

# Chapter 11

---

## Role play

---

### Power dynamics in a village logging dilemma

Michelle Dyer and Tim Daw

#### Learning outcomes and related terms

The drama processes in this chapter aim to develop:

- Appreciation of cultural embeddedness of power dynamics such as gender norms.
- Role play and applied drama as a method to support learning and reflection.
- Personal experience of the power and/or frustration of social and cultural norms.

Key terms and definitions:

- Gendered power dynamics: the effect of gender on the ability of individuals to exercise autonomy, make decisions, and have influence in relationships and interpersonal interactions mediated by social and cultural context.
- Global commodity chains: the trade networks that extract and transport raw materials from source areas (often in the Global South) to where they are demanded (in rapidly developing economies or in the Global North).
- Making the familiar strange and the strange familiar: the Anthropological idea that learning about a culture different from our own can lead us to reflect on our own culture with a new lens.

<b>Key sustainability-related outcomes</b>
Embodying sustainability values
Valuing sustainability/self-awareness and normative competencies
Supporting fairness
<b>Embracing complexity in sustainability</b>
Systems thinking
Critical thinking
Problem framing/integrated problem-solving competence
<b>Envisioning sustainable futures</b>
Exploratory thinking
<b>Acting for sustainability</b>
Political agency
Collective action/strategic/collaboration competence

## Context of application

The role play concerns residents of a small coastal village on tribal lands in Solomon Islands, where a foreign logging company wishes to log the forest above the village. The role play is a meeting to discuss the logging proposal.

This role play has been used in a range of higher-education settings from an introductory sustainability science course within an undergraduate programme in Business Ethics and Sustainability to a master's course on Social-Ecological Resilience in Sustainable Development. The undergraduate course includes 80 students (divided into four seminar groups each led by a teaching assistant) with no background knowledge of sustainability. Here, the role play aimed to introduce questions of power and gender dynamics in the context of globalisation. The master's class was a small group of highly motivated students who have previously had two months of intensive sustainability science teaching. Here, the role play was used within a module about how people benefit from ecosystems and support lectures on governance, equity, and environmental justice, by illustrating how power dynamics lead to unequal voice and unequal benefits from ecosystems. The role play can be run with 12–25 students.

## Step-by-step guidance

### *Setting up the role play*

Before meeting the students, prepare some written materials, like printed briefing sheets for all students. You also need to print role descriptions and distribute one (single) role card for each student. These materials are presented below.

You also need large visible name badges for each role - one per student. These include the title of the role as well as a letter A, B, or C (see list below) or colours to indicate the speaking hierarchy - which the chair of the meeting is instructed to follow, but without explaining this to the rest of the villagers.

Finally, you need a room with tables aside and chairs in a circle – ask early students to help.

## ***Running the seminar***

Welcome the students and inform them that you will do a role play which will be fun, and that applied drama like this can be an effective way to explore, experience, and learn about different perspectives in sustainability dilemmas. Applied drama is used not only in education, but also in research and development interventions with stakeholders to help facilitate understanding and learning. So, explain that in this lesson you will learn about a real situation, but also a novel method that can be used in sustainability science (for more detailed guidance about role play, see Chapter 12).

1. Warm-up (5 minutes).
  - a. Stand in a circle – draw your name with your hand in the air. Then with your opposite hand, with your foot, with your other foot, and with your head.
  - b. Now each person thinks of a short phrase, e.g. a line from a children's song and stands in a circle facing *outwards*.
  - c. Everyone says their phrase at the same time, then repeat it again and again, with a voice characterised by different situations, such as
    - i. Like you are telling someone a secret*
    - ii. Like you are talking to a room full of people*
    - iii. Like you are a child learning to read*
    - iv. Like you are very busy and bossy*
2. Distribute the briefing sheet to everybody (this could also be circulated in advance). Hand out the instructions for each role, one per student, and point out they should not share them with anyone else. The sheets state the role as well as speaking rules, such as “*You must never directly disagree with someone with an A*”, “*You should speak at length frequently*”, or even “*You may not speak at this meeting*”. Give the students time to read (5 minutes).
3. Preparing for the meeting (5 minutes).
  - a. Stand up and find two others who also agree or disagree about the logging.
  - b. In this group of three (or four) talk about why you (dis)agree with the logging.

Use your imagination and improvise. The reasons can be related to personal interests or to what is good or fair for the village, now or in the future.

4. The role play (40 minutes).

- a. Return to the seats and put on badges – ask everyone to say briefly who they are (e.g. *I'm a landowner*).
- b. Instruct the meeting chair to open and initiate the meeting.
- c. Let “the villagers” (students in the groups) discuss for about 30–40 minutes depending on how it is going, and then ask the chair to close the meeting.

5. Debrief (20 minutes).

- a. The players should stay in their roles and have a brief round to express what they are thinking/feeling. You may invite the “anthropologist(s)” (a role) to comment on what they saw.
- b. Then ask the students to stand up, walk around their chair, and sit down again to leave their role – now everyone is *out* of role.
- c. What was happening in the meeting?
  - i. At some point, allow the class to notice the difference between A, B, C is not just due to elder or landowner status – let them guess until they realise that speaking order is being driven by gender. Explain that gender was kept hidden to reflect that we are all influenced by rules and norms that we may not be aware of (e.g. an unconscious bias that men are more authoritative).
    1. Point out that the elder, land-owning man with an authority position is at the top, and an in-law, non-land-owning woman is at the bottom. So, gender and land ownership intersect to determine the power of each individual.
    2. Ask “*how does this affect how environmental disputes are resolved?*” What about for “*community engagement*” or projects “*for the local community*”?
  - ii. Anthropologists make the “strange familiar and the familiar strange” – having learned about the gendered dynamics in this village meeting in Solomon Islands, ask the students to reflect on their own context. For example, in this class, what are the unwritten rules about whose voices are heard, and how does that affect outcomes? Thinking more broadly, what is said and not said in environmental disputes? How might different voices be heard?
- d. Finally ask for a round of reflections on the seminar.

### Logging role play briefing sheet

#### Story outline

You are a group of village residents of a small coastal village on tribal lands in Solomon Islands. The 200 people in your village are a mix of landowners and non-landowners and some with very specific land rights.

There have been two previous logging operations by foreign companies in your village. The first one was in the 1970s. Decision-making and distribution of benefits from the logging were made through the elder system of authority. The second round of logging took place around 10 years ago. Decision-making was through the larger tribal group, and tribal land chiefs again served as trustees on the logging licence.

Village residents felt they did not get fair benefit from this round of logging, but even though they complained about this second logging project, many people received money, timber, and some other benefits. There were also negative effects from this logging: the village water supply was dirtied and the hydroelectric scheme was rendered non-functional by illegal logging too close to the watershed boundaries.

Currently, another foreign logging company wishes to log the forest above the village. They have approached the Prime Minister, who is a member of the wider tribal group of which your village is a part, and he is pushing for the logging operation to happen. The PM's representative claims that the current licence is simply a renewal of the previous logging licence and therefore there is no need to go through the wider tribal consultation process as required by both legislation and customs about decision-making on customary land. There are other legal irregularities in the way the licence has been obtained.

Three land-owning men from your village have already signed as trustees on the logging licence giving access to money. They have already accepted money from the logging company. Other landowners are opposed to the logging and are angry that the three other tribal members have become trustees without their permission and without wider discussion in the group.

The role play is a meeting to discuss the logging proposal. There have been underlying tensions prior to the meeting because of the appointment of the three trustees. Family groups are divided over the issue and people are feeling angry.

Due to the local culture the meeting is governed by a system of speaking rights. Each role play card gives you certain rules for the meeting and interaction with other groups – *do not share or refer to these instructions* in the meeting but use them to guide how you act.

Regardless of the rules of your role play card, your personality will also affect how you behave in the meeting. You may disobey your rules of engagement but there may be social consequences.

*Source:* Based on the anthropological fieldwork of Michelle Dyer, with modifications by Tim Daw and ideas from Eva Österlind.

**Roles to print and distribute to students**

<p>Meeting chairman</p>	<p>You must allow all members at the meeting who wish to speak to make contributions. However, you will give priority to speakers labelled A first and C last. For example, if you see an A and a B member wishing to speak at the same time, you will allow the A member to speak first. If you see a B and C member wishing to speak at the same time you will allow the B member to speak first. You may also ask someone to speak from any group. Let the labels A–C guide who you let speak, <i>but do not refer to these groups in the role play.</i> After any number of contributions have been made, you may give a summary of issues giving greater value to opinions of A members who are NOT in favour of the logging. You may do this as often as you like. If necessary, you can remind the meeting that members should be given the word by you as chair before contributing.</p>
<p>Elder landowner A x 2–3 in favour or against the logging</p>	<p>You ARE/ARE NOT in favour of the logging operation. You may speak at length and as many times as you like during the meeting to persuade others to your view. You may openly disagree with anyone else at the meeting.</p>
<p>Landowner A x 2–3 in favour or against the logging</p>	<p>You ARE/ARE NOT in favour of the logging operation. You may speak at length and as many times as you like during the meeting to persuade others to your view. You may openly disagree with anyone else at the meeting except elders labelled A.</p>
<p>Elder B x 2–3 in favour or against the logging</p>	<p>You ARE/ARE NOT in favour of the logging operation. You may make up to 3 contributions to the meeting. You may openly disagree with anyone except elders labelled A.</p>

<p>Landowner B x 2–3 in favour or against the logging</p>	<p>You ARE/ARE NOT in favour of the logging operation. You may speak at the meeting but only after members labelled A have had a chance to speak. You may make up to two contributions to the meeting. You may NOT disagree with anyone labelled A. You defer to elders labelled B. You may openly disagree with anyone labelled C.</p>
<p>In-law B x 2–3 in favour or against the logging</p>	<p>You ARE/ARE NOT in favour of the logging operation. You are married into this village. You are not a landowner. You may make as many contributions as you like during the meeting but must always defer to the opinions of Elders labelled B. If you have an opinion that disagrees with people labelled A you can only do this in very circumspect and respectful terms. You may openly disagree with anyone labelled C.</p>
<p>Observer Can be two if large class</p>	<p>You are an anthropologist. You will listen and observe the interactions between the participants throughout the meeting. You must decide what to do if you are asked to make a contribution. You will make a note of how many contributions are made by the participants. You will be asked at the end of the meeting to give your opinion on the meeting dynamics and give your understanding of the interactions that took place during the meeting. Pay close attention to what is going on. Who is speaking and how they speak can be more important than what they say for understanding social interactions.</p>
<p>In-law C x 2–3 in favour or against the logging</p>	<p>You ARE/ARE NOT in favour of the logging operation. You are married into this village. You are not a landowner. You may not speak at the meeting.</p>
<p>Village chairman A</p>	<p>You are NOT in favour of the logging operation. You are a landowner. You may make as many contributions to the meeting as you like but you do not dominate the main discussion. You keep your comments to challenge those elders and landowners labelled A who are in favour of the logging and also those labelled C.</p>
<p>Church elder A</p>	<p>You are NOT in favour of the logging. You are not a landowner. You are married into the village. You may make as many contributions to the meeting as you like. You may not openly disagree with elders labelled A. You do not openly disagree with anyone from group C.</p>
<p>Land rights holder C x 2–3 all in favour of the logging</p>	<p>You ARE in favour of the logging operation. You are not a landowner, but you have land rights to the place the logging company wants to build their log point. You may speak at length and as many times as you like during the meeting to persuade others to your view. You may openly disagree with anyone else at the meeting.</p>

## **Framing or pre-work**

Optionally, ask the students to read Dyer (2017, 2018) describing the context. You might want to read more about role play (e.g. Chapters 2 and 12) or about other warm-up activities (e.g. Chapters 4–7).

## **When to use and when not to use**

This activity is suitable when students have sufficient trust and confidence to embark on a role play. The learning from this exercise depends crucially on the debrief but also tends to be richer and more profound with more advanced and engaged students (i.e. with the master's class).

## **Reflections from the field**

This exercise generally elicits engagement and interest amongst the students and allows them to feel power dynamics that they may not have reflected on before. Feedback from undergraduate classes show that most students reflect on this issue and state that experiencing unequal power in the discussions supported their learning. Keeping gender hidden helps to add surprise and impact to the learning. For example, one reflected that during the role play she suddenly realised that she subconsciously assumed that her character was a man.

The separate round of reflections first in-role added a great additional opportunity to hear the perspectives of each participant – especially those with limited or no speaking opportunities. It also provided dramatic energy giving the students the chance to imagine and reflect on their characters.

The engagement and experience seem to vary with the level of the students. At the master's level, the students engaged more in the role play, reflected more actively, and drew more learning and insights from the exercise. On a five-point scale of agreeing that taking part in the role play helped to learn about sustainability, the 14 master's students gave an average of 4.2 and a minimum of 3, whereas the 32 undergraduate students gave an average of 3.2 including three students who gave a minimum of 1.

A minority of students from the undergraduate class were unaccustomed to and resisted the role play. Sometimes the undergraduate students invested less in following their roles. Thus, in lower-stage classes more encouragement and support from the teacher may be necessary. The teacher may also want to emphasise that the experience is best if people try to follow their roles.

## **Things to consider**

The gender roles should be hidden from the students and only become apparent in the debrief – this is because we all have an unconscious bias that men will be in

charge. When you do not know you are playing a man or a woman, you feel the personal injustice of being silenced or of silencing others. The point is to feel this personally, as yourself, so that you realise what it feels like.

Students need to understand why role play is a legitimate and effective teaching method.

We usually allocate all roles randomly, but with less engaged students, it may be appropriate to have a volunteer to chair the meeting, as this is such a key role.

Some students found the strong sense of empowerment/disempowerment unsettling. There is a need to have a proper debriefing and stepping out of roles to settle feelings of frustration and anxiety. As such, ensure that there is sufficient time for the debrief, and that students reflect on power dynamics in their own contexts.

## Learning extensions

Providing the context in which the dispute takes place can create a more immersive experience for students. When students know more fully what they are arguing for or against they feel more invested in their allocated role. This results in their wanting to succeed in influencing the outcome of the discussion in favour of their allocated role and thus subsequently experiencing more personally the power or lack of that results from circumstances outside of their control – like their gender, kinship ties, and so on. Greater contextual knowledge also reveals students' personal assumptions about what factors should be most important in interpersonal interactions. Understanding the cultural context of the role play foregrounds these culturally mediated power dynamics with the critical realisation that these cannot be assumed across cultural contexts.

## Integrating with assessment

The undergraduate course includes a weekly reflective log, which is compulsory but ungraded. At the end of the week in which the role play happens, students are instructed to contrast the experience of the role play with another seminar in which they deliberate about a sustainability question anonymously online (i.e. with almost no identity-based power relations). The final assignment of the module includes instructions for the students to draw on their reflective log to describe their learning. Some students have chosen to refer to this seminar.

## References

- Dyer, M. (2017). Eating money: Narratives of equality on customary land in the context of natural resource extraction in the Solomon Islands. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 28(1), 88–103. – a study that gives the background to the case.
- Dyer, M. (2018). Transforming communicative spaces: The rhythm of gender in meetings in rural Solomon Islands. *Ecology and Society*, 23, 1–10. – a study of the meeting on which this role play is based.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>