Shared Problem Definition

Role-playing to integrate perspectives in multi-stakeholder projects

THINKING | Perspective Skills

What you will need:

- 4-6
- Workshop
- 1 day preparation
- 2.5 days execution
- Flip-overs, sticky notes

Related Tools:

- Experiencing Interdisciplinarity
- Socio-Spatial Mapping

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"Transitions require professionals to step out of their discipline and rethink complex problems together with other actors. This role-play tool helps students to integrate various perspectives by stepping out of their comfort zone and into an expert role."

—Edith van Ewijk

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I. Overview

Typically, organisations are structured within specific sectors based on disciplinary boundaries, while professionals are trained to tackle problems specific to their area of expertise with the aim of finding solutions. In contrast, transition projects necessitate collaboration between professionals from various disciplines and organisations, as well as a more integrative analysis of problems.

Given that each actor may have their own interpretation of a problem, discussing the problem together and developing a shared definition of the issue is regarded as a crucial step toward achieving successful transitions (Beers et al., 2016; Schäfer & Krüger, 2016). This tool provides a framework for integrating diverse perspectives in multi-stakeholder projects.

Learning outcome

- The student is able to integrate insights from diverse perspectives

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II. Learning Activity

Students engage in a role-play, integrating diverse viewpoints and developing a shared definition of sustainability challenges.

1. Preparation for Roles

2 days

Preferably, before using this tool in your course, students will have gained general knowledge about a transition project. For instance: the energy transition, the water transition and climate adaptation in the redevelopment of an urban area, where different actors with various perspectives need to work together.

Now, students form teams of 4-6 and each student is assigned to a specific professional role related to the project at hand. For instance: an energy expert, water expert, landscape architect and nature-inclusive expert.

Each student is then asked to prepare for their role by gaining specific knowledge in their assigned professional field or discipline. Students can obtain this knowledge through studying various materials, such as reading documents and watching videos you have selected and provided.

Tip: these questions provide guidance for this study in the form of a short assignment that each student hands in at the end of this step.

2. Instructions for Role-playing

1 hr

Provide students with an explanation of the rest of the activity, clarifying the aim and process of the role-play.

Next, provide the rules of role-playing:

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- Ask open questions and be curious;
- Provide arguments for your input;
- Think of what would be desirable and possible in the specific context. Avoid providing too general comments;
- Try to first explore and do not find a solution immediately;
- Dare to doubt and dare to not be sure about something;
- Try to look at the problem or challenge from a different perspective;
- Keep your focus on the general challenge and not on specific personal issues. Be respectful at all times.

Tip: an alternative approach is to engage the students in shaping the roles themselves, which can increase the effectiveness of learning environments (Könings et al., 2014). This tool includes guidance to do so.

3. Understanding Diverse Perspectives

2 hrs

In the role-play, students need to come to a shared problem definition for the project at hand.

Each student has to consider the various perspectives of all participants in the role-play and needs, therefore, to listen carefully. Invite the students to ask clarifying questions, checking if they understand the other perspectives correctly (see the rules of the role-play in Step 2).

The role-play proceeds:

- Start with a round of introductions: what is the role of each participant and what organisation is the participant representing? (15 mins)
- Make an inventory of the various tasks per organisation: what are the key tasks and the objective of the organisations present in the role play? *Note the various tasks and objectives on a flip-over* (30 min).
- Discuss the core of the problem from each perspective. Why is it problematic in your view? *Note the various views on a flip-over* (30 mins).

Reflection on understanding fellow actors:

- How did you obtain knowledge of the perspectives of fellow actors?

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- To what extent were you able to stay open and focused on the exchange?

4. Integration of Diverse Perspectives 1.5 hrs

Students integrate the perspectives in order to come to a shared problem definition.

Guidelines for integrating diverse perspectives:

- How do the various problem definitions of organisations relate to each other? What are commonalities, differences and interfaces? *List commonalities, differences and interfaces on a flip-over* (30 min);
- Try to formulate a joint problem definition based on commonalities and interfaces. *Write down the joint problem definition* (15 min).

5. Reflection 15 mins

After the role-play (and a break), each student reflects on the role-play, the integration process and the insights they gained from it.

Please note, as part of assessment *as* learning, students reflect using the reflective questions.

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III. Assessment

First, teacher-led assessment is important at the start of the learning activity with the aim of ensuring that students have dived into the content matter and their specific role and that they are well prepared before participating in the role play. Being prepared is essential for the success of the role play and by a teacher-led assessment the risk that students come unprepared to class can be mitigated.

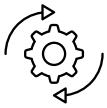
Each students self-assesses by means of a structured reflection on the exchange process and especially on integration.

Purpose

Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their own learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.

Roles

Self-assessment



Characteristics

Self-regulated learning

Materials

Reflective questions

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Assessment

Reflective questions

1. In your own words, describe the perspectives of the fellow actors in the roleplay regarding the transition challenge.

2. In your view, what are the key differences and similarities in the various perspectives of actors in the role-play?

3. What barriers emerged during the role-play, and do you think they were successfully overcome?

4. How did you integrate the various perspectives presented during the roleplay?

5. What factors aided in formulating a shared problem definition, and what were the primary challenges encountered?

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IV. Key Advice

Depending on the number of students, available teachers and available time and space, several role plays can be organised simultaneously or at different moments in time. Alternatively, other students can fulfill an observation role and be assigned specific observation 'tasks'.

Guiding questions for Assignment 1 (preparation for the role play) can be downloaded below.

Acknowledgments

This tool draws on action research carried out in the framework of the NWO research project Stepping Out and specifically on:

- *The 'Leergang Systeem Innovatie': a course on system innovation for professionals of the municipality of Amsterdam, Waternet (a water management organisation) and Liander (an energy network organisation). The course is based on Reflexive Interactive Design (RIO) (Bos & Grin, 2012) and set up by Prof. John Grin (UvA) in collaboration with Edith van Ewijk (UvA/ TU-Delft), Joeri Naus (UvA) the municipality of Amsterdam and Peter de Roode (independent organisation expert);*
- *Action research in the redevelopment of Haven-Stad, Amsterdam.*

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Key Advice

Guiding questions for Assignment 1 (preparation for the role play)

Write a short paper of max. 1000 words on the transition project. Make use of the selected readings* and make sure you address the following issues:

- Describe in your own words why the transition is needed. What is the overall problem? Make sure that you clearly state the societal relevance and back this up with literature.
- Reflect on the interdisciplinary aspect: what kind of disciplines are related to the transition?
- Make a short analysis of the stakeholders engaged: which organizations are involved? And what kind of professionals within these organizations are involved?
- What are the main tasks of the specific professional or expert you will represent in the role play?**

*The assignment can be adapted for various transitions. The teacher will need to focus on one (or more) transition(s), such as the energy transition, and provide a selection of readings on this topic.

**You will receive key information on specific roles and are also encouraged to search for additional information.

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V. References

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