ROLE PLAY REVIEW:

Practicing Case Management in an Academic Setting

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Winter 2013

Role playing a Human Services worker was, as it always is, an interesting experience. I actually really enjoy role plays. Before taking Case Management (HSP 345), I had already completed Interviewing in Human Services (HSP 325) and Collaboration with Families, Professionals, and Communities (SPED 468). Both of these classes stressed the importance of not being invasive of the client’s comfort zone—giving suggestions instead of demands, working at their pace, understanding confidentiality and expressing it clearly to them; etc.

With that said, I came into this class with a lot of knowledge already. But that doesn’t mean I failed to learn anything from the experience. With my other classes, I’d never filled out paperwork while conducting the role plays. I was constantly worried that I wasn’t going to look at the client enough and, as my group pointed out, I ended up staring and not blinking, thus causing the client to feel uncomfortable. At the end of every role play, though, I was still successful in completing the paperwork. The outline that was given to us was, I truly believe, the main reason I was so successful. In my last two classes I did not have such a thing and was still expected to hit certain points during each role play. I missed those points a lot during those times, I did not with this class. Playing as the client was a similar experience, though I’ll admit, I had much less enthusiasm for that role. I am not much of an actor and I was more interested in role playing how a Human Services worker would act, realistically, then make up and expand upon a fictional client. That said, I tended to rush through my client’s answers to questions and gave my Human Services worker a very easy set-up.

For these role plays, there was always an observer present. Sometimes this was a burden and an opportunity. That is because I had two very different experiences as the observer and the individual getting observed. As an observer, myself, I found myself writing down a lot of notes on different techniques I should try to implement or avoid when I myself was playing the Human Services worker. I focused on the Human Services worker alone and let the client do as they pleased. After all, that was where my focus was supposed to be. I found myself become very bored, however, because my partners always took nearly an hour just for their scenario. I either needed more notes to fill out or had to walk away in order for me to still have energy when my turn to role play approached. It was also uncomfortable for me to have an observer when I role played the client. This is mostly due to the fact that the observer was correcting my client-acting skills when they were supposed to only focus on the Human Services worker. I want to make it clear that I do not disapprove of observes. My experience simply was not one I thoroughly enjoyed. However, it was greatly appreciated when my turn came to role play a Human Services worker. We talked in both or roles and as our actual selves during the role play to analyze as we went and the observer always had good insight. I, myself, did it when I observed (for at least the first 30 minutes) and so did my group partners. Observers always catch things you might have noticed (reaffirming your thoughts), catch things right before you do (keeping you on your toes), and catch things that you might never thought of (that’s where the most knowledge comes in). The role of an observer is the best check-and-balance system for role playing.

After all of the role playing was said and down, my group reviewed each other’s performances. Though, in truth, my group reviewed each other’s work throughout the entire process—not just at the end. The person I observed, Megan, had the calmest demeanor of the three of us. I really enjoyed hearing her mixed communication skills and the language she chose to use and always wrote notes for myself about how I could implement those skills into my own role playing/and real life. I always observed her not always being affirmative and/or having an almost monotone voice. This is something I shared with her while she was in the moment of role play, hoping that an early mention would help her improve. My other partner, Clarence, role played my case manager. He really liked to take on the stereotypical socio-cultural persona of whoever he was portraying. As we role played, I found him correcting me as the client for not role playing effectively. I did not share this with him, but it really grated on my nerves. Otherwise, he was very effective. His voice was firm, yet personable. The body language (specifically eye contact and relaxed demeanor) were also very well done. From him, I learned what a good, firm voice sounds like—hard but not intimidating. For me, I was told that overall my reliability and enthusiasms were very well done. The only correction they had for me was to lessen my eye contact (I tend to stare and not blink).

Along with reviewing the actual performance of each other’s roles, we also reviewed each other’s case notes. The approaches we took for this activity were slightly different. I wrote mine in paragraph form and focused on the Data part of DAR (Data, Action, Response) much more than the other sections, making them weak. Megan wrote hers in a sectioned-off bullet-style, with each section being a different step in the case note process. Her notes were much more balanced than mine, I felt. They were also more detailed. Clarence used a technique to write his notes that wasn’t advised, but necessary due to his memory-loss. He would write a basic outline/transcript of what was said in the role play, give himself notes for what needed to be focused on, and then (as Megan did) write out the case notes in bullet-style. Both of my partners struggled at times to avoid “I” pronouns. After reviewing my partner’s case notes, I learned that bullet-points are very helpful when making a case note rough draft. However, as we learned in class, they are much more professional if done in a paragraph format. I was also reminded, and given examples, of why using terminology like “I” weaken case notes. When comparing my own notes to theirs, I saw where my content could use more balance and detail.

To conclude, though there were moments when I did not enjoy the whole experience, I appreciated the opportunity to role play and learn from my peers. Role playing is always likely to be awkward to some extent. Then again, so is Human Services work in the real world. It’s best we get our practice out of the way now, in a safe environment, then when it could make or break our career. This learning process wouldn’t have been possible without an observer, an outline of the agenda, or without our own (and our group member’s) case notes. Improvement comes best with a support system. That is what this activity was for us.