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Participatory Education

What and Why

Participatory forms of expression do not have to be limited to more or less artful narratives in larps and other kinds of role-playing games. What effects can role-playing have when used in education? This paper discusses possible effects of pedagogic role-playing and proposes some explanations to why role-playing is not used in schools.

Participatory education is mostly utilised as diverse forms of role-playing. One usual method is to make students[1] research opinions and goals for different nations or ethnic groups and then put them together in a conference where representatives for different parties may argue for their point of view. Likewise, the students can role-play different problems that businesses or organizations may meet. This kind of pedagogic role-playing is often called "simulation", since the participants try to re-enact situations or circumstances that are impossible to recreate in the classroom. The relevant parts of the situation are "simulated", while the rest is left out.

It is not far from true to say that role-playing is the primal way of learning, and that all higher education should start from there. The age-old system with master and apprentice is more a case of learning by simulating the master than learning by instruction; that is, the apprentice is trying on the master's role until she has reached the master's level herself. Children as well first try role models they get from the caretakers, moving on to roles they get from other interesting people and things they meet. This kind of learning is based on curiosity, which is hard-wired into our system. Children are learning machines, but anyone who has seen knowledge-hungry first-graders turn into despairing fourth-graders has also seen how the traditional school quenches that curiosity.

Contrary to this kind of learning, most traditional forms of education – on all levels – are built to deliver pre-packaged knowledge, not to further eager searching and self-made discoveries. It should be unnecessary to point out that simulation is a marvellous tool for awakening the pupils' interest for learning in general, but strangely enough it does not seem to be self-evident. The experience of being an active, responsible subject in a realistic situation of importance almost always enhances the students' motivation by personalizing the subject matter.

[1] The words "pupil" and "student" are used synonymously, regardless of the level of education, from kindergarten to university.

Effects of Role-Playing on Learning

Simulation helps the students ask relevant and thoughtful questions, e.g. when they want to get more information about the models determining the choice of controlling elements in the simulation. For example, what parallels to the simulation are there in reality? How can and should communication in the situation be organised? What are the problems presented in the simulation and how can they be mastered?

It is not unusual for a simulation to lead into critical analysis, which can motivate the students to develop their own theoretical models. Perhaps the strongest learning effect occurs when the students make their own simulations; in these cases the students have to make a thorough research of the situation in question to decide which elements are necessary and relevant, what the underlying causes are, and what forces control the development of the situation.

Simulations may help the students construct a more holistic picture of different circumstances affecting human behaviour. A well-made role-play should give a relatively realistic image of the political, social, historical, cultural and economic factors having an impact on the characters' lives. Thus, a simulation can give convincing experiences of different social systems. In addition, a simulation can give insight into the ways social or cultural capital influences chances for education and career, or about the impact of technology on human interaction and the interaction between human beings and social institutions. This allows the students to integrate their pre-existing concepts and information into meaningful wholes.

Social and Psychological Effects

Besides knowledge in specific subject matters, simulations can provide insights and skills in decision-making, resource allocation, communication, and methods of persuasion as well as capacity to understand and resist forms of persuasion. At the same time, the students get to experience the rational and emotional factors making up these kinds of processes. This happens on a general level, demonstrating that people are driven by a far from optimal mix of common sense and feelings, and likewise how they disguise emotion-based motivations by rational reasoning. On a personal level they may discover how these behaviours work in their own case. The view of mankind all of us internalise as we grow up, a view given by our primary group and then by our society and subculture, can thus be deconstructed. This allows the students to get a chance to develop their own conceptions of man, based more on personal experience than on tradition.

This kind of personal understanding can influence attitudes to underlying social structures. Examples include enhanced insight and empathy for the difficulties that decision makers face in the real world, a feeling that life is much more complicated than could be ever imagined and that nothing is fundamentally binary black-and-white, or a

conviction that the participators really have a possibility to influence their own life or the future of the world.

Other insights include explicit, concrete and bodily experienced perceptions of constructs, concepts and terms describing human behaviour. Everyone has some kind of a psychological or sociological world view, which can be tested against reality through simulation. Simulation can also show how context dependent such world views are, and what their importance for an individual's identity is. The classical training exercise in which two parties argue for the opponents' standpoints is always very fruitful; the exercise can be extended to include not only arguments but also identities.

Much of our knowledge is not formulated on a conscious level. Besides the silent knowledge (such as biking or cooking) we obtain in various ways, there is also knowledge we seldom realise we have until it shows up in actual circumstances. Since simulations are open-structured and can lead to unexpected chains of events, they can present opportunities to discover, identify and formulate such knowledge.

Behind every model used for simulation there are a lot of circumstances that are not presented explicitly. For example a role-play about business problems, economic transactions or management will also give knowledge about different kind of external and internal relations and factors that influence the market, while a role-play about international justice sheds light upon the connection between the satisfaction of various political groups and the likelihood for political leaders to remain in power.

One of the most important effects of simulations is their impact on the social context of the school. Being forced to abandon the classroom arrangement of traditional education, the control of the classroom moves from the teacher to the structure of the simulation. This leads into more relaxed relations between teachers and pupils. If the teachers accept the situation, the change may even remain. The involvement in the simulation may even decrease posing and status-seeking attitudes between the students, creating a better ambience in the classroom even in the long run.

Learning by simulation also forces the students to be more active and encourages them to question and even challenge the teachers – which is not always regarded as a good thing in a traditional school context.

Participatory arts have a positive impact on individual development, and pedagogic simulation is no exception. In short, these effects present a clearer view on how other people perceive the students, insights in the students' own capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, and fears and barriers the students had not been aware of. Not the least of the effects is the possibility to express intimacy, resentment or indifference without risking dire consequences.

Why Is Participatory Education Not Used?

There are many reasons for participatory methods not being used in education. Besides the tradition of education through one-way stimuli, there are purely ideological reasons

such as the domination of the spectator paradigm going through every sector of society. This shows up in a fixation to bookish learning and a corresponding devaluation of practical hands-on knowledge.

The traditional classroom is organised to suit the spectator paradigm. In front of the blackboard stands the lectern, in front of which the little desks are aligned towards the lectern. The classroom may also have an overhead projector or a TV set, which likewise levels and coordinates all eye movements. The teacher (or the machine) is the one producing the stimuli, while the pupils' task is to receive them.

There is a certain amount of stimuli going from the pupils to the teacher, primarily in order to elicit more stimuli from the teacher, or to prove that the pupils have received enough educative stimuli. The rules that restrict the students' action space are unspoken, but they are running the show nonetheless. There is no proper dialogue going on in the classroom, especially not aimed at a mutual search for knowledge. The spectator paradigm also presupposes a unitary, non-ambiguous message, in this case embodied in the teacher as the channel for the total body of transmitted knowledge.

The Lack of Competent Teachers

The previous paragraphs provide some general explanations why simulation is rarely used in institutionalised education. Moreover, there are a number of factual barriers, one of them being that there is no education in how to create simulations. This is a field with a lot of room for basic research: how can the curriculum of schools be framed in a way that makes the learning so pleasurable that it becomes almost automatic? How can facts and circumstances be dramatised and placed in believable contexts? Especially regarding abstract reasoning and far-reaching arguments – how to turn them into living experiences? The current teacher education does not cover these kinds of questions[2].

Simulation includes a lot of interdisciplinary activities. Understanding the different aspects of an ethnic conflict requires knowledge about historical, geographical, political, social, economical and religious circumstances, and thus, co-operation between many of teachers – something not encouraged in the teachers' education and working situations.

The material needs to be presented in a way that engages the pupils, which requires a certain creative capability in addition to the basic pedagogical competence. To realise the elements that can lead to dramatically interesting and learning-promoting plots for the simulation, the teacher needs to have some insights about dramatic enactment. Since teacher training is not geared towards such enactment, that kind of knowledge is perforce excluded. Ideally the pupils should research the subject

[2] Years ago the Swedish author Sven Lindqvist put forward a modest proposition on how to make mathematics and social studies more realistic by having the students make all sorts of statistics and estimates on living conditions and production terms at a big South American farm. He was heavily ridiculed for his naïve idealism.

themselves, but even in these cases the teachers must be able to help the students identify relevant and redundant information.

It is possible that the open structure used in simulations can be experienced as a threat to the teachers' authority. For a person trained for a career in the service of the spectator paradigm, secure in the faith that the students' duty is to act as grateful receivers for the fountain of erudition streaming from the teacher (an exact parallel to the myth of the singular artist), it might be difficult to switch thinking modes and begin a dialogue on the same terms as the other participants.

A simulation contains no more correct answers than life itself. Instead, a simulation consists of experiences that can provide opportunities to choose standpoints and opinions rather than getting pre-packaged solutions. Since in a simulation the chain of events often goes its own way, a simulation may even result in getting a "wrong" answer: a simulation of an ethnic conflict may reveal racism not expected by the participants, or a simulated business enterprise may choose to put profit margins before environmental protection. Seen from the traditional school perspective this makes for low grades, while it in fact means that the students get first hand experiences instead of second hand opinions. What better way of learning is there?

Conclusion

The biggest barrier for participatory education might be the hidden agenda of the school system. The real task of the current educational system is not to help students find their own place and role in life; instead, it aims to turn them into functionalities required by the economy. In this way, the school is an integrated part of the society's consciousness industry, geared to make the students *fit in.* That is a goal suited to traditional education, while participatory education might (note: *might*) provide a bigger action repertoire and a wider range of options to handle life with. The school system is always ten years late: just as generals are always preparing for the previous war instead of the next one, school teaches the students things they needed to know yesterday instead of what they need to know tomorrow.