

Creative Skill-Building Assignments

Historical Events as Live Debate-Summits

Identify an historical controversy that embodies crosscurrents or perspectives with which you would like students to grapple (e.g., origins of World War I). Divide students into constituent groups with defined perspectives (e.g., political and opinion leaders from Germany/Austria-Hungary; Serbia/Russia; France/Belgium; etc.) and assign them to seek out original sources to identify and understand the values, arguments, points of view, and beliefs of those constituents. In class, convene a debate-summit in which the goal is for constituents to (1) persuade others to understand their perspective and (2) identify creative, nonviolent options to resolve the conflict. Bear in mind that the purpose would not be to “win” a competition of words, but rather to wrestle with the complexities of crafting nonviolent resolutions to complex societal problems.

Evaluation. Students could receive feedback from both the instructor and classmates on the quality and thoroughness of their research and the persuasiveness of their arguments. See the oral communication General Education rubric for ideas on how to score presentations. Another possibility would be to ask students to write a paper or essay exam question that integrates the range of perspectives they heard during the summit and offer their own prescriptions.



TV & Film Scenes: How (Else) Might This Situation Unfold?



Identify a critical conflict or turning point scene from a TV show, film, or play as a prompt—e.g., the conflict between Yaz McKay and Ji-Yoon Kim in episode 4 of the Netflix series, *The Chair*. Prompt students to analyze the conflict using different lenses (e.g., contributing factors in the moment versus structural factors; Yaz’s versus Ji-Yoon’s perspective) as well as what they think the characters’ motivations are. Once students have a more holistic understanding of the conflict, assign them to write alternative scripts in which the characters could achieve their goals; scripts could be shared and discussed in small groups. Small groups could then draw on good ideas generated individually to generate an aggregated script to act out in front of the class.

Evaluation. Instructors could grade individual scripts according to how well these incorporate different lenses and perspectives. The instructor and classmates might also offer feedback to student groups using relevant criteria such as the extent to which the character accomplished their desired goal, balanced honesty with perspective-taking, etc. Alternatively, students could be given the opportunity to revise and submit an original script for conflict resolution after class discussion.

Case Studies as Relevant Applications

Students enjoy case studies because these make abstract concepts and theories feel vivid and concrete. Case studies tell a story about how real people dealt with or responded to situations; in reading about or watching these people, students learn to apply concepts and imagine what they might do in such situations. Some online sources (e.g., Harvard Business School Publishing) are free to faculty members and offer both well-defined cases for direct sale to students and instructor teaching notes (how-to suggestions for structuring classroom discussions, including a sequence of questions and summaries of key points). Yet, outstanding case studies are ubiquitous: they can be found in newspaper and magazine articles, biographies, documentaries, and podcasts.



To help students build skills using case studies, first identify stories that capture important concepts and moments in the lives of compelling characters (e.g., LGBTQ activist Marsha P. Johnson). Find accessible summaries (*The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*) and/or ask students to do their own research—a best practice is to assign students to prepare fact summaries or analyses prior to class. Then structure classroom discussions to analyze critical events or decision points: what were the person’s underlying motivations and options? What did they do that was or was not effective and why? What might they have done differently to achieve different outcomes; what would make this option more or less feasible? Students can act out what they think the person might say or do and provide post-discussion analyses for evaluation purposes.

Engaged Skill Building via Role Play Exercises

Role play exercises involve identifying (or creating) background materials based on two or more perspectives about an interaction or conflict, assigning those unique roles to students, and inviting them to meet and seek resolution. The outcomes obtained by pairs or small groups of students can be summarized and displayed in table form and discussed during debriefing to identify approaches that proved to be more or less effective in reaching desired outcomes. The need for individual preparation to role-play with others promotes high student engagement; moreover, structured interactions with classmates helps students to bond with each other.

Examples of role play exercises can be found [online](#), in textbooks or other teaching resources, or created based on actual situations. A key feature is that a common or shared set of facts needs to be mixed with different perspectives and some unique information based on those involved; in this way, the scenario mimics real conflicts in which no participant has access to all perspectives, facts, beliefs, or goals. Note that even brief roles (1–2 paragraphs, one page) can be highly effective.



Evaluation. A variety of assignments are possible. One possibility is to ask students to exchange post role-play feedback with each other (see sample form at the end of this document) and then individually prepare a written analysis of the interaction. Another possibility is to include neutral observers to provide written feedback to participating students, who then use this as a basis for written analysis. A third possibility is to ask students to compile and analyze their feedback across multiple role-play analyses to identify their strengths and areas for development.

Simulated Experiences: What Would You Do...?

Simulations refer to larger scale role-play exercises that can be used to illustrate group and systemic dynamics. A wide variety of simulations are available for classroom use, including computerized [marketplace](#) and [structured leadership simulations](#), group-based simulations focused on [power dynamics](#), and even those that mimic historical conflicts. Such historical and hypothetical conflicts enable students to practice listening, communication, advocacy, mediation, teamwork, and conflict resolution skills under challenging conditions. As such, simulations offer highly engaging, extremely powerful learning experiences for students.

One example of a full-class simulation is *Elmwood Hospital*, in which a mid-sized private hospital located in a low-income community is confronted by city residents, who seek improved health care services and outreach for chronic and preventable illnesses. Based on an actual case from the 1970s, community members have become angered by the hospital board's lack of response to repeated requests for change and occupy its board room, refusing to leave until their demands are addressed. The simulation entails a small group of designated mediators working through the confrontation between hospital board members and a large group of community members.



Sample Role-Play Exercise Feedback Form

Your Name: _____

Partner's Name: _____

Your Role: _____

Exercise: _____

Instructions: Use the items below to indicate how you reacted to your partner during the exercise. *Please be honest* and *constructive*; your ratings will *not* affect your partner's grade. Be sure to give this form to your partner for use in the negotiation exercise analysis (and to get one from your partner).

Did you reach an agreement? Yes No **If yes, what were the terms?**

	Not at all		Somewhat		Definitely
To what extent did your partner try to get the negotiation completed quickly?	5	4	3	2	1
To what extent did your partner seem <i>well prepared</i> — knowledgeable of the background information?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent do you think your partner was <i>stubborn</i> or <i>unreasonable</i> (e.g., for the sake of ego or appearance)?	5	4	3	2	1
To what extent did your partner <i>ask questions</i> to gather information from you?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did your partner really <i>listen</i> to you?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did your partner focus on <i>objective external criteria</i> to evaluate whether your offers were fair?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did your partner <i>discuss how to meet both parties' interests</i> (versus just their own position or interests)?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did your partner <i>suggest creative ways to meet both of your needs</i> ?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did your partner use <i>psychological pressure</i> to get you to concede?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did your partner's <i>body language, tone of voice</i> and/or <i>words</i> suggest <i>confidence</i> or <i>strength</i> ?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did you <i>trust</i> your partner (e.g., that they told the truth, would follow through on agreements)?	1	2	3	4	5
To what extent did your partner <i>stand firm</i> on key interests (rather than repeating their position over & over again)?	1	2	3	4	5
How <i>frustrated</i> or <i>irritated</i> did you feel during the session?	5	4	3	2	1
To what extent did you <i>reach an agreement</i> that <i>satisfied you</i> , in your role?	1	2	3	4	5
How much would you <i>want to work with this person again</i> if this situation were real? (<i>be honest here!</i>)	1	2	3	4	5

What were this person's *strongest behaviors* or *arguments* in this situation?

What could this person have *done differently* to gain more favorable terms from you?

What *suggestions* would you give this person if they wanted to get better outcomes in future situations?