

Emotional Engagement Through Drama: Strategies to Assist Learning through Role-Play

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When students are involved in a classroom activity designed to promote the learning of specific concepts, it is more likely they will understand and retain these concepts when they engage emotionally in the learning experience. The difficulty for teachers involved in higher education is how to engage students in their learning in an emotionally challenging way while maintaining a classroom environment in which students feel safe. In the following instructional paper, the use of role-play as a pedagogical approach for enhancing learning through emotional engagement will be discussed. The paper highlights how the author makes use of role-play to provide genuine emotional challenges for students in a tertiary setting while still providing a safe learning environment.

Much education practice operates at a safe neutral level without the space for emotional engagement, yet the idea that emotion plays a crucial role in learning has been discussed by many educational researchers (e.g., Jensen, 2008; Nimmo, 1998; Nuthall, 2000). Literature and personal experience reveal that drama could be an effective catalyst for genuine emotional engagement with issues of human concern, which could in turn be the beginning of an emancipatory learning process (Booth, 2000; Cohen, 1994; Courtney, 1998; Martello, 2001; Walkinshaw, 2004; Wilhelm, 1998).

The use of role-play in adult and higher education has been examined in numerous educational contexts. Researchers and practitioners from a range of disciplines have found that the use of role-play as a learning activity has improved learner understanding and engagement (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999; Craig & Bloomfield, 2006; Cutler & Hay, 2000; Harris & Daley, 2008; Luca & Heal, 2006; Rabinowitz, 1997; Raphael & O'Mara, 2002; Van Ments, 1999). However, there is little written on how teachers in higher education can engage their students emotionally in role-play while maintaining a safe classroom environment.

The author has used dramatic role-play in teacher education to make pre-service teachers' learning immediate, real and emotional. In reflecting on my practice, I recognised there were role-play sessions where a high level of emotional engagement had occurred and other sessions where emotional commitment to the drama work was completely absent. In the successful role-play sessions, there seemed to be a commonality of strategies used to commit students to the emotional world of the drama that were not used in the less successful classes.

In this paper, a theoretical framework is proposed that attempts to establish the impact of emotions on learning and the potential of drama-based teaching approaches to engage learners emotionally. A description of the author's use of role-play in pre-service teacher education courses is then provided, concluding with specific strategies that have proved successful in assisting students to emotionally engage in the unfolding dramatic world of role-play. The strategies discussed will provide teachers in a variety of higher education contexts with practical ways of making the use of role-play a rewarding learning experience for students and teachers alike.

The Theoretical Framework

Evidence of Emotional Engagement Enhancing Learning

The notion that emotional engagement in a task assists learning and particularly memory is well established. Researchers in the fields of psychology and neuroscience have demonstrated that, when strong emotions are experienced, the events associated with these emotions will be more accurately and readily remembered than more emotionally neutral experiences (Berry, Schmied & Schrock, 2008; Buchanan, 2007; LaBar & Cabeza, 2006; Sotgiu & Galati 2007; Zull, 2002). Neuroscientists have identified the particularly powerful role the amygdala area of the brain has in assisting memory by imbuing remembered experiences with meaning through associating emotion with experience (Jensen, 2008). Of particular interest to educational researchers is the relationship between emotions, learning, and social learning activities. Caine,

Caine and Crowell (1999) make the relationship between emotions and understanding explicit in their contention that students' understanding is affected by the emotional nature of their interpersonal relationships. They argue that it is the emotional nature of social experience that secures meaningful learning and shapes concepts. Similarly, Nuthall (2000) suggests that when students work together inclusively and co-operatively they are not merely learning social skills but rather the associated emotions of these social experiences, which are stored as integral parts of the scientific or mathematical procedure about which they are learning. It would seem that the emotions associated with the social interactions that occur in learning activities are fundamental in securing the long-term retention of the actual concepts being studied.

While it is commonly accepted that those involved in education should try to promote a positive emotional learning environment, there is evidence that providing opportunities for students to experience emotions commonly perceived as negative could also be beneficial to learners. Reisberg and Heuer (2004) provide evidence that events associated with both positive and negative emotions are more likely to be recalled in greater intensity than emotionally neutral experiences. Zull (2002) suggests that feelings of anxiety during a learning experience often lead learners to recall the detail of these experiences clearly. Similarly, recent advances in neuroscience show that both positive and negative emotional experiences can enhance both the encoding and retrieval of these experiences (Buchanan, 2007; LaBar & Cabeza, 2006). A recent cross-disciplinary study by a historian, a cognitive psychologist, and a biopsychologist demonstrated that the use of emotionally disturbing photographs increased the ability of college history students to recall associated information provided in the form of written text (Berry, Schmied & Schrock, 2008). The idea that robust emotional experiences play a crucial role in cognition is an important principle of the Reggio Emilia early childhood centres. Nimmo (1998) argues that many educators in the Anglo-American cultural tradition steer learners away from dealing with strong emotions and, in doing so, miss important learning opportunities, as moments of strong emotion in a social context can become part of the shared memory. He suggests that schools would gain much from adopting a Reggio Emilia approach that does not "shy away from controversial or emotion-laden themes such as children's fear of crowds or being lost" (p. 462). It is

argued here that learning activities in higher education settings should aim to engage students in strong emotions rather than remaining safe, sanitised, and emotionally neutral, as is often the case.

Often learners will experience strong emotions such as anxiety and confusion when ideas being introduced through particular learning activities come into conflict with their preconceptions. The cognitive conflict experienced by learners when their ideas are challenged by others is central to Piagetian theories of cognitive development (Hamilton & Ghatala, 1994). Studies of group interactions in classroom settings show that the cognitive conflict that occurs between peers when they approach an issue from different perspectives is highly conducive to cognitive development (Ames & Murray, 1998; Levine & Resnick, 1993). Drawing on Vygotskian learning theory, New (1998) describes how, when teachers encourage exchanges of multiple perspectives, increased knowledge construction occurs. She attributes this increased knowledge construction to the notion that learners have to work through the emotional confusion and disturbance engendered by differing views. Others also argue that the socially constructed nature of knowledge necessitates that teachers elicit conflicting perspectives so that learners engage in sustained, thought-provoking dialogue rather than mere repetition of a single dominant viewpoint (Alton-Lee, 2003; Lyngard & Mills, 2002). If strong emotions incited by conflicting perspectives are likely to lead to lasting learning, the challenge for higher education teachers is to create an environment for such learning to occur while protecting the emotional well-being of students. I find that use of drama, and more specifically, role-play, has been successful in balancing the need to maintain a learning environment where students feel safe from personal ridicule and find a space where they can engage in genuine, strong emotions.

Evidence of Drama Enhancing Emotional Engagement in Learning

The ability of drama to engage spectators and actors in a transformative process that connects the physical to the emotional was recognised by Aristotle some 2400 years ago. In his theory of *catharsis*, Aristotle asserts that audiences to a Greek tragedy would emotionally participate in the drama through their empathy with the tragic hero central to the play (Cohen, 1981). For him, such emotional participation

was the objective of theatre, as this engagement has a purifying effect on the audience as they are purged of unwanted emotions (Courtney, 1988).

More recently, educators working in the field of drama-in-education recognise that the emotional nature of drama is important when drama is used as a pedagogical tool to facilitate change and understanding in students. Martello (2001) describes the unique power of drama to involve the emotions of learners to enhance lasting learning. Others have argued that the power of drama in teaching literacy lies in its ability to bring about emotional interactions with characters from literature in the fictional world of drama (Booth, 2000; Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998). Similarly, Walkinshaw suggests that emotional participation in drama can lead students to gain a greater comprehension of a character's motives and a willingness to change opinions as a result of this involvement (Walkinshaw, 2004). While the emotional potency of drama is well established, Courtney (1988) provides insight into how emotional engagement in drama is also a safe experience for learners. He observes that when drama engages the emotions, it becomes a genuinely educative act, as participants are given the opportunity to adapt to emotionally difficult situations within the safe confines of a fictional world that offers little by way of repercussions in the real world.

While it would seem that drama can provide opportunities for learning through emotional engagement, the task of achieving this level of engagement is problematic for teachers using drama as a pedagogical tool (Bolton, 1992; Somers, 1994). Somers (1994) warns that when emotions are externally imposed by the leader, the resulting drama can be superficial and melodramatic. He argues that the emotional engagement promoted above occurs only when "emotions emerge as a result of the life conditions being explored" (p. 57). Bolton (1992) contends that more improvised forms of classroom drama, such as role-play, have far more potential to allow participants to genuinely engage in the emotions of their role than more scripted forms of drama, as participants get the feeling of living moment by moment. He observes that when participants are working from a script, they work within a "descriptive mode" that demands they focus on the technical skills required to deliver their lines in a plausible manner, rather than being able to engage in the actual emotions felt by their character as the scene unfolds. Bolton argues that when participants in a drama are able to

engage at an emotional level with their character, they are operating in an "existential mode." Within the "existential mode," participants are more likely to engage emotionally with their role and the roles played by others, as they are spontaneously living through the experience in real-time (Heathcote, cited in Wagner, 1979). Bolton advises that this type of existential engagement, where there is a focus on the immediate fictional reality, can only occur when a participant "submits to and trusts the situation in order to experience it" (Bolton, 1992, p. 11).

A Description of Practice: Role-Play as an Approach for Achieving Emotional Engagement in Higher Education Contexts

Setting the Scene and Committing to Role

As a lecturer on pre-service teacher education professional practice papers, I have experimented widely with the use of drama as a pedagogical tool to explore the content of these courses. Pre-service professional practice courses require student teachers to inquire into the complex role of the teacher and explain how this role is mediated by political, social, cultural and economic factors beyond the four walls of the classroom. Experimentation in these courses ranged from using drama conventions as a small part of an overall teaching session to delivering entire lectures through role-play. The author has found role-play particularly useful in assisting students in gaining an understanding of multiple perspectives on issues concerning the practice of teachers at both macro and micro levels.

The structured role-play used by the author usually involves three to five key organisational groups that have a vested interest in a controversial issue relevant to the course of study. In the case of educational issues of concern to pre-service student teachers, these groups could include a teachers' union, a parent lobby group, government education officials, or university academics. Students are then assigned to one of these organisational groups and informed that all members of the group are to take on the same collective identity, such as a group of teacher union delegates, while developing an individual role within the broader group. I have found that the use of group roles reduces the anxiety students often have about role-play, as they feel supported by their fictional colleagues.

Before students take on their role, they must be made aware of the issue that is central to the role-play, and then they must research how their group would respond to this issue. At this stage the students are provided with source materials that give them information on the perspective their group holds on the issue. Information can be provided in the form of press releases, newspaper articles, relevant web sites, academic journal articles, television news items, and press photographs. When the research has been completed, the students are informed of the scene and setting of the role-play. For example, the setting may be a community hall, and the scene could be a public meeting to discuss the central issue. Students then spend some time making small props that signify the setting. For example, if the setting was to be a school staffroom, then students may make up a mock staffroom notice board complete with messages to staff about upcoming social events and teacher playground duty rosters. It is at this point that students are put into roles through a ritual that signifies they have now entered the dramatic world. Examples of such rituals could be pouring a cup of coffee or putting on a fictional name badge complete with the group/organisation they represent.

Informal Role-Playing

The beginning of a role-play is usually informal, with students in role milling around meeting members from other groups. I find it useful to assign two or three possible topics of conversations to have during this informal discussion time. The first topic to be discussed informally with a member of another group is usually very general, such as the weather or the latest political scandal. The final topic should be the controversial issue under discussion. It is important to note that, at this stage of the role-play, all students are participating simultaneously, so there is no sense of audience. It is also important that students are aware that the teacher has taken on a role. I have found it important to take on roles that are not overly important but still give some control over the direction the role-play will take. A good example is one where the scene is a public meeting, complete with an official delegation from the State Department of Education. The teacher would not take on the role of a state education official, as this immediately places them in a very powerful position compared to other roles. A more useful role to take in this situation would be that of a member of the local

school Parent Teacher Association who has volunteered to be the chairperson at the public meeting, as this role has no real power within the dramatic world but does allow the teacher some degree of control over the way life will proceed within the fictional role-play world.

Structured Role-Playing

At some point in the informal chat stage of the role-play, the teacher-in-role calls for the more structured stage of the role-play to begin. This could be an announcement from a state official regarding a proposed policy related to the central issue of concern followed by submissions on the policy from each group. It is at this point that more “drama confident” students within each group may begin to openly voice their organisation’s disagreement or support for the ideas being put forward at the meeting. While the comments made during this stage of the role-play are improvised and unscripted, they are still well informed, as students had prepared earlier for their roles by researching the source material provided by the teacher. It is important to note here that it is the teacher’s task to carefully consider what information will be disclosed to each group so as to allow for spontaneous conflict to occur when participants are challenged by perspectives they may not have considered or even be aware of.

Reflecting on the Role-Play

When the role-play is over, it is important to provide opportunities for students to reflect on understandings that have emerged through the drama experience. The teacher guides group reflection through asking questions that prompt a review of the role-play experience. Discussion questions should centre on arguments put forward in the role-play that were particularly compelling, surprising, and well supported. At this point students are usually keen to read or view the source material that was until this point only privy to other groups in the role-play. (The author has found that a beneficial side-effect of being involved in a role-play is the increased motivation that students display towards their course reading). Following discussion and reading of all the available source materials, students are encouraged to share and justify their own perspective on the issue explored through the role-play.

Learning through Role-Play Not About Role-Play

Bolton and Heathcote (1999) suggest that role-play allows leaders greater control than more open forms of “process drama” where students decide on the direction of the drama. It is important to note that the type of role-play described above is not traditional role-play where students simply simulate a real-life work problem with an audience, focusing on the authenticity of the simulation. Rather, the learning that occurs *within* the context of the role-play is of critical importance. Bolton and Heathcote (1999) allude to this emphasis on role-play serving an educational purpose when they state that the focus needs to be taken “off role-play as a form of behaviour of interest in itself (to be ‘pointed at’), and steer it towards a meaning making act of contemplation” (p. ix).

In utilising the structured role-play strategies outlined above, I have found that participants regard such drama experiences as meaningful, emotionally engaging, and safe. In reporting on a small-scale research project into the use of role-play in a teacher education context, I found that participants perceived that the emotional nature of the role-play assisted in the retention of key course concepts and enabled students to reflect on how they had come to construct their own perspective on the issues explored through the role-play (Heyward, 2008). Furthermore, the study participants assisted me in clarifying the lecturers’ strategies that facilitated emotional engagement while maintaining a safe learning environment. It is these strategies that are explained in greater detail in the remainder of this article.

Strategies that Assist Students to Emotionally Engage in Role-play

When using structured role-play, it is important that students, if they are to commit emotionally, feel that all participants believe in the dramatic world. I have found that it is crucial that participants are not rushed into roles but are gradually introduced to the dramatic world by taking time to establish the time and space in which the role play is to exist and clarifying the social conventions of this fictional space. O’Neill (1995) argues that, if participants are to take a drama seriously, it is important that they work hard at creating the social context of the drama and then live by the rules of this context. The importance of building belief in the dramatic world is central to the practice of the drama-in-education pioneers Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton. According to Bolton (1992), if educators

want students to move beyond a descriptive mode of drama, where they artificially signal the feelings of their character, to the existential mode, where they can feel emotionally engaged with their role, then students must be “protected into emotion.” Heathcote believes that the only way to protect children into emotion, and thus free them from the self-consciousness brought about by the silliness of others, is to encourage all participants to believe in the “big lie.” Agrees Wagner, “Everyone must at least try to accept the one big lie that we are at this moment living at life rate in an agreed upon place, time, and circumstance and are together facing the same problem” (1979, p. 67). The illusion of the imaginary world (O’Neill, 1995) relies on participants colluding in the conspiracy of the big lie (Wagner, 1979). Research demonstrates that the taking on of a role by the leader is crucial in accelerating this collusion (Bolton, 1992; O’Neill, 1995; Wagner, 1979).

If all participants are to believe in the fictional world of the role-play, it is crucial that the teacher also demonstrates commitment to the drama by taking on a clearly defined role alongside the students. Bolton (1992) suggests that the strategy of teacher-in-role is crucial in helping students become more committed to the idea that something important will happen within the drama because they see that their teacher clearly believes in the fictional world. Bolton labels this feeling of expectation as the “imperative tension.” Bolton and Heathcote (1999) found that when teachers commit to a role, students feel more protected within the drama, as the burden of establishing a social context in real-time is now shared with the teacher. Although the use of teacher-in-role is central to the practice of many drama-in-education practitioners, O’Neill (1995) cautions that the purpose of using teacher-in-role is not to give a performance but rather to establish the atmosphere and rules of the fictional world from within the drama.

If participants are to feel safe within the dramatic world of the role-play, they must be clear on when they have entered and exited this fictional world. For learning through drama to occur, teachers must facilitate participants’ entrance to, existence in, and exit from the dramatic world. I have found that a group ritual such as the picking up of a coffee cup can clearly signal the beginning of a role-play, and a similar action can signal the conclusion of the drama. In devising entrance and exit rituals it is important the lecturer ensures all participants are fully aware of these signifiers. O’Neill (1995) discusses how entry into the dramatic world is largely up to the leader, as he or she

must find a way to engage participants with the event and encourage them to add to the establishment of the dramatic world. Correspondingly, Bolton (1992) argues that it is the teacher who must “bear the burden of establishing the fiction so the participants, freed from that particular burden, can submit to the existential experience” (p. 35).

Researchers and practitioners in drama education also point to the importance of leaders making it clear when participants have departed from the dramatic world. Wagner’s (1979) analysis of the practice of Dorothy Heathcote highlights the important distinction Heathcote made between the real and fictional worlds by always clearly signalling when she was in and out of role. Similarly, O’Toole and Dunn (2002) discuss the importance of providing clear opportunities for participants to de-role and de-brief.

While the aim of structured role-play should be to engage all participants, it is important to recognise that some will find it more difficult to commit to the “big lie” than others. The leader must therefore be sensitive to an individual participant’s willingness to take on a role. I find that students appreciate their lecturer’s awareness of those who were likely to want to take a more passive role within the drama and those who would be comfortable with more prominent roles (Heyward, 2009). Bolton (1992) has similarly observed that in drama, as in real life, there must be room for participants to feel they can take on either an active or a passive role. I have found that when participants are not forced into high-profile roles against their will they are far less likely to make explicit their disbelief in the dramatic world, and therefore it is more likely that the remainder of the group will maintain their belief in their roles.

In maintaining emotional engagement in the drama it is important the lecturers consider how they disclose information to move a role-play forward. Lecturers need to acknowledge the power they hold in the unravelling potential of drama as an educative experience. O’Neill (1995) suggests that in using dramatic pre-texts (the source of the drama process) such as photographs, newspaper stories, or journal articles, leaders of a drama should distort or rework the material so that it leads to exploration, not explanation. Although the author finds some students felt frustrated that they were not presented with all the information at the outset of a role-play (although this was revealed subsequently), this withholding of “truth” and the distortion of the dramatic pre-text is crucial in ensuring

that participants engage in the explorative “existential mode” rather than the explanatory “descriptive mode” (Bolton, 1992; Heyward, 2010). The deliberate withholding of truth is a useful strategy to enhance emotional engagement.

Conclusion

If teachers in higher education are to take the opportunity to enhance their students’ learning through role-play, it is important that they are cognisant of the following strategies to protect students both in and out of role:

1. The establishment of the fictional world and roles within this world must be worked towards slowly and deliberately.
2. Belief in the fictional world can only occur if the teacher submits to this world through the taking of a role.
3. Participants in a role-play need to be clear when their existence in the fictional world begins and ends.
4. The teacher must maintain an awareness of the differing levels of participation students feel comfortable with. The role-play should therefore be structured to allow for varying levels of commitment.
5. The dramatic pre-texts used to stimulate dramatic action within the fictional world need to be carefully disclosed so as to create tension between the various groups in the role-play.

In this article, the author has argued that possibilities exist to enhance the learning of students in higher education contexts by eliciting genuine, strong emotions. The notion of engendering feelings of anxiety, fear and anger runs contrary to the deeply held beliefs of most higher education teachers that learning occurs most effectively in a safe and trusting learning environment. It is the contention of the author that the use of role-play offers a unique opportunity to both engage students emotionally in the fictional world of the drama and maintain a safe learning environment. It is within the fictional world of role-play that students are free to openly express the feelings of their given character with the security of knowing their words and actions will not have repercussions for their ongoing relationships in the real world of the higher education classroom.

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