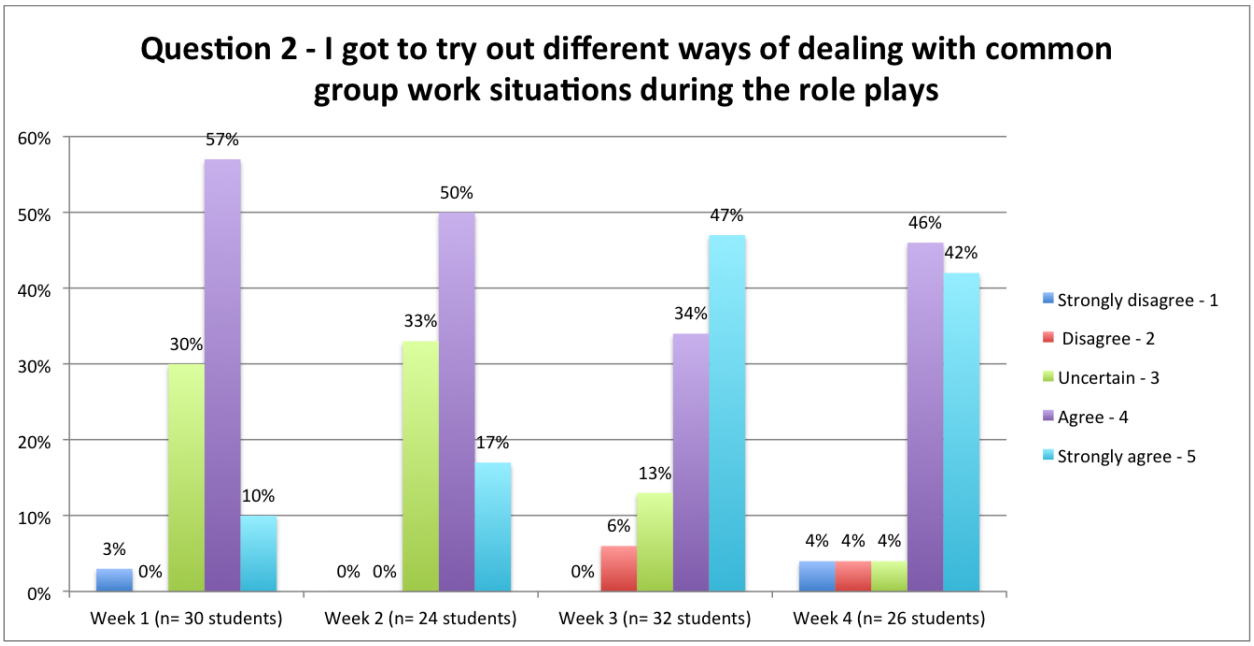
Questionnaire Data

The questionnaires were collected from an average of about 25 students per week. Although they weren't the exact number of students each week, most of the students who were attending class regularly were present for the role plays. Because not all students attended class regularly, the data is skewed towards students who are motivated to come to class. Another important lesson from looking at the overall data collection is the number of students who felt uncertain about whether the role plays were impacting their knowledge and skills. This was the one key variable that decreased over time, leaving a growing sense of agreement of the effectiveness of the role plays. There wasn't a linear increase between whether students strongly agreed or agreed that the role plays helped them in certain areas. This can be attributed to the different situations that were being acted out, some of which resonated more for the students.

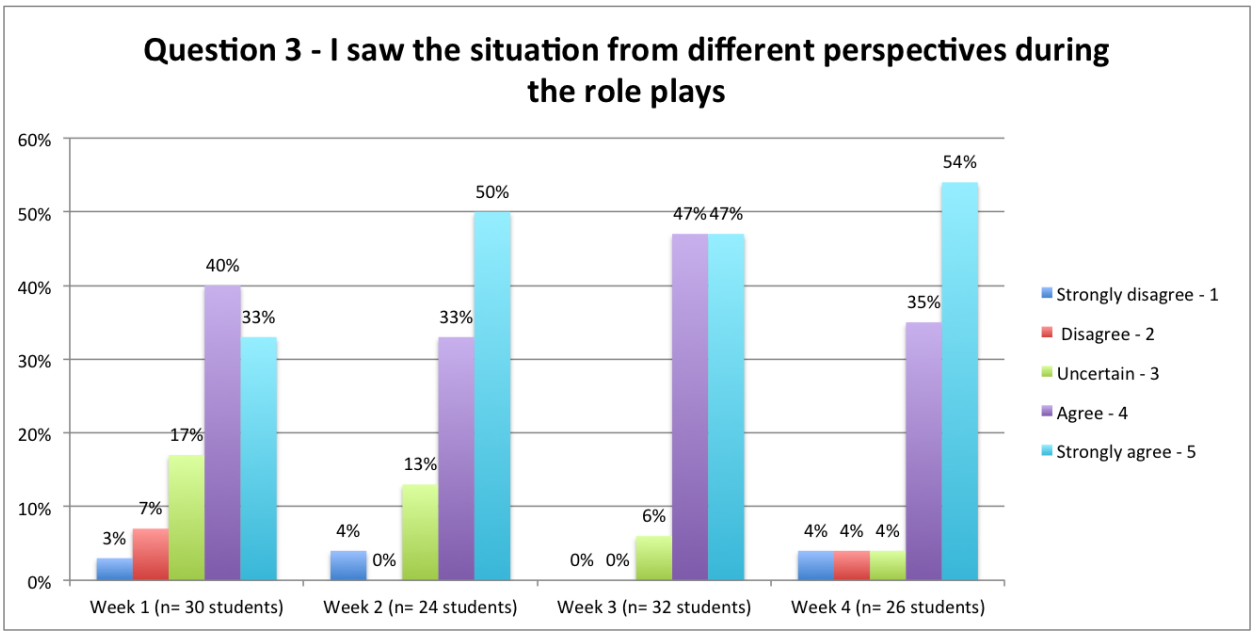
The overall decrease in uncertainty over whether the role plays were influencing their skills and knowledge was that they were simultaneously learning more theories and applying them in their lab classes, so the role plays were reinforcing that work. Moreover, because we started the role plays in the second class, there had not been a lot of information or lab work done. However, by the forth role play, students were more practiced and had a broader knowledge of group dynamic concepts. Even though the weekly skits focused on some elements more strongly than others (for example, conflict in week 3), there are many overlapping ideas that run through them, where the skits are meant to build on each other, and not be done in isolation.



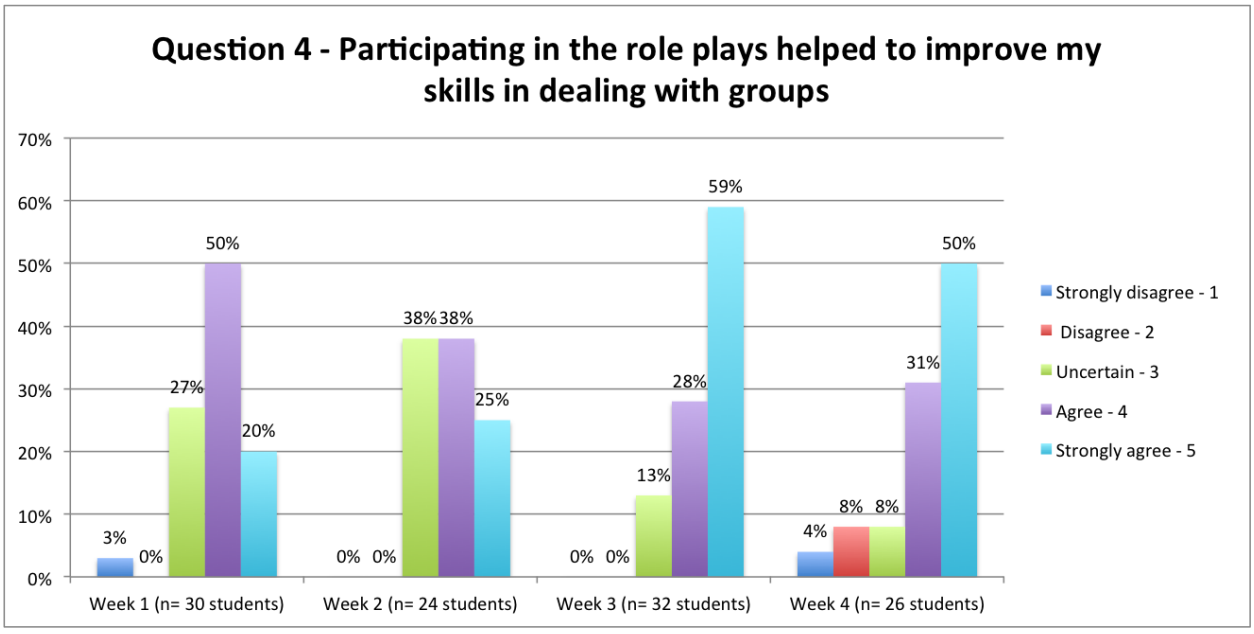
Students gradually expanded their understanding of the concepts and theories of group dynamics. The table illustrates how 63% of students strongly agreed that the role plays gradually increased their knowledge and skills by week 3, compared to only 17% of students in week 1.



In week one, 30% of students were uncertain whether they got to try out different ways of dealing with group situations. By week four, only 4% were uncertain, and 88% of students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

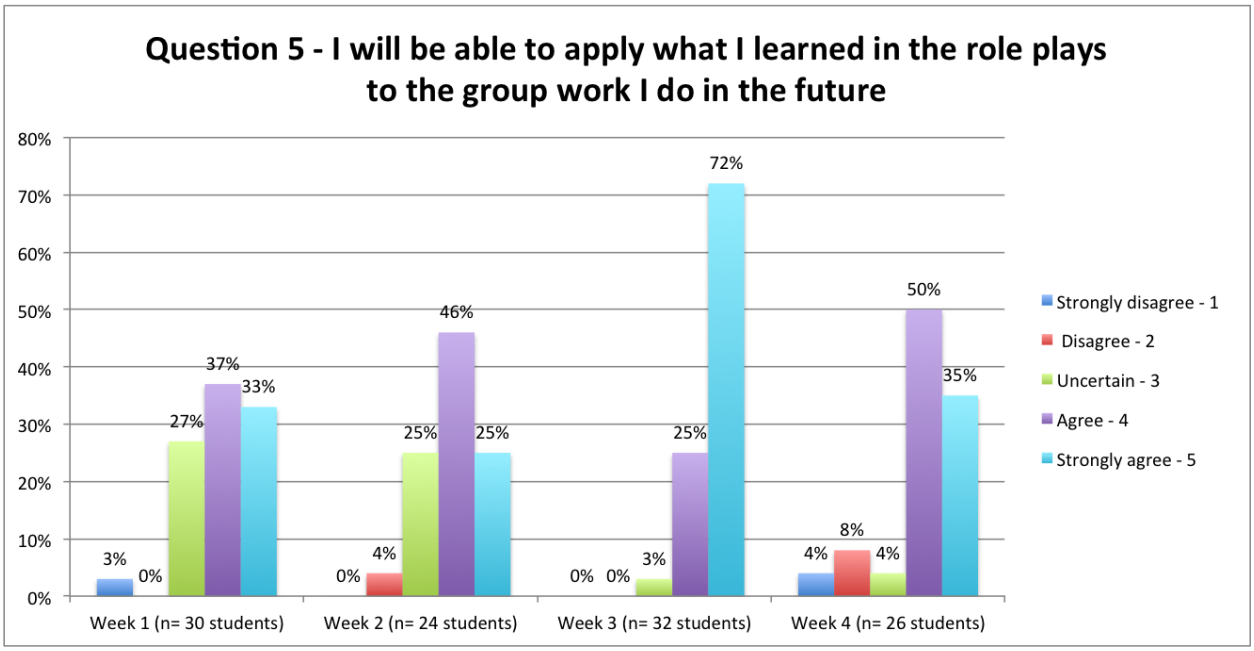


Of all the outcomes, this had the most consistent high number of students who agreed that the role plays helped them see situations through the perspectives of others. In the first week, 73% of students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and by week four, 89% of students agree or strongly agreed.



This question deals with application, and so, we anticipated it would rise over time. In the first role play, only 20% of students strongly agreed that participating in the role plays helped to improve their skills. However, by the third role play, more than half of the participants (59%) in the study strongly agreed that the role plays increased their

skills while working with others, both within and outside of the classroom setting. When giving feedback on the role plays, one student wrote, “Through role playing, I have learned to better communicate with my peers and to establish certain roles or task(s).”



The graph indicates that in the third week, 72% of students strongly agreed that participating in the role plays will help them apply their learning to real-life situations, which was the strongest agreement throughout the course of four weeks. That week addressed conflict when group members aren’t doing their part, a strong stressor for post secondary students. Simply by role playing the situation and discussing alternative ways of coping, the students felt more empowered to deal with it in the future.

Feedback on Improving Role Plays

Our findings also emphasize how role playing within the classroom can be enhanced for future research and/or application. During the focus group, students stressed the importance of incorporating role plays into their first semester, seeing as they had various group projects from the start of their program. Students indicated how being exposed to this exercise at an earlier stage of their program would have allowed them to develop the skills and knowledge of group dynamics in order to better understand different identities and conflict situations in first semester. Likewise, students also indicated the significance for role plays to be implemented in all semesters, leading up to their field placement in third semester. A student emphasized how this would provide them with numerous hands-on skills they need when entering the workforce for field placement.

Students also emphasized how implementing role play exercises early on would have pushed students to step out of their comfort zone and “break the ice” by working and preforming with new or unfamiliar classmates. During this project, the groups stayed the same during the four role plays, which made it easier to coordinate and

expedited the process. Some students enjoyed working with the same group members, however, others mentioned that they would have preferred to mix up the group in order to interact with new people. In the future, role plays could also be used to encourage students to meet and interact with different individuals in order to better understand or empathize with diverse classmates and/or personalities.

Moreover, students also requested to have the ability to embody multiple characters throughout the four weeks of role playing. Although there were not explicit instructions for students to keep the same roles or characters, students fell into the pattern of playing one character. In this sense, taking on more than one character or role would open up more conversation and dialogue about diverse identities, and allow them to take on different personalities.

It is important to keep in mind that even though the majority of students polled agreed or strongly agreed that the role plays were helping them develop their skills and better understand the concepts, for some students, performing in front of their peers still brought anxiety and stress. The class was divided into groups of 5 or 6, and the role plays were performed in small groups rather than in front of the entire class, which alleviated some stress. By explaining the purpose of the role plays, assuring students that their performance isn't being judged, and allowing an option to act as an observer, the fears of students can be mitigated.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates the benefits that students receive from participating in role plays in the classroom environment. It focuses on how students can develop new knowledge and skills to consider while working with others in group settings. The study indicates several key findings, such as, understanding course concepts, dealing with common group situations, understanding multiple perspectives or identities, applying learned skills or knowledge to real life circumstances, and understanding self-awareness and one's impact on others. The study also shows how role plays are constructive tools to embed into educational environments by colleges and/or universities in order to stimulate student's learning and growth. As one student states, "it goes back to self-reflection," where students are given the ability to self-monitor both their choices and behaviours while interacting with others in society. In this sense, role plays work to encourage students to re-evaluate how their actions impact other individuals, both within and outside of the classroom. This is specifically important to acknowledge, especially among professionals in training who are in the Human Service field, and will be working directly with clients or individuals in the community.

As this study heavily focuses on post-secondary education, future research should consider how role plays can impact children and/or youth within the primary educational system as well. Conducting and analyzing the impacts of role plays among children and/or youth will not only assess the impacts on students learning process in the classroom, but also evaluate their perceptions and worldviews in society. More specifically, future research should evaluate if embedding role play exercises for students at a younger age works to increase the understanding of varying identities in society, such as different racial, ethic, or gendered identities. This will therefore indicate

if role playing can reduce biases or misunderstandings among individuals in society if they are exposed to different identities at a younger age, and throughout their lifetime.

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