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Role Playing

We might also put to work the learning potential of role-plays by engaging in them ourselves. At Colorado State University, new graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in the English Department are wholly responsible for teaching a full course in composition their first semester in the program. To prepare these GTAs, composition faculty members engage them in a week of teaching orientation before the semester begins and then provide ongoing support throughout the semester through a multi-faceted program. This program includes having GTAs audit a veteran instructor who teaches from the same syllabus, having weekly small-group and full-group professional development meetings, having grading conferences each time a paper is due, graded, and commented on, providing direct observation of teaching several times during the semester, and requiring enrollment in a theory and methods class for the teaching of writing. Together these strategies accelerate teacher development.

GTAs report that one of the most helpful aspects of this training program is the role playing that's done in the pre-service orientation and in the theory and methods class. Here GTAs choose a portion of a lesson and develop a strategy for its delivery, then perform it for their peers and the composition faculty. The mock class then gives feedback. Since each GTA engages in this process, no one feels singled out and the feedback is practical and constructive. GTAs also report that they get great ideas from each other because of these role plays, since the stress of performing tends to produce really outstanding and imaginative classroom ideas. The entire group benefits from the role play, getting new ideas, developing a degree of distance from their own teaching, and deriving benefit from the feedback that peers and faculty provide.

As one instructor wrote: "In my athletic training courses, the students spend an incredible amount of time together and role-playing lets them do some different things and offer more of themselves. Because I have never been comfortable in a theater atmosphere, I let the students take the lead while I become a quiet observer, offering guidance and re-direction as needed." Another had this to report: Role-playing is a valuable skill in all aspects of life. It is a way to get at the hard stuff of life, the stuff that can't simply be taught out of a book. For instance, the skill of reflective listening might be easy to understand, but much harder to put into practice. In my class, I challenge my public speaking students to constantly link what they are learning to their lives outside of class. In this way, public speaking becomes a way to role-play citizenship. In small ways, students begin to bridge the gap between talking about a topic they are interested in and how their words are actually affecting the lives of others. Life happens in conversations; let's make them count."

Getting in the skins of others

Karyn Madison has taught design and merchandising classes. While working on her

Ph.D., she experienced first-hand the power of role-playing and simulations. “I had a group project in a curriculum design class and my team simulated a community meeting to determine whether a student with special needs should be allowed to move into a regular classroom setting.

“Because we wanted to include various characters like the parent of another kid in the class who was opposed to it, we took some creative license. The other characters we chose to include were the following: the parent of the child with special needs; that child’s previous teacher who supported mainstreaming; the student’s next teacher; and a special education coordinator who moderated the ‘meeting.’ It was fascinating to get in the skin of these characters, particularly when our personal views were different from what the role required. We also assigned the remaining students in class the role of observers: They were members of the community and were free to ask questions or make comments at the appropriate times. In this presentation on inclusion we wanted to make the point that what might work for some may not work for all. Sometimes theory does not translate into reality no matter how well meaning everyone is. Ultimately, I found that role-playing was not just for kids. It proved to be a great learning experience for me to get an understanding that is not as easily conveyed in a more traditional format.”

Sue Doe recalls one of the best role play simulations she has ever seen in a composition classroom. It was developed by then-GTA, Sara Cartmel, MFA, who has been the Coordinator of the Student Success Center at the Art Institute of Portland. Earlier she was an English composition GTA, Sara worked to help students understand the importance of evidence to making an argument in writing, Sara divided her class in half and then each half into small groups. The small groups became cast members in a courtroom role-play. One person was a narrator while the others were lawyers (one for the defense, one for the prosecution) and witnesses for each side.

As they prepared their role-plays, it became clear to students that one side of the fabricated court case clearly had a better case than the other. It was clear because of the evidence provided by the witnesses and invited by the lawyers. Groups rehearsed their role plays and then performed them for matching groups from the other half of the room. (Each half of the class had a different scenario they performed.) At the end of the role play, Sara debriefed the role play by asking the groups to explain which “story” or “case” was better or more convincing and why a demonstration of comparative effectiveness of arguments had relevance to the composition classroom. Students explained that an argument will always be weak if the evidence used to support it is weak, whether that argument is a court case or an argumentative piece of writing. They had internalized the lesson.

Technology

As with many of the other approaches discussed in this book, video and film clips can be very effective in “setting the stage” for debates, simulations and role-plays. They offer a shared experience as a reference, a way to get into the situation and characters. Documentaries, in particular, offer a valuable “reality check” of how things really were.

Slides or PowerPoint images can also provide an important visual context. E-mail, listservs and electronic discussion formats can help facilitate valuable opportunities for conversations, discussions and interactions after class.

Debates, simulations and role-plays can certainly happen within a distance learning format. The time lag with two-way television interaction as well as the lack of visual cues when phone are used can be a challenge. For independent on-line classes, students often say they miss the interactions that can happen in traditional classes.

Writing

Today's pedagogy around the teaching of writing is distinctly active and experiential. Writing classrooms tend to employ peer review, cooperative work groups, and active construction of written texts, and as such, they tend to be locations within the academy where the faculty development movement has been rather fully internalized. Many writing classrooms are also computer-based and the peer interaction and writing collaboration extends beyond the classroom into forum discussions. Yet writing integration across our college campuses all too often continues to suffer. Among the problems are low expectations for writing or no expectations for writing. Also a problem are inauthentic writing assignments that emerge strictly from the minds of professors.

In the research on creativity, it is clear that anyone can develop his or her talents for innovation by *exploring* new opportunities and experiences (von Oech, 1986). Many researchers write about stretching our current ways of thinking and acting, of getting past the mental "locks" that constrain us, of tapping into other talents, in particular, through greater use of the emotional, the intuitive and the experiential (Patrick, 1955; Gordon, 1961; von Oech, 1983; Goleman 1994; Gardner, 1999). In the business world much has been written about the importance of a focus on innovation (Peters & Waterman, 1983; Peters & Austin, 1986; Collins, 2001). Instructors at every level can draw on these ideas to develop their abilities to step in to new roles themselves.

For writers, it is clear that so much more is possible when assignments emerge organically from real world situations. We might consider the possibility of mining for genuine writing tasks that are generated by real agencies, organizations, and businesses. Because Sue Doe teaches a writing-integration course called "Writing in the Social Sciences," she can search for groups my students might approach for real world writing tasks. "If I do this, though, I must first decide on the type of writing I want to see—and here we might think specifically of a complex rhetorical task such as argumentative or persuasive writing, which will necessarily involve a range of additional writing strategies and abilities, such as description, explanation, and source integration. In other words, I can ask a great deal of students if I decide to assign an argument, and this seems a reasonable expectation for the upper-division students I see in this course."

Deriving from these larger goals of the writing task we have in mind, we can then go in search of tasks that will genuinely offer this opportunity—and require students to play different roles—while also doing authentic work in the outside world. For example, one

student writer might work with a local nonprofit that makes blankets for homeless or cast-off children. This writer might draft a letter that can be used at local fabric stores to enlist participation and donation of materials. Another writer could draft a memorandum to a company administrator making a case for a manager's complicated new idea for improving business. The student writer becomes an entrepreneurial writing consultant who must get inside the skin of a "client" and then write for an appropriate purpose and audience. This is a very different role than what typically happens in the classroom.

It is important to remember that college-level writing does not have to be strictly about academic papers. In fact, we do well to ask questions that may yield authentic writing "tasks" that students can study. Where are the opportunities for active and experiential learning for our students via real writing assignments? What are we overlooking in terms of local resources and local needs? How might we integrate writing for more engaging, active, classrooms? How do we prepare students for these different roles?

Amy Pruden, assistant professor of civil engineering, gives students in her first-year engineering seminar an opportunity to write an engineering analysis and format it for differing audiences and purposes. Amy turns what could be a fairly predictable engineering problem into something that must be not only accurately analyzed and computed but also meaningfully conveyed to two differing hypothetical audiences. These are audiences that are similar to real-world audiences these young engineers will eventually be designing structures for. Again, we ask, how do we best prepare students to understand the needs of different audiences and what roles they need to play.

Specifically, Amy has students do a three-part assignment that begins with their critique of a poorly written short engineering report. From this, she is able to discern their language fluency and comfort with writing. Next she has students evaluate a water treatment storage facility and write their findings in memo form for their boss. She lays out their audience, purpose, and occasion for writing this memorandum. Finally, she asks these students to revise that report memo and present their findings in a brief technical report for a government agency, which is the actual client that needs to evaluate the water treatment facility. Again, as part of her well-designed assignment, she clarifies audience, purpose, occasion, and limitations for the piece of writing. Using a theater metaphor, we ask students to put on different "hats" depending on the goal of their report.

Amy's approach gets her students to understand early in their academic careers that engineering will involve communicating results as well as solving problems. Thinking about audience and purpose for these short engineering reports begins a long preparation of students for the complex engineering work they'll do down the road. For starters, as seniors, these engineering students will do a senior design project for varied real clients and authentic purposes. While all of these senior designs will require a written report, the similarity among the projects ends there. As such, these young engineers must be flexible writers who are able to solve problems and communicate results to differing audiences. Amy recognizes that it is possible to expect this level of work at the senior level only if development of writing abilities has been a focus from the start of the engineering

education. Her early, essential assignment begins that process and provides the groundwork for all that follows.

Perhaps most importantly, Amy demonstrates that, as a trained engineer, she is herself an accomplished writer, i.e., she has developed her skills to “play this role effectively.” She practices what she preaches through the example she sets with this assignment. In short, it is well written, with the needs of her audience kept close in mind. As college teachers, we should remember, as Amy does, that we too are writers with authentic audiences, and these audiences specifically are our students. The success of our students’ written work depends in large part on our own ability to write a series of lucid assignments that develop them as writers. Amy’s own exceptional writing skills, especially her awareness of an audience of students who are learning to be both engineers and writers, leads directly to the successful education of her students. As a result, her students almost certainly will distinguish themselves among their engineering peers once they’re out in the world because they also will be strong communicators.

Lessons from the theater

In our book, *Teaching and Performing*, Suzanne Burgoyne and I (2002) connect what we know from the stage to the classroom, and especially where you want to better engage and energize learning. For example, some of your students may be quite complacent about their own learning, comfortable with the status quo, enmeshed in what Freire (e.g., 1970) has termed the *banking* notion of education. In this more traditional but enduring practice, the primary function of teachers is to get “deposits” of information into the minds of the young. During this process, instructors socialize students into a receptive but, Freire argued, fundamentally dysfunctional culture of silence and passivity. Here education and learning of a certain type can reinforce student docility and conventional ways of thinking. In *Teaching and Learning Peace* (2002), I make the additional point that in a world bristling with far too many weapons and much too much violence, where too many think first of military “solutions” to complex problems, that “might makes right,” education can play a special role in defining other alternatives and the skills we need to resolve conflicts peacefully.

The national literacy campaigns that sprang out of Paulo Freire's work in Central America, South America and Africa are examples of the value of more active and empowering models of education, where teachers have moved away from a conventional focus on information-giving and toward a facilitated learning process. When I visited Cuba, Nicaragua and Brazil to see these efforts first hand, I could see how poor and illiterate masses literally “bootstrapped” themselves upward through involvement in small, interactive study groups facilitated by volunteers who may have been short on literacy skills themselves but were long on enthusiasm, commitment and idealism. A desire to read was built on student stories—i.e., oral descriptions of their own life experiences, concerns, hopes and dreams—and, then, transformed slowly, word by word and sentence by sentence, into an understanding of written language (e.g., Timpson, 1988). Throughout Freire's work is the imperative that teachers foster engagement

through the use of meaningful material, that they avoid information giving or “banking”, and that they stay committed to their facilitator's *role*.

Out of these successes with literacy and empowerment emerged a very original adaptation to the theater that holds much promise for a creative use of role playing. After the publication of Freire's (1970) classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal (1979, 1992, 1995) began to explore its application to the theater and later wrote *Theater of the Oppressed* (1979) among other books. Here he described various ways in which actors can use the lived experiences of audience members to generate material for the “stage”. Every performance would be fresh and meaningful to the audience that is present. There are no written scripts to portray, just what the actors can coax from those in attendance. The struggles, challenges, hopes and dreams of audience members themselves become the focus for improvisations. Scenes are “acted out” by actors (used primarily to jump start a scene) and recruits from the audience. Whoever volunteered the issue gets to play a role for the purpose of uncovering other perspectives and possibilities.

Using the ideas of Freire and the techniques of Augusto Boal, a lesson on peace education and nonviolence might look like the following: First, students (or any audience members for that matter) are invited to suggest problems for the group. According to Boal, these should be real and complex. With everyone’s input, new and different solutions will be explored in a variety of ways. For example, someone might want to work on a conflicted relationship that threatens to turn violent. Someone else might be outraged at a new movie’s graphic violence and want some ideas about staging a protest. A parent might want to help a child with nonviolent alternatives to confronting the bully at school. An instructor could want to have better communication in class when issues like affirmative action and white privilege spark strong feelings and defensive reactions. Despite the hostile response of some students to an inexperienced adjunct instructor in an introductory chemistry class, one of our own students wanted ideas for salvaging the class by shifting to a problem-based, student-centered discussion format.

Then, the one with the “issue” or “problem” chooses individuals to play particular roles. The chemistry student in the example above might pick a few to be the students and someone to be the instructor. The “scene” would be set and the action begun. Note that having participation from people with some acting experience can be helpful to get things going. At any point, however, anyone from the audience can yell “STOP” and jump into any of the roles. After each run through you want to ask the person with the issue: “What was new? Was it believable? What did we learn?” Again, the goal is to give the person with the issue multiple, different perspectives and new ideas for resolution. The action is usually fast so you have to make sense of it all on the fly. Everyone gets involved. The audience is the cast and crew.

Another Boal technique is to use *sculpting* to see an issue from a physical, nonverbal perspective. People are recruited from the audience to play various “statues” in a scene that captures the essence of a particular problem. For example, someone wants to stage a protest of an extremely violent film at a local movie theater. In a first sculpture, people might be positioned as the film’s killers and their victims. Others are positioned as

audience members—terrified, eating popcorn, wide eyed. Once in place, everyone has a few moments to absorb the impact. In a second sculpture, the protest has had some effect and patrons of the theater have turned away from the killers. Again, allow a few moments to absorb the implications of that scene. Then the questions for the debriefing session: What insights came from the two scenes? What does it take for people to shift from mindless consumption of violence to actual rejection?

Summary of Key Terms

- **Using planned and spontaneous activities**
- **Active and interactive learning**
- **The importance of debriefing**
- **Varied assessments**

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