Role-Playing as a Teaching Strategy

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Role-playing is a teaching strategy that fits within the social family of models (Joyce and Weil, 2000). These strategies emphasize the social nature of learning, and see cooperative behavior as stimulating students both socially and intellectually.

Role-playing as a teaching strategy offers several advantages for both teacher and student. First, student interest in the topic is raised. Research has shown that "integrating experiential learning activities in the classroom increases interest in the subject mater and understanding of course content" (Poorman, 2002, pg. 32). Fogg (2001) tells of a college professor who felt that his history classes were boring and not involving the students. After trying out a role-playing type game one semester, he observed that students were much more interested in the material.

Secondly, there is increased involvement on the part of the students in a role-playing lesson. Students are not passive recipients of the instructor's knowledge. Rather, they take an active part. Poorman (2002) observes that "true learning cannot take place when students are passive observers of the teaching process" (p. 32). One student at Barnard College who was enrolled in a role-playing history class said, "This class tricks you into doing so much work" (Fogg, 2001). The result of the involvement is increased learning (Fogg, 2001).

A third advantage to using role-playing as a teaching strategy is that it teaches empathy and understanding of different perspectives (Poorman, 2002). A typical role-playing activity would have students taking on a role of a character, learning and acting as that individual would do in the typical setting. Poorman (2002) found "a significant increase among students in feeling another's distress as their own" (pg. 34). Role-playing has also been seen to be effective in reducing racial prejudice (McGregor, 1993).

Students who role-play the part of enslaved African Americans in a class on pre-Civil War history, for example, develop greater empathy and come away with a better idea of the experience than they would in a typical lecture setting (Steindorf, 2001).

In role-playing the student is representing and experiencing a character known in everyday life (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). The use of role-playing emphasizes personal concerns, problems, behavior, and active participation (Silver & Silver, 1989). It improves interpersonal skills (Teahan, 1975), improves communication skills (Huyack, 1975), and enhances communication (Ettkin & Snyder, 1972).

The role-playing approach can be used in a variety of settings, including the classroom. The principle behind role-playing is that the student assumes a particular personality of a different person, such as a historical character. According to Jones (1982), students "must accept the duties and responsibilities of their roles and functions, and do the best they can in the situation in which they find themselves."

One possible use of role-playing might be to introduce a topic, using the students' background knowledge (schema) to introduce and interest them in a new unit of study (Lloyd, 1998). But probably more often, role-playing is used as a strategy in which students use their background knowledge in addition to acquiring new information about the character in order to better play the role (Lloyd, 1998).

Skilled teachers have generally used skits, plays, newscasts, and other forms of drama to motivate students when new information in introduced. Role playing activities can be divided into four stages (Cherif & Somervill, 1998):

1. Preparation and explanation of the activity by the teacher

2. Student preparation of the activity

3. The role-playing

4. The discussion or debriefing after the role-play activity

Mark Sutcliffe from the School of Economics at the University of the

West of England provides educational advantages of role playing:

Educational advantages of using role-play
(From http://www.economics.ltsn.ac.uk/advice/roleplay.htm, found on April 18, 2002.)

The educational advantages from using role-play in teaching include the

following:

⇒ It encourages individuals, while in role, to reflect upon their

knowledge of a subject. As such, role-play is an excellent teaching

method for reviewing material at the end of a course of study.

⇒ Individuals are required to use appropriate concepts and arguments as

defined by their role. As roles change, so might relevant concepts and

arguments. Students may come, as a consequence, to appreciate more

fully the relevance of diverse opinion, and where and how it is formed.

⇒ Participation helps embed concepts. The importance of creating an

active learning environment is well recognized if the objective is one

of deep, rather than surface learning. Role-playing can make a

valuable contribution in this process.

⇒ It gives life and immediacy to academic material that can be largely

descriptive and/or theoretical.

⇒ It can encourage students to empathize with the position and feelings

of others - something that, in the normal process of teaching, is likely

to be missed.

Who among us does not remember entering a kindergarten room, and upon seeing the play stove and refrigerator not have memories of their youth? Role-playing goes by many names: acting, improvisation, dramatic play, pretend play, socio-drama, etc. With a small child the act of role-play itself helps them learn social values and how to perform tasks normally performed for them. Children set up milk bottles and cans and make believe they own a store. Role-play helps children reach outside their world and embrace the feelings, emotions and plights of others. It is widely used in the lower grades to help children explore the world around them.

When role-play is used in a school setting, students extend their knowledge of a subject by researching a character within a given course of study. Student interest is raised in subject matter, thus generating interest within the subject (Poorman, 2002). Students become active participants in their education rather than passive observers. It allows students to feel empathy for others when portraying a character involved in turbulent times in history (Steindorf, 2001).

We start our educational journey role-playing house, and usually end it in some sort of production of a senior play. Role playing is a mainstay of education that needs to be incorporated into our lesson plans on a regular basis.

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