

Exploring gender perceptions of student teachers using role-play

Edward P. Errington, University of Otago, New Zealand

Introduction and overview

One important task of teacher educators is to assist student teachers to incorporate gender equity policies into school practice. McClaren (1989) notes that this assistance is more likely to succeed when student teachers have had the opportunity to identify and possibly confront their own beliefs about gender first. It follows that student teachers' eventual influence on promoting gender equity may be maximised if they are able to acknowledge, articulate, and critique their own perceptions of gender issues. Without making their own gender positions explicit first, student teachers could well reinforce existing gender stereotyping in schools.

Moreover, earlier research by Errington (1985) served to reveal the primacy effect of personal beliefs on teachers' professional beliefs, and subsequent classroom behaviour. If we accept the assumption that beliefs are interrelated, then beliefs about students' own gender relations are also likely to influence professional beliefs about children and gender roles in schools. It would be useful for teacher educators to be aware of the content of students' gender perceptions and how gender positioning is perceived.

Role-play is one educational strategy which can provide a practical medium through which tutor and students together explore students' own gender stories. Within role-play, students assume specific roles and engage directly in situations or scenarios which are chosen because of their relevance to the participant's own working knowledge. Beliefs, values, attitudes can readily be addressed through this first hand experience.

Joyce (1986), Boyd (1988), and Tait (1992) have made various claims about the relative success of using role-play to raise gender awareness among students. Observations regarding the efficacy of role-play appear to have been limited to the value of taking specific roles within the role-play itself. However, in reality, students may be afforded at least three positions for planning, action and observation, within and outside of the role-play (Errington 1992, 1993). That is, as storyteller (this is my story), actor (I am enacting someone else's story) and as audience member (I am witnessing the stories

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others). To what extent do student perceptions differ according to these respective positions? How efficacious do students find the use of role-play in these contexts?

This paper is divided into three parts in order to address these questions: The first renders a brief rationale for employing a socially critical approach to role-play designed to reveal and address gender perceptions. The second gives an overview of the Deakin University Gender Project (1990-1993) where I used this approach to raise student awareness of gender as an issue. Here, the principles of Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988) were employed to engage students in a systematic process of discussion, action (role-play) and critical reflection/evaluation. The final part of the paper focuses on the outcomes of the Deakin Project, that is, the content of students' gender perceptions, views according to their respective position within the process; and, comments on the efficacy of role-play employed to represent and address gender issues.

1. Exploring gender issues through role-play

Conventional approaches used to reveal gender perceptions have historically relied on a *discussion-only* approach and at the time this was not seen to be sufficiently stimulating for students to want to identify or modify their gender beliefs. Within role-play, students agree to act 'as if' the roles are really their own and behave accordingly within the selected scenario so that specific educational intentions may be met (Jones 1980; Milroy 1982; van Ments 1983). Role-play can be used to help students re-create, as closely as possible, the kinds of social/interpersonal discourses which they experience in their daily lives, taking the valuable working knowledge of the social actors for its content (Errington 1991).

A more specific, 'socially critical' approach to role-play can be used to encourage participants to problematise, rather than merely accept, their taken-for-granted social beliefs. Where possible, students may be encouraged to envision new agendas of possibility, noting that gendered situations which exist at the moment can be changed - for the better (Errington 1992). The success of the approach relies on students feeling sufficiently empowered to shape, and in turn be shaped by, the construction of the role-play.

There are clear advantages for using this form of role-play for social inquiry on two counts: First, students may find themselves in a better position to observe how and why they view their own gender position in a particular way. Second, they may also gain from having other social actors in the role-play (and life) replicating the pervasive influences of peers, parents, authority figures, who inadvertently 'fix' their present/past gendered position. A critical stance towards these positions may be generated by having students engage in a systematic process of discussion, enactment and reflection,

following the deliberations of Action Research outlined by Kemmis & McTaggart (1988).

2. The Deakin University gender-role-play project

The project had three main aims:

- To locate the content of student teachers' gender perceptions
- To find out how students represent gender in their daily lives
- To examine the efficacy of role-play for helping students represent and critically reflect on gender-focused situations.

The first two aims were intended to reveal to students how they perceive gender as an issue so they would be in a position to make conscious choices about their gender behaviour, as distinct from acting habitually, or on the basis of taken-for-granted beliefs. The third focused on the quality of experience and reflection afforded students through direct engagement in gender issues.

Personnel in the project

The student teachers

The student volunteers (twenty females and five males) were enrolled in a unit of arts education (music, visual arts and drama) as part of their final year of teacher education. These students had no previous background in role-playing and so the steps outlined in the 'Stages of the Process' were new to the majority.

During the one-off, four hour session, gender issues were examined using a process of discussion, enactment and critical reflection. Simple role-play conventions were used which did not require specialist skills or techniques. This simple approach facilitated the flow of student stories. It is useful to examine the respective roles of students and tutor-facilitator in the project:

The tutor facilitator

As tutor, I aimed to fulfil a number of roles: I acted as role-play facilitator and resource person, providing the necessary structure to support the expression, representation, and reflection on student experiences. I was also a co-learner in this enterprise, intent on gaining insights from the richness of student stories. I was also co-critic, intent on helping students reveal and question their own experiences, as well as

encouraging them to problematise their own recollections and those of other social actors.

Stages of the process

Discussions

Students were invited to recall incidents in their lives where they had been the victim or perpetrator of inequities in respect to gender. It was made clear that public, not private experiences should provide the content of the discussion. Each participant was encouraged to recount their story with a partner who asked questions to clarify events for both teller and listener. Some students simply listened to their partner's story, feeling they had no story to tell.

Moving into groups of five or six, individual members first recalled their incidents of gender inequities for others. Next they were required to select one example to enact on the basis of its typicality from those heard within their group. The person whose story was chosen was required to direct the group members as actors. Their task was to realise the selected story through role-play. Within each group, the actors questioned the storyteller-director to gain further clarification about the sequence of events (plot), their respective roles in the story, and the relationships between role-players. Rather than the storyteller-director act her/himself in the role-play, another group member was selected to play Self. Thus the storyteller-director was afforded the protection of role distance.

Representation of stories through role-play

With appropriate guidance from the tutor, each group made decisions about how best to represent the storyteller's story using role-play. Questions were asked by all group members about how roles should be played to replicate and represent the story as closely as possible. This is not to suggest that the stories were replicated without interrogation. Rather, group members questioned the storyteller, and each other, trying to make sure that details were elicited in a sensitive and non-threatening way.

Performance of the stories

Following a period of rehearsal, each group was asked if they were willing to enact their stories for others. Those who were happy to perform before the whole audience did so, and at the end were guided out of role, and thanked for their enactment. Those who

did not wish to perform appeared content to focus on the problems experienced when representing their story through role-play.

Critical reflection on the process

After viewing these enactments, the whole class reflected on their experiences in a number of ways: First, storyteller-directors were asked to comment on their thoughts and feelings regarding perceptions of the process; then about their gender positioning in real life. What had been the content of the scenarios? Why choose this particular scenario? What had they gained from looking at themselves 'from the outside'? What had they learned from their perspective as storyteller-directors?

Second, those who had enacted the stories of others were asked to comment on their part in a process from within (as actors) and without (as selves) in the role-play. How did they see the vantage points afforded by each perspective? What had they learned from their acting perspective?

Finally, the whole class was asked about the kind of view they enjoyed as audience members witnessing the enacted stories. Would they be able to recall similar gender experiences themselves? What had they gained from their perspective as audience members?

3. The outcomes of the project

For purposes of clarity, this discussion of Project outcomes is divided into three parts. These are: the identified content of gendered situations; student perceptions according to their position in the process (storyteller, actor, audience member); and, student views regarding the efficacy of role-play employed in this context.

1. The content of students' gender perceptions

There emerged five overall themes from the stories represented. These focused on some taken-for-granted interpersonal, gendered relationships within specific lived contexts:

Access - the degree to which individuals were either given or denied opportunities in life according to gender. For example: some females saw themselves as the victims of unequal promotion prospects in respect to certain jobs being governed more by gender than merit [no place for female firefighters].

Vulnerability - perceptions of male strengths and female weaknesses. For instance: there existed persistent myths, perpetuated by males and females, about what men are able to do physically and women unable to do.

Exploitation - the ways by which individuals are used by others for their own gain on the basis of gender. Examples were given of men taking advantage of women financially because it was presumed they knew nothing about mechanics. Women were accused by males of 'playing the dumb blonde' to their own advantage.

Control - notions of superior male 'control'. For example: some women were envious that men had a perceived ability to control their emotions, while women appeared to be subjected to them. This did not mean that men were viewed as 'superior'. Rather they were viewed as being 'different'. Male and female students challenged the myth about men's inability to express their emotions, honestly and openly.

Societal expectations according to Gender - notions of fixed gender roles held by parents, partners and significant others. For instance: some male and female students commented on how parents, friends, siblings and peers seemed to create, albeit subconsciously, extremely narrow parameters about what men and women 'should' be doing based on gender stereotyping in familial positions (daughters vs. sons).

2. Perceptions according to position in the role-play process

Students' views of gender clearly differed according to their respective position as storyteller, actor, and audience member. Here are examples of each of the perspectives afforded through the role-play. Names have been withheld to assure anonymity...

One storyteller-director commented on the advantages of being 'detached' from one's own story by being on the outside looking in. As she said:

I found that having others re-play my life situation helped me to see it in a slightly different light. I was able to see it from the director's detached point of view.

The phenomenon of role distance is a valuable feature of role-play and can, with careful planning, provide students with many 'different lights' by which to view gendered situations from within and without the scenario.

In the case of those enacting the stories of others, role-play can provide a unique opportunity for students to adopt an opposite gender role, where men can assume the role of women and vice-versa. This is not to suggest that either party are able to

immediately adopt the posture and/or full understanding of the gender group. However, for many student teachers, this may be the closest they come in their own lives to experiencing the 'other' gender role, and maximising the possibilities of achieving true empathy. Within the fiction, other actors agree to accept the person in question as being the assumed man or woman. This 'willing suspension of disbelief' can make the situation appear very real for those engaged in role reversal. One female actor adds:

I enjoyed the role-playing situation where I adopted the role of a male. It made me feel that I am capable of doing male activities, despite the fact that society portrays this as an impossible task.

The above clearly indicates the viability of role-play to create an 'agenda of possibility' and raise the confidence of females to challenge the alleged superiority of males. Another female paid a compliment to the male actors in her group, noting how they were observant of female behaviour within the scenario. She notes:

These men (in my group) handled the female role well and this created a great deal of discussion about gender. It also enabled each of us to examine a male and female perspective.

Male students claimed a measure of empathetic understanding for females, exploring some of the interpersonal characteristics attributed mainly to females, by using the process of role reversal:

I found it worthwhile to really understand the female's point of view of sexual discrimination in the workplace and being taken advantage of. Being the (female) person who establishes the personal side of things first, gets friendly, and then talks about the problem.

Clearly there are benefits for male and female student teachers to experience gender role reversal in terms of building confidence and empathy. It may also be used as a device to dispel myths surrounding the alleged superiority of either gender. Attributes accorded to one gender may be seen to be human aspects ascribed to both males and females. Similarly, some students may now be less than willing to ascribe merits to the children they eventually teach, based on gender alone.

Audience members made claims about the kinds of unique perspectives that this position gave them. In particular, they claimed that observing others stirred within them some forgotten memories of gender inequity. Others stated that the role-plays and discussions paralleled and legitimated their own experiences which until now had not been given any value. One audience member was prompted to recall that:

I initially could not think of examples of sexism in my life (then...) I found myself realising that there have been instances where I had not realised or considered its existence. I found I was able to empathise with several of the examples given and acknowledge similar situations myself.

Each perspective provided a particular vantage point for recalling, discussing, addressing, and representing individual and shared experiences. Taken together these rendered a form of 'triangulation', a term used to describe a process of data gathering whose validity is informed by a range of observer perspectives.

3. The importance of role-play in this educative process

Finally, the whole class was invited to comment on the value of role-play in facilitating their gender perceptions. One student noted the value of role-play for bringing some stereotypical views of gender to the surface, and so being in a better position to confront them if necessary:

I think role-playing is a challenging experience because you realise how stereotypical your own sexual differentiations are!

Another student felt that role-play was useful for providing a non threatening context in which feelings surrounding an issue could be recognised, and ultimately dealt with:

This session made me think about **why** I may feel angry about the condescending way the guy at the garage spoke to me.

Not all students accepted role-play as a useful medium for investigating gender. Some did not see themselves as part of the issue and expressed difficulty in working in this way, noting how the process may rely too heavily on participants needing prior experience to experience it fully:

It was very difficult for me to portray gender through role-play as I can't really say that I have experienced gender issues myself. Without experiences it is virtually impossible to translate other people's ideas into role-play.

However, most felt that their resistance to gender as an issue had been lowered through engaging in the process. This view was typified by one student comment:

Today I enjoyed the gender issues as this made me realise the situations I am faced with every day. Issues that I am not fully aware of came to the surface...role-play can provide the perfect condition for children and adults to realise their actions in a relaxed, fun, and unpressured manner.

Students also commented on the value of role-play as a means of providing simulations of gender constraints found in life; lowering resistance to pedagogy; developing empathy across gender relationships; fostering; building confidence in students' working knowledge; making 'gender' an explicit political issue for participants; allowing expression of attitudes, values and feelings; and, where possible, facilitating a modification of viewpoints.

Conclusion

Revealing gender views from different positions via role-play provided valuable insights for students on which informed decisions about gender relations could be based. A number of students shared the view that their perceptions of gender as an 'issue' held immediate implications for the formation of gender appropriate attitudes, which will accompany them into schools. Student viewpoints served to legitimise the use of role-play as a potent educational medium for exploring the construction of gender relations. How successful students are at putting gender policies into practice remains to be seen. What is certain is that role-play can go a long way towards increasing their likelihood of success.

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