

ROLE PLAYS AND DEBATES



By Marcin Zaleski

One of the reasons why I have always found debate a fascinating educational activity is the fact that debate in my classroom used to be a reflection of the reality outside of it.

I have always steered away from the so-called “fun” debates in which teams engaged each other in a discussion concerning the superiority of one flavor of ice cream to another, or similar investigations. I certainly see value in providing the opportunity for students to practice their rhetorical skills and even topics like the one mentioned above provide that opportunity to a certain extent. Debate however, has always meant more to me than just a practice of style and delivery. By focusing on topics that are relevant and important for the society in which students live, debate allows students to step out of their roles as students. By debating a topic that makes the headlines, students become aware that they are members of the community and that their voice matters, since they are capable of making arguments on the issues which are discussed by politicians, moral authorities and experts. By presenting students with a certain historical perspective and relevant examples a

teacher can also make them realize that debates have the power to change the world by providing impetus for action, by legitimizing some policies with the power of arguments and evidence, by influencing people’s attitudes and thinking. Examples are plentiful and they cut across the time and space: from debates about slavery between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, to debates preceding the recent attack on Iraq. One of the lessons that students can learn from analyzing debates in the real world is that the sides in these debates are represented not only by objective reasons and facts, but by real people who share certain values, beliefs, interests and feelings. This is something that is often forgotten in a purely academic debate: debating the issues affecting people’s lives is emotionally charged and takes place within the context of often subjective attitudes and convictions. Debaters in the real world (not the classroom) - politicians, activists, campaigners and advocates attempt to iden-



tify the point at which their position overlaps with the beliefs of their audiences. They reason with what the Ancient Greeks used to refer to as “enthymemes” - that is *reasoning with one’s target audience and not just to them*. Debaters in the real world use the public forum to express their own convictions and beliefs and impact the beliefs of others.

Academic debate is slightly less personal. Although student debaters are real people (with personal beliefs and convictions), most of the time, they do not get a chance to express their personal opinions during a debate. They represent objective (often de-humanized) sides in a debate: affirmative and negative and focus on arguments, rather than on the analysis of why some people would find such arguments appealing.

In this article I would like to focus on an educational tool which may be used alongside debates, and which can explore a variety of views on any given matter in the same time exploring the emotional, psychological and personal background of these views. This method of education is known as *role-play* and along with *case study* and *simulation* belongs to the repertoire of experiential learning techniques. The method is not new and it has been part of the interactive pedagogies since the beginning of the 20th century, but I would like to share with you my experience with applying this method in the process of coaching debate and teaching English.

WHAT IS A ROLE-PLAY?

Role-play is a technique in which students are presented with roles in the form of a case or scenario, then act out the roles in order to experience them for educational purposes. Role-play is, then, a spontaneous human interaction that involves realistic behavior under artificial or “imagined” conditions. In teaching methodologies, role-play is considered to be an excellent tool for introducing students to different social roles. Mostly, this process takes place when situations involving specific problems of social life and moral dilemmas (e.g., intolerance and deception) are simulated. Therefore, the goal of role-play as a teaching method is not only to practice competencies, but also to induce a discussion that allows identification of effective and ineffective patterns of behavior under given circumstances. The technique involves many variations and types (depending on the level of preparation- spontaneous role-plays, dramatic skits, etc. and number of students involved- pairs, triads, groups and multiple groups). The technique is a very popular training method in a variety of adult training contexts: various types of business, military, etc. Apart from the functions listed above, in the context of debate education, role-plays can serve as a tool for analyzing and researching issues, formulating arguments and exchanging views on a variety of topics. I will not present the diversity of forms that the role-play may take but will focus on the types of role-plays that can best be adopted for classroom use and related to debate preparation and topics that can be debated.

The formats that I used most often in my debate club and English class-

room included:

- **mock trial** - students are presented with a scenario of a court room procedures and adopted the roles of different characters (judge, prosecution, defense, witnesses, jury, etc.).

- **student parliament** - students play the roles of politicians/law makers and represent different factions: social-democrats, Christian-democrats, liberals, etc. as well as groups of interest (farmers, women, teachers, etc.). This type of role-play may involve a different context, for example w meeting of a city council/ faculty meeting at school or university.

- **meeting of an international body like UN, UNESCO, etc.**- students may play the role of diplomats representing different countries, members of different NGOs or other groups of interest.

- **talk-show (one of my favorites)**- students play the role of guests invited to a TV studio to take part in a talk-show on a chose topic (it can be a debate resolution). Students can create their own format of a talk -show (and style) and play roles of different characters invited to the studio (including a host).

- **press conference**- students can represent a party, an organization, a group of interest and they can respond to questions asked by the rest of the class (journalists of different papers).

- **negotiations**- students can represent different groups of interest, trying to solve a problem. The groups could be in conflict, for

example: workers and employers but can also represent different, not necessarily conflicting interests: e.g. a country trying to join an international organization.

A very interesting form of role-play that can be conducted with students may include characters that are not fictitious but real-life characters. For example a teacher of history may organize a role-play involving real historical figures (for example a mock trial of Napoleon Bonaparte).

WHAT SKILLS DO ROLE-PLAYS DEVELOP?

Each role-play regardless of its scenario and theme will develop a range of skills in students. A teacher, however, may want to gear the process of learning facilitated by a role-play in a particular direction: for example if a teacher wants to make students more sensitive to other cultures, he/she may design a role-play which will require students to expand their awareness of personal stereotypes and prejudices and their effects (for example through a role-play of a meeting of a university faculty dedicated to solving a problem of hate speech on campus).

In structuring my role-plays in a debate club, I tried to make sure that these exercises develop skills that are used during debate. In particular I paid attention to the following:

- **communication skills** (in particular: awareness through activities that illustrate what happens when people communicate, either verbally or nonverbally; building trust

through activities to create trust and a climate of openness and learning; conflict resolution through activities that develop skills to recognize and deal with interpersonal conflict situations; feedback through activities that promote awareness of how others can help a person to understand the impact of his or her behavior and that encourage acceptance of the opinions or feelings of others; listening skills through skill-building activities that help people to listen actively; styles through activities that identify communication styles and deal with issues of style in interpersonal interactions.

- **research skills** (in particular: ability to identify appropriate sources of information, related to the theme/ scenario of a role play- through activities involving looking for sources (on the internet, in the library); ability to find appropriate evidence and use it effectively- through activities involving quoting sources and supporting ones' views with relevant data; ability to critically evaluate sources- through the activities involving assessing information presented by other students.

- **problem solving and critical thinking** (in particular: generating alternatives through activities that offer practice in this early step in problem solving, information sharing through activities that demonstrate the importance of sharing information effectively in problem solving, consensus building through activities aimed at developing students' skills at reaching general agreement and commitment to decisions and goals, action planning through activities that teach

the skill of action planning (particularly useful when preparing students for policy debates).

- **team and group work skills** (in particular: how groups/teams work through activities that help team members to develop skills in observing what is taking place within their work team; competition/ collaboration through activities that deal with both the competitive tendencies that emerge within groups and the appropriateness of collaborative behavior; problem solving/ decision making through activities that teach these necessary skills within a work team.

Role-plays in my debate club and English language class were also very effective in developing students knowledge and understanding of the area which was used as a basis for a role-play. For example when, role- playing a parliamentary procedure dedicated to a bill regulating experimentation on animals, the students acquired knowledge of the current legislation, the status quo, animal rights, biology, etc. When a given role-play took place in English, the students expended their vocabulary in a given area.

WHY ARE ROLE-PLAYS EFFECTIVE TEACHING TOOLS?

I have found role-plays effective teaching tools for a number of reasons. First of all students typically experience role-playing as an engaging activity and this reflects upon their participation both during the preparation process and during the activity itself. Because almost every-



one knows how to play someone else's role, students tend to enjoy role-plays, and it is unnecessary for them to learn new skills in order to benefit from the process. Also, role-playing often is fun, although teachers have to be careful: over-playing a part can detract students from the learning. When role-playing is conducted skillfully, the situations have a high credibility for students, thereby reducing resistance to learning relevant skills and theory.

The technique is highly flexible. The teacher can change the role-play as it is being conducted, and the materials can be edited to fit particular situations. Role-playing can be engaged in for brief or long periods (some of my role-plays lasted as long as 1.5 hours although

45 minutes were more common - I have in mind the activity itself, without preparation and de-briefing)

Role-playing relies heavily on experiences of participants in ways that increase their ownership of learning. Students are engaged in all stages of the role-play, starting from planning and finishing with debriefing and as a result are much more motivated to participate in the process of learning. This technique is highly interactive and shifts teaching and learning from teacher-centered to student-centered (some teachers who are used to more traditional approaches to teaching may need to re-invent themselves - a truly great and challenging experience for any professional!). It raises both the quality and quan-

tity of active participation among students and encourages teamwork and a sharing of the responsibility of learning.

As I mentioned before role-playing has the potential to develop skills in self-expression, listening, communicating points of view, and interpersonal interaction, and as such it can raise students' consciousness about the need for these skills in human interaction. When used in conjunction with the teaching of argumentation and debates, role-plays may provide an interesting insight into the value criteria and warrants - by giving the opportunity to analyze the value systems and group interests upheld by individuals and groups of people.

In their book *"Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum"*, Alfred

Snider and Maxwell Schnurer present yet another argument in favor of role-play debates: “One of the most valuable things about role-playing debates is that they allow students to step away from the anxiety of playing themselves in a debate and give them a role to play. This role can reduce anxiety about debating and clarify what a person’s arguments should be” (*Many Sides: Debate Across the Curriculum*, Alfred Snider and Maxwell Schnurer, p. 69, IDEA Press 2002). For this reason role-plays can serve as an excellent exercise for younger students and less experienced debaters.

HOW TO PREPARE AND CONDUCT A ROLE-PLAY?

Although the level of preparation will differ depending on the topic and the type of role-play, teachers should always remember that student-centered activities require as much (and maybe even more) preparation than a lecture. A very important aspect of the student-centered methodologies that should not be overlooked during the preparation for a role-play is that students should be involved at almost all the stages of activity and they should be allowed to decide how to conduct a role-play.

Each role-play activity is traditionally composed of the following stages: introduction, assignment of roles, preparation of the students’ groups or individual students, stage preparation (optional), role-play, evaluation and debriefing.

Introduction

There are many ways in which a

teacher can introduce a role-play. The activity can either proceed or follow a debate on a chosen topic. For example, after a debate on a topic “Private/public distinction is detrimental to women’s rights” a teacher may ask the students what type of scenario could be used to further discuss the topic and what particular aspect of the topic they are most interested in following a debate (or a series of debates). Students may suggest focusing on one aspect (for example the issue of equal pay or domestic violence) or discussing many aspects of the issue of women’s rights under a more general heading. The choice of the content of the topic will to a certain extent determine the choice of the scenario. For example if the approach to topic is more general, the format of a talk show may be more appropriate (for example: a talk show may involve a discussion on the topic: Are women’s rights respected in our country?) while a more focused topic (women in the military) may render a mock trial scenario more appropriate (for example a woman may be suing military forces of a given country for not allowing her to serve in the army).

The teacher should also remember that there is a different level of preparation on his/her part when a talk show is to be role-played and when a teacher wants to conduct a full-scale mock trial (with evidence, witness statements, etc.).

The teacher may also introduce a role-play by presenting a case study (it can be a simple narrative). The narrative should involve a conflict or a dilemma and ideally a number

of characters (in order to involve many students). A possible narrative related to the topic of women’s rights may involve the following story: a woman pilot is not sent into combat by her superior, although she is perfectly qualified to be engaged in direct combat. As a result a number of soldiers die in combat. The superior is court-martialed. Students may take part in a mock trial and analyze the dilemmas faced by the characters faced by the characters from the case study by playing their roles and representing their sides. The teacher planning on moving from a case study into a role-play should also remember that different types of role-plays require different levels of complexity from a case study.

When I used role-play in teaching English I would often give my students an article on a given issues and ask them to read it at home. It was very good starting point for the role-play and a good practice of reading and comprehension skills.

The teacher could also introduce a role-play by simply bringing a debate motion to class (when a teacher wants to use role-play as an introduction to debate) and having students brainstorm ideas about the motion. Then the teacher could ask the students to brainstorm ideas concerning the scenario of a role-play and potential characters. The teacher could also determine the scenario by himself/ herself and simply inform the students that they will take part in a simulation of a talk show (mock trial, press conference, etc.).

Part of the introduction should also be dedicated to a discussion related

to the selected format of the role-play. For example if the students (or a teacher) decide on a talk-show format, they could discuss the types of talk shows they watch, the types of hosts they are run by, the type of audience that is invited, topics discussed as well as their quality. The discussion may also focus on the social, psychological and informative function that talk shows perform, and the need they fulfill.

The teacher should also remember about informing students of the logistics of the role-play: how much time can be spent on it, what the process of preparation will be like, what the rules of a particular role-play format are, etc. A lot of problems connected to the implementation of a role-play can be avoided by a well-prepared and detailed introduction, when the students are clear about the purpose of the exercise and know exactly what will be expected of them. That does not mean however, that a teacher should adopt a rigid model which cannot be deviated from - the role play is a flexible teaching tool and an element of improvisation should be seen as the method's asset rather than a shortcoming.

Assignment of roles

Once a scenario and a topic have been selected (either by the teacher or students), the teacher may move on to the second stage of the activity, which is the assignment of roles. The assigning of roles cannot take place, however, without a prior brainstorming of the choice of potential characters to be involved in a role-play. I often used to combine the second stage with the first one, and have stu-

dents come up with a list of characters that could be involved in a role-play. While students brainstormed different issues related to the topic, I asked them questions regarding a possible character who could best represent a point of view on a given issue or have knowledge about a given problem. For example when analyzing possible characters who could take part in a talk show on women's rights, students could list: a woman executive, a housewife, an expert on labor law, an owner of the company, representative of the government, representative of a women's NGO, etc. The teacher can help the students to come up with a list by putting them in a role at this stage of the process (e.g. *"If you were a TV producer and were interested in presenting a balanced view on the subject, whom would you invite to the program?"*). By listing the characters, students can already brainstorm ideas about the positions that the characters will represent (for example - a woman executive may claim that women should not be given preferential treatment on their career path).

The assigning of particular roles to students is not easy and the teacher must rely on his/ her knowledge of a given group's dynamics as well as individual students. The most favorable situation is when an individual expresses his/her willingness to play a specific role. If a student was designated to play a given role by the teacher, the teacher should carefully observe students' reactions and make appropriate adjustments if there is a need (if a student resists being a given character - he/she should be entitled to withdraw).

When I used role-plays in my English classroom, I would make sure that I assigned characters according to my students' level of English (e.g. I would be careful with giving a role of a talk show host to a student who struggles with his/ her English, which does not mean that the level of the difficulty of assigned tasks and roles should not increase with the level of such student's skills and knowledge).

Sometimes I would assign two (or more) students to play one character so that they could prepare in groups (especially if "becoming" a given character required a lot of preparation- for example, if an expert on a given topic was needed to take part in a discussion). It is usually recommended that all the students are assigned a role. If there are more students than characters, some students can be paired to play one character or they can become observers in a role-play. Being an observer should not mean that a student has not been given a task. Observers should be prepared for the evaluation of such aspects of the role-played as authenticity of the different roles played by individual students (for example: "would such and such character make this kind of argument or defend such and such position?"). The observers should also be ready to take a leading role during the debriefing phase of the activity. The teacher may help the students who are observers by providing them with a questionnaire to guide them through an observation process. Observers may also be included in some role-plays, for example by being members of the jury in a mock trial or the audience in a talk show.

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The teacher should fluctuate the roles that students play and make sure that one student does not spend most of the time being an observer rather than an active participant.

Students' preparation

Many role-play exercises can be conducted with little or virtually no preparation: during business trainings when role-plays are used as a training method, some trainers sketch a scenario for the trainees and ask them to perform their roles with no preparation. There is value to this kind of exercise when a trainer is interested in providing participants with experiences of different social roles, styles and channels of communication, etc. In such cases and instructor/facilitator provides only the preliminary information. Individuals who play different roles take a few minutes to determine the sequence of events and the process of their presentation. The task for participants is to imagine and to behave as if they were in an analogous, real life situation and act the situation with little preparation. I used such technique with my English students and the purpose of such role-plays was to give students the opportunity to practice some language functions. Role-plays are often used as part of the communicative or functional approaches to second language teaching. Example of such role-play contexts may include: a visit to a doctor, conversation in a shop, job interview, asking directions, etc. In fact, I preferred to give students less time when preparing for such role-plays, since with more time on hands they would often script their roles and try to memo-

rize them, which was counter-productive to the goal of the exercise (which is to develop and test natural responses of language learners in a given situation).

The situation is slightly different with the role-plays that are more complex, involve more participants and are to be used to explore debate topics. In this case, the focus of the activity should shift from a study of social interaction (though this aspect of the role play needs not be neglected) to the analysis of the theme, developing arguments and presenting evidence. Viewed from such perspective preparation of students for the role-play is one of the most important stages of the activity, since the level of students' preparation will determine the success or failure of the activity in the classroom. Much as it is the case with debate, appropriate preparation to the role-play will result in enhanced learning about the topic and developing of the skills required by debaters.

The level of preparation required for role-plays will vary depending on the format of the activity and a particular role that a student will play in a given activity. For example student congress or parliament may require more time for preparation than a talk show. Students participating in a student parliament are required to study current legislation and work on their own proposals (just like in policy debate). A teacher may augment the problem with unequal distribution of responsibilities among the students by grouping them into bigger groups that represent a similar view on a given issue and are likely to pres-

ent a similar point of view (faction, interest, etc.) so that they can work together. For example in a mock trial, students may work together on the defense team (including the witnesses and experts), prosecution team and the jury.

The level of preparation can be enhanced by increasing the number of roles in the activity that require researching a given issue. For example, when conducting a role-play on the issue of women's rights (talk show format), the level of students' preparation will be higher when more "expert" roles will be included. Thus such a talk show may feature the following roles: a labor law expert, psychologist, human rights expert, sociologist, etc. Of course such a show may also feature a "housewife" but it must be remembered that evidence presented by such a character may be mostly anecdotal (which does not mean that a student playing such a role will not present good arguments- they may be based more on internal logic, value judgment or emotional appeals).

A teacher may help the students to initiate the process of preparation by starting with a brainstorming session on the strategy for gathering information and its potential sources, encouraging students to generate ideas about research not only for the characters they will play but also for the characters played by other students.

One of the methods of gathering information, which is often underutilized by debaters when preparing for debates is an interview. When preparing for a role-play on a given

theme, students who will represent views of chosen characters may in fact interview their real life equivalents (for example a student who plays a the role of a lawyer may want to interview a real lawyer -often in such cases, parents' involvement may be of assistance). Before the students are sent on their assignment, the teacher may want to review with the students the basic rules and etiquette of conducting interviews.

If the role-play is complex and requires a lot of research, the teacher may give students more time to prepare. It is important that the teacher monitors the process of preparation, for example by setting appointments with the groups of students to inquire about their progress and to address some questions that they may have.

Setting the stage for a role-play

This element of the activity is optional since not all role-plays will require a special set. Some however may and it is a good idea to ask students to think of the way in which the stage can be set and who will be responsible for doing it. Most talk show role-plays, student congresses and mock trial will require re-arranging of desks and chairs in a room. Some role-plays may require the use of props (a banner, a speaker's stand, etc.). One of the most exciting (but also most stressful!) props that can be used during a role-play is a video camera. Material recorded on a VCR tape is an invaluable resource for debriefing and analysis and if teachers have access to appropriate equipment, I would encourage them to use it with their students.

Conducting a role-play

Finally the big day has arrived and both the students and the teacher are ready to conduct a role-play. Similarly to the previous phases, the way in which any give role-play is conducted depends on the format, the number of students participating and their roles. There are some general rules that the teacher who wants a role-play to be successful should remember. The most important thing for a teacher to keep in mind is that successful role-plays take place with minimal interference from the teacher. That is why a teacher should remain on the outside and advise and intervene only if it is absolutely necessary. Intervention may take place if the students get confused and are not able to correct the situation by themselves. If a situation of this sort occurs, teacher's comments should be brief and to the point and only assist in moving the action.

Before the role-play begins, the teacher should make it clear to the students once again that being a good actor is not as important as knowing the motives that lead the behavior of the assigned character, understanding the background of the situation and being able to make and respond to arguments (the general guideline to the students may be: "*Be yourself and act in the most natural way. It is better if you simply act as you would if you were in the position of the person described in your role instructions, as if it were "for real."* For example, *if you are in the role of a woman executive, consider yourself to be the woman executive, rather than acting the way you think a woman exec-*

utive would"). The teacher may also ask students to wear tags with names of the characters they are impersonating. The function of the tags is to provide students with a sense of security (after the role-play and before debriefing has begun, participants should be reminded to remove the tags and "exit the role"). After the role-play is finished, the teacher should thank the students for participation in the role-play, (using the real names of the students and thus providing a natural transition from the play to the debriefing phase).

Debriefing

Although the process of learning takes place before a role-play (in the initial brainstorming and preparation) as well as during the activity itself, the teacher should not forget that every educational activity should finish with some form of closure. In a debate it is providing feedback by the judges and coaches and looking at the flow sheet with debaters (or some other form of debriefing: discussion with the audience, etc.). In order to make the process of learning more effective in the role-play, a teacher should dedicate some time to debriefing the activity. Debriefing should be distinguished from a teacher's evaluating the activity (which can also take place after a role-play). Debriefing should focus on receiving comments from the students themselves and be as student-centered as the role-play itself. The teacher should be more of a facilitator of the learning process than an instructor. The role of the teacher should limit itself to organizing a discussion around the outcomes of the activity and eliciting comments from

students, rather than making comments himself/herself. Here are some useful tips to teachers who would like to make debriefing a useful experience for the students:

1. Remind the students of the goal of the exercise before the discussion
2. Ask individual participants how they felt during the role-play and if they would like to comment on their roles and performance.

When moving to eliciting general comments from students, the teacher may want to structure the analysis along the following lines:

3. Interaction between different characters in the role-play
4. The main lines of arguments presented by different characters (ask the students if they could identify some common/ overlapping positions or view points)
5. Areas of conflict which emerged during the role-play (also how the characters dealt with the conflict)
6. Main arguments and evidence which was used

Towards the end of the debriefing the teacher may want to explore the students' view on different issues related to the theme of the role-play (which can also be connected to the topic of debate). Teachers may want to prepare a list of questions which they can ask use to stimulate the discussion on the topic. For example when talking about women's rights or the role of women in the society, following a role-play on the topic, the

teacher may ask some of the following questions:

1. Would it be possible for the society to get rid of gender (not in biological sense)?
2. What would this be like?
3. Are men and women the same (not biologically)?
4. Are there power differences between men and women (name them if the answer is "yes")?
5. Which power differences are socially caused?
6. Can society change/compensate for power differences between men and women?
7. Should society compensate for power differences?
8. What are your society's expectations regarding men?
9. What are your society's expectations regarding women?
10. What is the distribution of labor between men and women in your society?
11. Who does more work at home in your society: men or women?
12. Do women have access to all occupations? (if not which occupations are traditionally male? Why is this so? Does it matter? Is it unfair?)
13. Is the family a just social institution?
14. How much individual control

do women have over their circumstances?

- a) over the question of marriage
- b) over social perceptions
- c) over reproduction
- d) over career choices

If the teacher runs out of time to complete the discussion on the questions related to the theme of the role-play, he/she can give the students a written assignment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Role-plays can be a very effective method of engaging students in analysis of a variety of issues and can serve as a great introduction to debates as well as an interesting addition to the preparation for debates on a chosen topic. This method of education is flexible but requires similar flexibility from both the teacher and his/her students. The role-play can be a rewarding learning experience but can also turn into chaos. There is a very thin line between the stimulating control over the learning process and the type of rigid control that eventually limits rather than enhances the process of participation and learning. Each teacher who would like to use the method in the classroom should remember that the role-play should be a highly interactive, student-centered activity and only as such it will fulfill its educational objectives.

