

Designer-Client Role-Playing Challenges

Author Jill Bazemore Pable
Florida State University, Department of Interior Design
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2051
240 McNeal Hall, St. Paul, Minnesota 55108

Key Words Role-playing, Professional Practice, Problem Resolution

Category Professional Practice

Type Class Exercise

Level Junior or Senior

Duration 1 Class Meeting

Note: each situation takes approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Four to six scenarios can be addressed during one class meeting.

Similar role-playing situations can be devised for other topics in interior design. They work particularly well for the subject of Designer-Architect-Contractor relationships.

Abstract Students were exposed to real problems professional interior designers encounter in the course of working with their clients by means of a series of role-playing exercises. These exercises, in which one student assumed the role of the designer and the other the client, taught them to empathize with the client's view of the situation and promoted thoughtful consideration to resolve problems presented. Group discussion invited students to compare their reactions to those of others.

Criteria Rationale

Upper division interior design students begin to think more about the day-to-day realities of professional practice as they look toward their graduation. While their degree work provides them with core skills indispensable to their eventual practice, it is difficult in the academic atmosphere to emulate certain true-life situations a professional designer is likely to encounter. Similarly, a student's internship experience, while providing a window into the professional realm, can conceal dilemmas an interior design professional faces.

Students need the chance to develop and test their decisions as they relate to the business of professional practice and compare their conclusions to those of others. The ability to see a situation from the client's point of view has additional value for the emerging professional: through empathy, they might learn to maximize productive client-designer dialogue, resolve misunderstandings and disputes effectively.

Program Requirements

The above needs might be addressed through exposing the students to constructed situations, presenting them with real-life dilemmas regarding professional practice students face from both the designer and the client's points of view. Students are prompted to reach their own conclusions-think on their feet-to achieve resolution of the problems. By initially interacting in pairs students tentative in their decision-making gain confidence. The exercise culminates in group discussions determining the most valid solutions. This non-threatening interaction develops team decision-making skills, and builds individual confidence.

- Process** The instructor divides the students into pairs. They are informed this is a role-playing exercise and it is imperative to act out the part, including emotions, to the best of their abilities. They are told to deal with the situation they read about and formulate solutions they will defend, as a group, to the class. The students are then told whether each is the designer or the client.
- The instructor then hands out the same pre-printed role-playing descriptions to all the pairs of students.
- The students are instructed to silently read the role descriptions three minutes without discussing the scenario with their counterparts. During this time they should be formulating reactions or decisions within their own minds.
- The instructor directs the students to engage in five minutes of role-playing within their groups to resolve the dilemmas.
- At the conclusion of the paired discussions, the instructor brings the class together. Each pair then explains to the class their solution to the problem and why it is satisfactory. The class debates the validity of all the solutions and decides which might be best

- Evaluation** The grading of role-playing is difficult. The activity may work best when presented in upper-level design courses that rely heavily on class participation and evaluation throughout the course.

Students enjoyed this activity and found it extremely worthwhile. Most were fascinated with the dilemmas presented in professional practice. The more gregarious students took pleasure in the acting aspect of these role-playing activities.

- Credits** The inspiration for this activity stems mainly from a class at Florida State University, "Current Trends in Interior Design". Students in this class voiced

a need for most exposure to the nuts-and-bolts of professional practice, and wished to test their newly-gained knowledge of business practices from other course work.

Credit is due the College Teaching Program within FSU's Educational Leadership Department for promoting innovative teaching ideas such as role-modeling.

Documentation

Situation 1

Client. You are an affluent person who resides in a house which you are continually adding to and updating. The designer with whom you are about to speak satisfactorily renovated your living room last year. Since this was a success, you have recently asked this designer to help you with your kitchen.

In a previous meeting you verbally established this designer would be willing to do the job and reached a verbal non-specific agreement as to the designer's method of charging for services. The designer indicated that the contract proposal would be written up shortly.

Since you work in a business that frequently relies upon verbal contracts, and because you are in a hurry to have your house finished, you feel you must ask the designer to begin today before the contract is completed and signed by you (even though the first job with the designer was carried out with a written contract.) You would not react kindly delays for any reason! (You also have a reputation for being a bit forceful.)

Designer. One of your interior design jobs last year was the renovation of a living room for an affluent business person. Even though this client was a bit demanding, the project was a success.

This person has approached you now to design a kitchen, and because business has been a little slow this year you feel you should take the job. In a previous session, you verbally agreed to do the job , and you discussed some methods of paying for your services. You left the meeting promising to get back with the client soon with a written proposal for this person to sign.

It is now two days later and this prospective client urgently needs to speak with you ...

Situation 2

Client. You are a president of a corporation which has employed the services of an interior designer to create the interiors in your new corporate headquarters. The designer is cordial, honest, and extremely creative. This last point is where your dilemma lies.

When you approached the designer you had a clear-cut idea of how you wanted the offices to look. The designer has since looked at the building and thought about your wants. The designer has just presented the completed design to you for your approval. Although it is wonderfully executed, it is not what you wanted! It is very "now"-very contemporary-and just about the opposite of what you were thinking. You believe that just because the building is very contemporary in style does not mean the interiors should match.

You now need to listen to the designer and convey your feelings...

Designer. You have been hired to design the interiors of a corporate headquarters to be located in an existing building. In prior meetings with the president, you have gained a good idea of his traditional preconceived notions. After the first meeting, you toured the building and found it very contemporary in style-so much so that you now strongly feel the interior must complement the building and also be contemporary.

You have put together your presentation and know it is not "Early American" with walnut and mahogany traditional elements as the president wished, but more in keeping with the architecture. You are afraid that if you give in and concede to "Early American" you will not be proud of the project. On the other hand, if you try tactfully to educate the president to come around to your way of thinking, you might lose the job!

Situation 3

Client. You are the president of a local insurance company. Your office is about to undergo renovation. For unspoken, political reasons you must choose an architect, contractor and interior designer who already have insurance policies with your firm. The choice for the interior designer also is motivated by another important insurance policy holder, who has put in a good word for his niece/nephew.

The interior designer you have chosen does indeed have a policy with you and wishes to talk with you ...

Designer. You have been chosen from a long list of interior design firms to do work for a prestigious local insurance company. Knowing you did much legwork to secure the job and now have it, you at first congratulated yourself.

Now, though you are starting to think that you might have gotten the job because you have a policy through this company and were therefore not entirely chosen on the basis of your good work and service. Further, you have the feeling your politically powerful Uncle Charlie-who is always looking out for you-put in a good word for your firm. You know he has a big insurance policy with the clients, and suspect he may have exerted a little pressure on the company to force them to hire you.

Should this bother you? After all, you have the job! But how does it make you feel to have gotten the job on this basis?

The insurance company president and you have just gotten together to discuss the project. Should you mention your suspicions to him and question him about what he really thinks of your firm or just keep quiet?