

# R

Thomas Herrmann & Isa Jahnke (2012):  
Role Making and Role Taking in Learning. In: Seel, Norbert (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning (ESL)*,  
New York et al. Springer.

## Role-Making and Role-Taking in Learning

**Au1** THOMAS HERRMANN<sup>1</sup>, ISA JAHNKE<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>Information and Technology Management, Institute for  
Applied Work Sciences, University of Bochum, Bochum,  
Germany  
<sup>2</sup>Center for Research on Higher Education and Faculty  
Development, TU Dortmund University, Dortmund,  
Germany

### Synonyms

Role-assignment; Role dynamics; Role-playing; Roles in learning

### Definition

Roles in the context of learning can, on the one hand, be described by concrete examples such as teacher, student, advisor, facilitator, examiner, examinee, freshmen, mentor, tutor, etc. On the other hand, it can be defined in an abstract way: A role comprises a set of patterns of behavior, rights, and duties which are temporarily assigned to various persons. For example, in different settings a person will be seen as a child when the person is visiting his or her parents; the same person also can be a student when he or she is at university, and in discussions he or she can take the role of a facilitator to push the group forward – the role that one assumes is dependent on the context of the social setting and differ within societies. Accordingly, a set of expectations are addressed and communicated to the person who assumes the role.

The question is how expectations and roles evolve. Sociological researchers (cf. Herrmann et al. 2004) point out that expectations result (1) from the position within an organization which is held by the role (e.g., teacher, student) – what is called “formal roles”; and (2) roles also may develop informally through the communicative interactions within an organization or a community (e.g., facilitator, opinion-maker). Therefore, a differentiation between formal and informal roles is needed. The relevance of informal roles increases with

the emergence of non-institutionalized settings of learning (e.g., online communities).

Social roles (see “theoretical background” below) are both *facts* and *products* of social interaction. Roles are *facts* that deliver the foundation for social interaction: Roles exist as “objective facticities” (Berger and Luckmann 1966), where people perceive roles as existing facts and “external social installation”; this term stresses the established society’s perception of a role like father or mother; a boss at a bank; a teacher at school within a society. People have cognitive concepts about an ideal role-behavior in mind. The society or community itself “defines” what “ideal” is. This is a complex social process in complex social structures (see Giddens 1984 “The Constitution of Society”).

Roles are *products* of social interaction: Roles are also developed dynamically in social systems by repetitively perceiving social interaction patterns and expectations (e.g., the moderator, the decision maker, the informal leader, and the opinion leader). The shaping of (new) roles depends on the characteristics of the persons who assume a role and on how they play it (role-making) as well as on those who assign a role to others. However, these simply circumscribed dynamics are embedded in complex social structures within an organization, community, or society. The most relevant patterns of role dynamics are role-assignment, role-taking, and role-making which are defined as follows:

1. *Role-assignment*: There are various types of role-assignments. A person assigns a concrete role to another person by either urging him or her to assume it. This may happen by applying means of social sanctions (e.g., threats of negative consequences). Or a person is allowed by others to take a role voluntarily. Furthermore, persons may decide independently to take over a concrete role and other people (within the social system) will agree more or less explicitly.
2. *Role-taking*: Role-taking indicates that a person acts due to the expectations of a specific role. These expectations can potentially be enforced by sanctions being imposed on the role actor. People develop an individual understanding regarding the expectations of a role – even if

82 they have already taken it – and they are able to reflect  
83 on their role. This so-called role-distance means  
84 looking at one’s own way of role-taking at a remove.  
85 Role-distance includes a competent, critical, evaluative  
86 attitude toward the expectations which influence  
87 a role. A person need not to stick to a single role but  
88 can take several roles or switch between them (e.g., a  
89 person can taken the role of student, learner, and infor-  
90 mal conflict-moderator in a class; a person often is not  
91 a teacher *and* a student, but a person in a student’s role  
92 could also take the role of a tutor, this is a student who  
93 teaches other students in certain classes).

94 3. *Role-making*: Role-making characterizes how a person  
95 *lives* (plays) a role, and how he or she transforms the  
96 expectations into concrete behavior. Role-making  
97 takes place in social interaction, where people “nego-  
98 tiate” the expectations which are significant for a role.  
99 In general, this negotiation proceeds implicitly and is  
100 often not reflected by the actors (although communi-  
101 cation about roles and role-making could be helpful  
102 sometimes). The driving force of role-making is the  
103 difference between the role-taker’s individual attitude  
104 toward the role on the one hand and the expectations  
105 which are assigned to the role by its social context (e.g.,  
106 given by the society, community, group, or  
107 organization).

108 4. *Inter-role-conflict*: If a person within a social network,  
109 organization, or community takes more than one role  
110 at the same time or switches frequently, a conflict  
111 between the roles can occur. This results from different  
112 demands on different roles. For example, a person  
113 takes two roles such as moderator and participant at  
114 the same time. In the first situation, he or she struc-  
115 tures the participants’ discussion and therefore should  
116 take a neutral position. In the second role, he or she  
117 provides his or her own input and argues for his or her  
118 own opinion. Thus, there is a conflict between the  
119 person’s competing interests.

## 120 Theoretical Background

121 A social role is often defined as a set of activities performed  
122 by individuals (Goffman 1959), but a role also defines the  
123 range of expected behavior within a group. For instance,  
124 a person who teaches has special behavior patterns such as  
125 “giving some instructions to the group,” “beginning when  
126 the class starts,” “supporting students’ learning,” or  
127 “standing in front of the class.” Consequently, the group  
128 (when expecting such activities at school) labels a person  
129 who behaves in accordance with these patterns as  
130 a “teacher” (a type of role-assignment). If the person in  
131 the teacher’s role undertakes totally different activities

132 than expected, parents, students, or other teachers would  
133 probably intervene. They would give correcting feedback  
134 and if this has no effect and if interactions and discussion  
135 did not lead to a change of behavior, one would try to  
136 apply negative sanctions until the teacher would rectify his  
137 or her behavior. To conclude, a role and its role-playing  
138 depend on the preexisting values and norms of a group,  
139 community, social system, or society, and the possibility  
140 or power to restrict alleged “incorrect” behavior. There-  
141 fore, a role and “good” or “bad” role-playing are relative to  
142 its cultural setting (e.g., in society A “educative” behavior  
143 is different than in society B).

144 The term “role” has a long tradition. Beginning with  
145 Mead in 1934, the role theory was especially criticized  
146 between the 1950s and 1970s for not sufficiently  
147 explaining the complexities of societies. Thus, role theory  
148 was no longer considered to be a complete sociological  
149 theory, but the term “role” was integrated as a basic term  
150 in contemporary social science. With Giddens (1984), the  
151 term role was expanded to include temporal processes and  
152 became part of social structures that form the basis of  
153 a duality: on the one hand, a role is created by those who  
154 interact, and simultaneously, there are on the other hand  
155 inherited rules, resources, regulations, values, norms, and  
156 social relationships that are produced and reproduced  
157 during human interactions. A role in online communities  
158 also depends on computer-mediated interaction, and  
159 a role is then a perceivable interaction pattern created  
160 “through” the repetition of social interaction (Bales  
161 1950) supported by technologies.

162 To support the analysis of collaborative learning and  
163 knowledge management, Herrmann, Jahnke, and Loser  
164 (2004) as well as Jahnke (2010) have extracted four char-  
165 acteristics from historical discussions about the role con-  
166 cept: from Symbolic Interactionism beginning with Mead  
167 (1934), Goffman (1959), and Blumer (1969) – to the  
168 Functionalistic Paradigm beginning with Linton (1936),  
169 then Parsons (1951) and Dahrendorf (1958). These four  
170 characteristics are:

- 171 1. Position within the social relations of an organization,  
172 institution, or community
- 173 2. Tasks/activities which have to be performed in accor-  
174 dance with a role
- 175 3. Expectations and trust of others with respect to the  
176 role-taker’s behavior
- 177 4. Social interaction (either co-presence or computer  
178 mediated) which characterizes and shapes the role-  
179 playing

180 *Position/social relations*. The position means the mem-  
181 ber’s position in the group, organization, or community in

182 relation to other members. The position can be a formal  
183 one, such as student, teacher, study management advisor,  
184 or moderator, assigned by work contract or membership.  
185 It can also be an informal position like opinion leader,  
186 conclusion maker, or promoter of the procedure. The  
187 term “position” has no relation to a physical location.

188 *Tasks/activities.* The aspect of “tasks” focuses on what  
189 an organizational or community member in a specific  
190 position does or what this person is expected to do  
191 (from the viewpoint of the community or organization),  
192 what the different primary activities are, for example  
193 teaching, consulting, moderating, and/or contributing.  
194 Tasks and activities are often close to the position held  
195 by a person.

196 *Expectations.* Here the term “expectation” refers to  
197 what people expect a role holder, depending on a specific  
198 position performed by an individual, should and should  
199 not do. In official organizations, expectations are often  
200 linked with the job description. The expectations are  
201 rather illustrated explicitly. But, expectations can also be  
202 “communicated” nonverbally and implicitly (it is not  
203 illustrated anywhere). It includes informal notions, com-  
204 mitments, and agreements often about nonroutine actions  
205 (“what to do when X takes places”).

206 *Social interactions/role-playing.* People have expecta-  
207 tions about what a role owner should and should not do,  
208 but a role is a dynamic phenomenon and therefore can  
209 also be changed by individuals. Within certain limits the  
210 role actor can actively shape a role he or she has taken. The  
211 role actor *transforms* the role expectations into concrete  
212 behavior (aspects of role-making; see below). This is one  
213 reason that each participant fills the same role (slightly)  
214 differently. But such changes depend on (1) the anticipa-  
215 tion of people’s power that could restrict nonconformist  
216 behavior, and (2) the role-mechanisms.

217 With these four categories, roles and their dynamics  
218 can be empirically observed in certain settings of teaching  
219 and learning. *Position* and *expectations* characterize the  
220 *structural dimension* within groups, that is, how people  
221 relate to each other. Tasks and activities and online inter-  
222 actions and role-playing mainly focus on the *action*  
223 *dimension*, that is, how a person performs the position  
224 and plays the role. The combination of these factors can  
225 sufficiently describe the possible change of roles within  
226 social contexts, for instance, Technology-enhanced learn-  
227 ing and knowledge sharing in online communities within  
228 companies and organizations.

## Important Scientific Research and Open Questions 229

230  
231 The new research field of “computer-supported collabo-  
232 rative learning” (CSCL) was a driving force in the discus-  
233 sion about the shift from considering “teaching as transfer  
234 of objective knowledge” to an understanding of learning  
235 as “collaborative knowledge construction” (Stahl 2006).  
236 With this shift, new forms of social interaction and recip-  
237 rocal perception lead to an extended variety of roles in the  
238 context of learning. Investigations of computer-supported  
239 collaborative learning settings (at schools and universities)  
240 revealed that learners and teachers fulfill different formal  
241 and informal roles. These roles characterize the sharing of  
242 various tasks during the learning process of knowledge  
243 construction. The students play the role of various experts  
244 (with different levels of experience) or they carry  
245 out typical sets of tasks in order to organize their  
246 collaboration (e.g., facilitation, documentation, triggering  
247 meta-reflection, etc.). The role of the teacher is also split  
248 up into more differentiated “sub-roles.” From a socio-  
249 technical design research perspective, the question is  
250 whether the roles can be formally “implemented” or  
251 assigned to the learners by technical and organizational  
252 means, whether they mainly develop spontaneously  
253 (within the learning community), or whether  
254 a combination of both is the most common way for roles  
255 to evolve. Further research needs to answer to what extent  
256 supportive roles for knowledge construction can be  
257 planned and formally established (from outside the  
258 learners’ group) to foster learning. Under which condi-  
259 tions will roles result from an informal or from a formal  
260 process? To what extent can roles be designed and how?  
261 A further question is to what extent different learners’  
262 roles affect participation, competence development, and  
263 grades in courses offline as well as online. Furthermore,  
264 the impact of the role dynamics and the emergence of  
265 a variety of roles within the learning process as well as  
266 the willingness of students to take part in this process have  
267 to be investigated.

## Cross-References 268

- ▶ Communities of Practice 269
- ▶ Computer-Based Learning 270
- ▶ Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) 271
- ▶ eLearning 272
- ▶ Online Learning 273
- ▶ Role Play and the Development of Mental Models 274
- ▶ Role-Taking for Knowledge Building 275
- ▶ Social Networks 276

277 **References**

- 278 Herrmann, Th, Jahnke, I, & Loser, K. U. (2004). The role concept as  
279 a basis for designing community systems. In F. Darses, R. Dieng,  
280 C. Simone, & M. Zackland (Eds.), *Cooperative systems design*  
281 (pp. 163–178). Amsterdam: Ios Press.
- Jahnke, I. (2010). Dynamics of social roles in a knowledge management  
community. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(4), 533–546. 282  
doi:10.1016/j.chb.2009.08.010. 283  
284
- Stahl, G. (2006). *Group cognition: Computer support for building collabo-*  
285  
*rative knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 286

Galley Proof