



A Role Playing Exercise of a Wheelchair Program in Central America

Wheelchairs for the World

Written by Amy Smith

In this role play, students experience some of the tensions that arise when stakeholders with varying objectives determine the outcome of a project. They gain insight into the factors that influence funding decisions and the different effects of donation-based programs and capacity-building programs.

Start by having students playing the same character get together as they read through their roles. Check in with each group to make sure they understand their objectives and their special instructions. It is critical that you emphasize that the characters who are only supposed to respond to direct questions do this consistently (and without saying things like “I’m only allowed to respond to direct questions” to their class-mates). After about 5 minutes have the working groups form and begin the exercise. Martin(a) Moneybags will run the meeting. You should set a time limit, 15 minutes is about right, although you can adjust this depending on what time you have available, but be sure to leave plenty of time for the discussion that follows. At the end of the time, ask each Martin(a) Moneybags to make their decision and write it on a piece of paper and turn it in. Then give them the opportunity to explain their decisions to the class. Following this, ask the class what they thought of their participation in the decision-making process. You may also want to use this as an opportunity to bring up other examples of donation-based programs vs capacity-building programs and their consequences.

Additional comments:

The wheelchair users and their parents are only allowed to respond to direct questions. In many cases, they are not given the opportunity to do anything other than introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting. It is interesting that in many cases the entire plan is set without ever asking the end user (the wheelchair rider) what they would like. Sadly, this is also typical of many development projects.

I have run the exercise where in half the cases, Max(ine) the mechanic is able to communicate freely and in the other half, (s)he is only allowed to respond to direct questions. This limits the ability of the workshop manager to explain the benefits of capacity building and employment generation to the funders. It is interesting to note how this affects the decisions that are made.

When they are not given specific instructions, different students playing Martin(a) Moneybags will interpret their task in a variety of ways, some will give some money to each program, to hedge their bets, others will distribute it in an all-or-nothing manner. The directions in the role descriptions are ambiguous, so you should decide if you want to restrict their options.