

Dorothy Heathcote - Some Notes on Role Work

Role has become the fashionable 'in' word used as a blanket word to cover a multitude of classroom events and frequently practised crudely.

So what is the special element which has to be present in 'role' work? Even a child's dictionary and thesaurus' gives a range of definitions: capacity, character, part, position and function. Reader's Digest Reverse Dictionary (1989) develops the term in process of action . . . "the public face that a person adopts in social situations" and a less obviously useful one in classroom work, (which is in fact one of the most adaptable for teaching) related with niche: "role or status of a plant or animal within its ecological community". Note the terms 'social' and 'community'. The common ground of both definitions. The basic denominator then has to be, *recognised in public situations evoking response*.

Other elements are:

- *in immediate time*; no matter what period or circumstances apply.
- *recognised as being selective* and deliberately conceived for specific purpose/s.
- fulfilling itself as being internally coherent - no irrelevant embellishments, its form exactly created for specific ends and process, and used in relation to drama, whether in theatre performance or classroom exploration, to create circumstances of significance demanding attention, response and development of the social encounter for deliberate purpose/s.

It can be useful to bear in mind sociological aspects of role, though these *seem* less useful in the action of role work. I find it useful because by reminding myself of these aspects, I can deliberately blur boundaries so that the actual gender of participants (and indeed their chronological age) can be "stretched" to include androgyny, asexual elements as well as the more obviously defined male and female projections. Sociology gives us firm role lines

- of inheritance: males can become fathers, brothers, nephews, uncles, grandfathers and so on:
- likewise I can be a mother, sister, aunt, grandmother ...

But *roles of function* are infinitely various as socially accepted laws and rules change, and each of us slots into functional roles as we live our lives within our circumstances.

These roles of function never remain static in cultures, and at this period of time there exists a remarkable breaking and bending of accepted functional roles open to all who would wish to try them out in the community.

This leads me to remind you of the way societies constantly re-invent parameters and boundaries. This factor is particularly relevant in teaching using drama elements. Societies progress (process is possibly a better term) through three basic stages:

The formal - (unquestioned) elements which rule because they are unrecognised and without labels, so we can't question them if we can't *see* them affecting us. At this period in time very few formal laws still hold in our culture, but you may have many cultures represented in your classes, each of which will have different formal elements. When a formal rule is challenged (noticed!), it becomes

The informal - which has been recognised as important and frequently made mysterious so that only certain individuals are permitted to hold the knowledge, the secrets, the rites of passage and therefore the expertise. Thus these become 'experts', consultants and guides to the less knowledgeable. The lawyers, doctors, priests, gurus; and now we include the new sciences of technology, genetics and so on. We all need the computer wizards!!

The technical - where anyone has access to knowledge. Don't mistake technical as meaning technology. In terms of culture it means we all can deal with it ourselves. These three boundaries are in constant flux and in our own cultures we feel very much at home in finding our social "feet". Place us in less well-understood cultures and we had best beware. Drama permits us to reshuffle our positions in the three dimensions - that is one of the obvious advantages in using drama for learning.

All the above is highly relevant and useful when we consider role work for learning. These aspects have been explored in training schemes, possibly more than teachers in classrooms have used them.

So the teacher's palette has enormous potential.

1. Any gender can demonstrate a role, whether inherited or functional in the social drama event.
2. The role can function in social/cultural circumstances related with formal, informal or technical boundaries, demanded by themes and circumstances,
3. *There are gradations in role function* which will be designed into the work by the leader participant. In other words we can "edge in" to role work. We do not have to provide fully activated representations which the theatre naturally requires, because audiences expect to see actors living out their roles fully in now, immediate time.

Thus "edging in" circumstances are absolutely essential if teachers are fully to exploit the potential of role work for learning. I find these are rarely discussed and demonstrated in teachers' own accounts of classroom work, so it is these "tunnellings" into full role I should like to explore.

Particularly they demand close attention to "teacher talk" moving between literary form and dialogue formation. It is this distinction which enables group thinking to shift from 'out there' images to "we in" thinking. From planning to behaving. From considering to caring enough to affect circumstances.

The next tunnel involves the task becoming 'imaged' in some way blackboard (infinitely more useful than whiteboards and the books of paper which are in process of superseding them), chart, group drawing, assembling and re-assembling to name a few of the many tasks we can invent to suit purpose/s.

The next involves some limited demonstration to be influenced by the group who begin to "own" it, to recognise their influence in creating the role. The demonstration will be only verbal at first, then some entry of deliberate signing in gesture and demeanour, gradually more firmly demonstrating attitude, social stance, power to influence events and whether in formal, informal or technical cultural strata.

All these tunnellings build belief and are often perceived as deliberately delaying "getting started"! They conform to Bruner's stages of exploring for understanding:

- **iconic** (the drawing, plans, images, made public to all)
- **symbolic** - using words to represent
- **experience** - behaving 'as if'.

We further can distinguish between roles when each group member deliberately accepts behaving as if they are someone other than their actual life person. All of the participants may be confronted by a specific "other" working in role to focus the group on some specific social circumstance which they will process in now time. This "other" can be represented by the class leader but very different rules apply to this role work than if a significant "other" is used, enabling the teacher/leader to take up a facilitating function.

And then we have the 33 representations of role within contexts of dramatic action, where role manifestation can be manifested equally powerfully, ranging from an actual human presence actively engaging in dialogue and action to the equally potent evidence that an "other" has been or may in future be present, as in the mark of the Scarlet Pimpernel, or the franked stamp on a letter or seal.

The 33 role manifestations are also affected by the frame and point of view of all participants relating with the "other".

A Solomon's carpet of possibilities indeed, generating many thought and language patterns and involving teachers/leaders in exciting challenges.

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