
Developing student-constructed scenarios to explore gender issues

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Introduction

Several years ago, as a teacher educator within an Australian university, I employed scenario-based learning with final year trainee teachers to investigate their positions on gender issues. My use of scenarios to help students explore gender issues has been more fully documented elsewhere (Errington, 1993). For present purposes the examples described below demonstrate how scenarios can be perceived from different perspectives; from the position of the creator or storyteller; from the position of each actor within the scenario; and the position of an audience member witnessing the unfolding events. Each scenario renders a unique perspective through which students can learn about, appraise, and possibly modify their own gendered positions.

In accord with McClaren (1989), I realised as a teacher educator that students' eventual influence on promoting gender equity (as intending teachers) in schools was likely to be minimal if they were unable to articulate or critique their own perceptions of gender issues. Workers in the broader area of gender education also stress the importance of participant experiences as the fundamental starting – point for issue investigation. They echo the need to provide opportunities for students: to interrogate socially constructed events in their past (Shotter, 1984; 1986; Haug, 1987; Kippax *et al.*, 1988; Davies, 1989); to question their part within the reconstruction of gendered life stories (Haug, 1987); and to develop the ability to distance themselves from the event itself (Crawford *et al.*, 1990).

Scenario-based learning can provide opportunities for students to reconstruct and reflect on experiences and their role within them. Rather than simply discussing issues, students can adopt an active learning role – they can use their own working knowledge as the starting point for exploring, rediscovering, and evaluating personal and shared gender meanings. Scenario-based approaches which incorporate the role-playing of scenarios by students are described elsewhere (Errington, 1997).

Given the above, the purposes of this chapter are twofold: first, to describe how

students as trainee teachers constructed their own scenarios to reveal and reflect on “lived” gender experiences; and second, to discuss the efficacy of this approach for facilitating multiple perspectives on gender issues.

Using student-constructed scenarios to explore gender issues

Scenario-based approaches to learning were employed with three learning objectives in mind:

- to assist participants to discover their own gender content, through the construction of relevant and authentic scenarios. It was this ‘content’ that needed to be worked on if students were to successfully deliver gender policies in schools. Students’ own stories of sexism are more relevant than those introduced from elsewhere. It is these that trainee teachers will take with them into schools;
- to engage students in helping identify the gender positions of peers. Students were to provide each other with the motivation and support necessary for the scenario-based approach to work; and,
- to investigate the efficacy of using scenarios as a research medium. There is a desire to observe the efficacy of scenario-based approaches in order to illuminate the lived and told stories of the whole group.

My task in the following construction and representation of scenarios was to act as a resource, providing necessary impetus and support for students to assemble their “lived” gender scenarios. I was also a co-learner, intent on gaining from the richness of student stories.

Stages in the scenario-construction process

Discussion

I began the process by asking the whole group to recall particular instances where they believed they might have been the victim or perpetrator of inequities in respect of gender. It was made clear that public, not private experiences would provide the content of the discussion – that is, experiences which could be shared with others.

Sharing stories in pairs and groups

Each person was encouraged to tell their own story to a partner, and to ask questions of each other to clarify events for both teller and listener. Notably, some students simply listened and enquired about their partner’s story, feeling that they had no story of their own to tell. I reminded students about the need to handle their partner’s story “with care”. This initial work in pairs aimed to encourage recall of gendered stories that they then could share within group settings.

Interestingly, stories were not accepted ‘wholesale’ by group members. Comments such as “it’s not that bad surely”, and “that could never happen to me”, were common among males and females in respect of the expressed intensity of lived experiences.

It also became clear that recalled events were not isolated (students remembered more than one instance) and that others in the group had experienced similar events either in their personal lives (childhood, present) and/or in the professional context of schools (as trainee teachers out in schools).

Reconstructing lived gender experiences

Working in groups of five or six, group members took turns to recall lived incidents of gender inequities. I asked them to select one person's story and inquire from the selected storyteller further details of roles, events and contexts, through a process of "hot seating". Hot seating can help the storyteller remember otherwise hidden memories. Questions are asked until the essential parts of the story (the focus of the event) are remembered and understood by all members of the group. The purpose of selecting one specific, intact story, was to avoid a stereotypical (generalised) view of gender inequity.

It is the asking of questions such as: 'What did you do? How did you feel? What did the others think, feel and do? And then what happened? Why did you behave in this way?' that help to preserve the individual construction and foster group understanding of the story.

The person whose story was eventually selected was asked to direct other group members as enactors: their task would be to realise the story through the construction of a scenario. Thus, the enactors within each group were invited to question the storyteller to clarify the story, the person's part in the story and the parts played by others, and ultimately the relationships between the scenario and all those within it.

Group members were encouraged to explore how, and in what ways, the storyteller saw him/herself being positioned in relation to others as victim, specific role taker, and so on. In complementary fashion, storyteller and group participants focused on how they saw themselves positioned by significant others, such as family, friends and peers.

Once the group had chosen which story to enact, the storyteller then cast the group members to enact parts in the story. Storyteller-directors who wished to act in their own narratives were invited to do so. However, most preferred to have others enact their own (lived) roles. Some recalled later how they had felt too exposed to enact their own real-life roles in the stories.

Enacting the scenarios

When storytellers and actors had selected the particular incident or story for enactment, they then had to decide the best way that their story could be represented within a clearly defined scenario. The group worked to recreate the story of the storyteller as faithfully as possible. They were also encouraged to question the story and their responses towards it. In particular: the specific roles in the story (how these should be realised), the use of scenarios; and how these should be represented. Students also interrogated each other regarding which parts of a story should be shown, and the reasons for revealing some aspects and not others.

I continually emphasised the storyteller's ownership and how she or he should have the final say over the unfolding/final scenario and maintain fidelity to his or her own

told story. Each group was given time to reconstruct the storyteller's narrative and then enact it. A number of participants decided that they would reverse gender roles.

Critically reflecting on the experience

After viewing these scenarios, the whole class gave feedback on these experiences in a number of ways. They were asked to comment on their own gender positioning in life, noting whether they had experienced similar events in the past to those experienced or witnessed here. To what extent had they felt positioned by others? How successful did they feel their own and other scenarios had been in enlivening gender as an issue? Critical reflection was encouraged within and outside the scenario. Within the scenario, participants as actors were able to comment on their perspectives; they also commented on their engagement with both the gender issue and the social relationships that appeared to influence perceptions of that issue.

Storytellers seemed to gain much by interrogating other social actors in their own gendered scenario. For example: "Why did you treat the young woman ('me' the storyteller) in that way"? It was anticipated that students as members of the audience or as non-acting storytellers were likely to relate to the scenarios, but at a distance. Similarly, actors had an opportunity to step out of the scenario, and were asked about their own responses to being in role, social relationships, and their gender incidents. They were invited then to recall their thoughts and feelings at particular stages of the whole session. This approach involves a conscious analysis and subsequent demystification of the scenario and the construction of the gendered incident.

Following a period of broader, public reflection by students as storytellers, actors and audience, all were invited to recall their immediate thoughts about the issues, the scenario, and their own positioning.

Three scenarios

Here are examples of scenarios viewed from different perspectives as storytellers, actors and/or audience.

Perspective 1: A storyteller's scenario

'Maria'¹ as storyteller, recounted her experience as a bank teller at a local bank where she worked with an inexperienced male colleague. Some months later when an opportunity arose for one teller to be promoted, preference was given to the male bank teller, regardless of his relative inexperience when compared to Maria.

Maria was actually told by her boss (confidentially of course) that because she was likely to start a family rather than pursue a long-term career in banking her promotion application had to be overlooked. This was in clear contrast to the public face of the bank manager who claimed to be an equal opportunity employer.

¹ Names have been changed for anonymity.

In the scenario, Maria as storyteller decided to reverse gender roles and to take the part of the male teller herself. The inconsistent position of the bank manager, as the person directly responsible for delivering equity policies, was made clear. We saw him espouse the pride of the bank in facilitating equal opportunity for all its workers. In a later scene we see him tell Maria's immediate supervisor that "in, say, five years time she will probably be raising a family. What price then the bank's investment in management training?" According to Maria, and all other female victims, the subtext is: "You are good, but you are not good enough".

On reflection Maria recalled how she had taken the role of the male teller herself in order to give the role "a sensitive and informed treatment" (her words). She had hoped to avoid stereotyping or trivialising a significant incident in her own career/life.

Through reconstructing this lived event as a scenario, and by taking on the "oppositional" role of male bank teller herself, Maria was able to distance herself, and examine the male's point of view more dispassionately. Maria finally added that if you "go into any bank and have a look at the tellers, predominantly they're female and the people behind them are males. It might seem a generalisation, but I know it's true".

Audience reaction

Having observed Maria's story, Annie, a member of the audience, recalled a similar incident in her own life where: "there was a woman on the ground floor of the bank for ages. Finally, they just had to promote her because she'd been there for so long, but there were guys who'd been there for a shorter time who were given promotion just like that". The notion of impeded access to promotion and poor recognition of ability was common to the experiences of many female students. The majority of women in this group had at some time experienced impediments to promotion on the grounds of gender.

Perspective 2: An actor's scenario

There next followed a scenario in which two women, 'Rachel' and 'Gina', assumed roles as firefighters and rescued two males from a raging fire. On reflection, they related contrasting feelings about their common experience. The story began with Rachel asking why firefighters were predominantly male. Why, as a female, was she dissuaded from experiencing the exhilaration and empowerment afforded to male firefighters in their social role?

The enactment began at the point when the two males in their group were unable to put out a fire in their own home. We saw them being overcome by smoke inhalation. The two (female) firefighters responded quickly to a fire alarm, dashed to the rescue, and dragged the two victims from the house. The (male) victims thanked them gratefully for their courage.

Even though the scenario was simple in its execution, it gave rise to an interesting period of reflection regarding the thoughts and feelings experienced by the two females in their role as firefighters. Although working alongside each other, sharing the

firefighting task, their reflections revealed totally opposite feelings about the event. It served to show that scenarios focusing on gender issues do not have to be complex to raise critical awareness.

On reflection, Rachel recalled:

I felt a great sense of power and purpose and I wasn't worried about my appearance or what I looked like, or how I was feeling. I had a job to do and I suppose I actually felt like a *heroine* (my emphasis).

Rachel had expressed her experience in female terms as the heroine – a symbol of female power. She went on to add that she had felt a wonderful sense of purpose, responsibility, power and real worth in being a female firefighter.

On the other hand, Gina, the second firefighter, appeared uneasy with Rachel's notion of power, stating that:

I wouldn't want to be a firefighter. I don't want to be physically strong. I don't want to have the life situation where you are dealing with other people's lives ... I felt silly pulling a man out of it (fire). I felt good in a way that I could actually do it. You know I was actually pulling a man out of this and you know I am really the *hero* (my emphasis), but I still feel uncomfortable.

Thus, in contrast to Rachel, Gina framed her experience in masculine terms, implying that the archetypal hero should, and could only, be male.

Gina expressed discomfort with the role of male firefighter and did not wish to be empowered in this way. She seemed happier with clear traditional lines between female and male social roles. It is notable that Gina is more clearly positioned within a set of expectations about what male and female roles should be.

Perspective 3: audience scenario(s)

Members of the audience, watching other groups enacting stories, were often stimulated to recall similar incidents of their own, ones that appeared forgotten until now. In this sense drama provided a window to past experiences that hitherto had remained forgotten. One such enactment concerned the exploitation of males and females.

Scenario A: Males exploiting females

In 'real' life, the event focused on the exploitation of a female customer by a male garage mechanic. The recalled event involved a male mechanic and a female customer. However, in the constructed scenario, the storyteller (the real female customer) decided to reverse gender roles, that is, the exploited victim would now be male not female in the scenario, giving a twist to the lived event.

The scenario was seen by actors, audience and storyteller alike to produce mutual female/male exploitation. The (now) female mechanic exploited the male customer by making sexual advances. In return, the male customer exploited the female mechanic financially by receiving a discount for the repair.

Scenario B: Females exploiting Males

'Janis' a member of the audience recalled an incident similar to the one concerning a car mechanic and exploitation. She told us how the registration plate of her car was suspended by one side only. To get the problem fixed, she went to the garage and approached the male mechanic for help by adopting a stereotypical "dumb blonde" facade.

This ploy, where she feigned stupidity, achieved the desired result and the mechanic immediately fixed the car. Janis admitted that she exploited male assumptions about female mechanical ineptitude in order to get her way. All she had to do was to resist being her 'real' thinking self, and assume the dumb female stereotype.

The whole class considered this incident. Some males were annoyed that they (as members of the male population) were being exploited. They challenged the morality of Janis and other females who manipulated men for their own ends. Janis and others remained unrepentant, asserting that some males used similar tactics in order to get girlfriends to do (motherly) 'female' tasks such as ironing their clothes for them.

Student reflections

Overall, these reflections focused on the possibilities of change. At one end of the spectrum some students greatly resisted any notion of change, preferring clear male/female dualities and did not regard gender inequity as an issue of injustice.

Some female students registered discomfort, fearing that their femininity would be undermined if they assumed traditional aspects of maleness:

We don't have the opportunity that men do. You know I want to be at home and look after the children. I also feel uncomfortable with it. If Scott stays home to look after them, then maybe he's taking away from me something that I might want.

Other students in the middle of this dimension of change, claimed an increased awareness of gender as an issue thanks to involvement on various levels in this scenario-based approach:

Being the daughter who was victimised, I felt that the situation was not dealt with properly and although I was not entirely blame-free, the fact that 'boys will be boys' was not how I wished the situation to be treated (that is, I was the victim of sexism).

What I liked about this session was looking at discrimination faced by males – something I (as a female) rarely think of. I was made more aware of discrimination against males. This discrimination does not allow men to acknowledge or partake in 'femaleness'.

Further along, more students claimed a sense of power, responsibility, and purpose, having exposed themselves to aspirations greater than those imposed by historically based male/female roles and relationships.

All claimed that the scenarios facilitated the possibility of change, regardless of some initial resistance to the exploration of gender issues:

(When using scenarios) ... I feel that situations become more obvious as we are often looking on objectively rather than being the participant at the time. I initially could not think of examples of sexism in my life. Interestingly, as discussion began, I found I was able to empathise with several of the examples given and acknowledge similar situations myself.

A number of students shared the view that personal perceptions of gender as an “issue” have immediate implications for the professional attitudes that they will be taking into the classroom, and their ability to deliver gender equity policies.

Gender surrounds us and permeates our lives in practically every situation. I personally am becoming more aware of: how this affects me personally; how it affects others (particularly schoolchildren); how I contribute towards sexism; and how I can remedy sexism.

As one student commented:

It's good to actually act out roles like this because it brings our own stereotyped [sic] views and biases out in the open. I think role-playing is a challenging experience because you realise how stereotypic your own sexual differentiations are!

Rather than have persons simply replay their own gender role, some students chose to reverse positions so that they could experience the same (and often their own) story from different vantage points. So it was not unusual to see males ‘being females’ and vice versa. What is clear is that this convention proved to contribute greatly towards raising the consciousness and empathy of students regarding changes of positioning, and implications for ‘real’ life.

Some storytellers and actors decided to change the ending of the scenarios to show how they would ideally have been positioned by others in a positive way. These idealised endings did not focus on simple ‘goody’ moral endings; rather, they provided a fresh look at the way events might be changed en route, so that ultimately outcomes were totally different. There was clear value in students showing each other that events can take a different turn if preceding actions are enacted, deconstructed, and subsequently set on an alternative track leading to more positive outcomes.

Conclusions

Scenario-based learning provided a structure by which students, as intending teachers, were able to recount, enact and reflect on personal/social knowledge of gender construction in their own lives. Scenarios which encompassed conventions, such as role reversal and ‘actual’ and ‘ideal’ endings, and opportunities to direct one’s own story proved useful in helping participants reveal and represent their lived experience.

It seems that scenario-based approaches can offer views of gender construction from a variety of roles and perspectives. Notably the simplest experiences of gender inequity provided storytellers, actors and audience with the most stimulating content for raising the level of debate. Through scenario-based approaches to learning, the previously lived

stories of students can be resited within freshly experienced social contexts, and reviewed and critically interrogated from the different perspectives of actors and audience. Storytellers also valued the opportunity to view experiences “coming to life” and the chance to critically reflect on them. It is these revitalised stories and ‘new’ memories that students, as newly qualified teachers, will take with them into schools.

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