Using Role-Plays in Secondary Content Classrooms

By Catherine Saldutti

We are familiar with elementary school skits, where students act out a story or perform a reenactment of a famous historic event. Such learning experiences are appropriate with learners of all ages, in all subject areas. Appealing to the kinesthetic, auditory, and visual learning styles in particular, role-plays can help students internalize natural processes (science), order of operations (math), sequence of events (social studies), and how coordinated, multivariate systems work (e.g., an orchestra). In these examples, role-plays serve to create mental models of academic phenomena. A role-play is a form of active pedagogy that makes ideas and principles "come alive" for students.

One example of a role-play in science simulates the effect of a vaccine on future infection events in the human body. Students assume roles as immune system cells, pathogens such as a virus, and the vaccine. Props are as simple as index card "necklaces" that serve as labels for the various players in the immune system; one student might play a Memory B cell, while another might act out the role of a Helper T cell. To begin, all students stand in a circle in an open space. All students represent a character in the play; often this means that two to three students play the same role, simulating the multiplicity of cells at work in this biochemical pathway. The teacher can narrate the process of infection → immune response for the various players identified and, when cued, the students can respond to the narration by acting out the process. Of course, there are always a few laughs along the way, keeping students engaged and interactive.

To ensure internalization, the teacher can step back after the play is complete, allowing a "replay" with a student narrator. Finally, students can act out the process of infection → immune response without any narration. These gradual moves toward the visual/kinesthetic, in the absence of auditory cues, help students truly internalize the process or sequence of events. Try revisiting a 2-D diagram of the same process after completing the role-play. You might be surprised at their newfound level of understanding and active engagement.

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