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Role-play in Literature Lectures: The Students' Assessment of Their Learning

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The following article is based on a piece of qualitative research on the use of role-play in a literature module in the Modern Irish Dept. of University College Cork, Ireland, in 2015. There were 18 students involved in the research. The aim of the research was to investigate if students associate learning with the use of role-play in literature lectures, and the findings indicate that students do indeed associate many different types of learning with role-play. Role-play is used widely in language classes but less widely in literature lectures. Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs); questionnaires; a focus group; and essays were used as a means of gathering data. The research findings indicate that students are nervous when first presented with the prospect of doing role-play in class; however, the findings show that these feelings soon give way to an acceptance of role-play and an appreciation of this teaching methodology as beneficial to both teaching and learning. The students who took part in the study were very enthusiastic about the group work involved in preparing and performing role-play. The lectures and role-play were all carried out through the medium of the Irish language. While the authors recognise that role-play may not lend itself to all teaching contexts, they wish to encourage other literature teachers to experiment with role-play.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of this piece of research we asked the question: what do students think they are learning from role-play? We posed this question against the theoretical backdrop of Teaching for Understanding (TfU). We saw the students' role-plays in terms of *performances of understanding*. The module I taught the students in the Autumn of 2015 was concerned with types of storytelling which included both folkloric story and the modern short-story. I used an array of research tools to collect rich and varied data: CATs, questionnaires, focus group. I will look at the data associated with the focus group, the data from one of the CATs and the essays the students wrote in fulfilment of the module coursework in this article. I will also analyse one of the role-plays.

Role-Play

I drew on different areas of theory in my research, namely: Education, Drama Education, Teaching and Learning, and Performative Teaching and Learning. I take my definition of role-play from Carmel O'Sullivan who maintains that role-play occurs when someone acts out a role that is different from his/her normal role in life in order to create a piece of drama (O'Sullivan, 2011: 512). According to Cecily O'Neill, role-play and acting are similar:

> …both acting and roleplay require the same basic ability to project into a variety of fictional situations by pretending to be someone or something other than one's self. (O'Neill, 1995: 78)

In my lectures, I used "pre-texts" on which to base the role-plays. Cecily O'Neill (1995), who has been involved in drama education for many years, coined this term and it refers to the reading of a text before doing a piece of role-play. The role-play is inspired by the text. This use of text is very important in a university context where students admit to not reading much anymore.

Manfred Schewe argues that students prefer the immediate and visual world provided by the internet and television to reading a book. It will be the lecturer's responsibility to engage students with literature through "imaginative methodology" (Schewe, 1998: 220). In this context, the lecturer will have to function as a facilitator. Role-play involves "physicalization" as learning is given a physical form (Spolin, 1973: 15; Schewe, 1993: 8). Role-play can be seen as an example of an "imaginative methodology".

In Ireland, storytelling took place in public (Ó Cadhla, 2011 and Ó Giolláin, 2005). It pre-dated radio and television. Drama is also public. Through carrying out role-play based on folkloric stories, students can come to appreciate the storyteller's role. Schewe's idea of "physicalization" of the learning is very relevant to this process. It helps students to grasp the nature of storytelling which may be a strange concept for them at the beginning of the semester.

Our use of the concepts of learning and understanding draws on the theory of Teaching for Understanding (TfU). There are four dimensions involved in the TfU framework: Knowledge, Method, Purpose and Form. Each of these involves different levels of ability: naïve, novice, apprentice and master (Wiske, 1998). I wish to add another level to the TfU framework, i.e. the student voice. The research discussed here on role-play draws heavily on the student voice examining as it does three main themes in my analysis: the emotional response to role-play; the importance of group work and friendships made during the group work; and the learning that the students associated with the role-play they were involved in. In this paper, I will look exclusively at the students' perception of learning attendant on role-play. According to David Perkins, one of the leading TfU theorists, the teacher has to organise "performances of understanding" that will allow the students to progress over a period of time (Perkins in Wiske, 1998). My use of CATs/ Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo and Cross, 1993), questionnaires (Thomas, 2013), essays and role-play itself allows the students "to think and act flexibly with what one knows" (Perkins, 40) which is the definition of understanding that Perkins devised. In the CATs and questionnaires, focus group and essays, I was looking for the students' voice, their opinion of what they had learned as a result of role-play and their evaluation of role-play as a teaching method.

Theatre can be seen as Active Learning (Burgoyne, 2015). Role-play too involves Active Learning. While I do not refer to Active Learning Theory directly in this article, my studies in teaching and learning have drawn from this tradition from the outset.

Marcia Baxter Magolda argues that students are constantly being assessed (2000). The TfU framework also emphasises assessment of students and the need to be conscious of how experts know and find out information. I draw on Bloom's Taxonomy as a way of assessing my students. The original Bloom's Taxonomy provides us with levels of understanding which assess what the students are able to do – the lowest level being Knowledge and highest being Evaluation (Kennedy, 2007: 25). The taxonomy has since been revised with Creativity now being the final level (Anderson et al, in IACBE, 2014-2016 and Owen Wilson, 2016). Given that my research involves creativity, i.e. the use of role-play, the revised taxonomy is even more relevant to my research than the original. It is essential, I will argue, to consider the students' own assessment of what they are learning. This forms part of what they can "do" in relation to the course of study. I asked them to tell me what they had learned from role-play. I hoped to appeal to that inner teacher that Maria Montessori wrote about in her seminal work *The Absorbent Mind* (1982: 6). It was necessary to listen to the student voice and to learn from the students. It is not just the students who need to understand what we as teachers teach. Teachers also need to understand the students' position(s).

The students worked in groups when preparing the role-plays and when performing them. Sometimes the groups consisted of only two students, at other times there were six students in a group. Blatchford et al. (2003) and Long and Porter (1985) have described the importance of group work in the classroom. Blatchford et al. emphasise "cooperative group work" (2003: 154). They were writing about how children behave in groups. Teachers often have fears around group work worrying that students may not really be working when engaged with their group; they think that it may be hard to control students while doing activities together; teachers doubt that students can "learn from one another" (Ibid 156). I had all these concerns too despite the fact that I was dealing with university students. Blatchford et al. emphasize the importance of children's interaction with peers because, they point out, children have more interaction with their peers than they do with their teachers (Ibid 158). According to Long and Porter, group work fosters freedom and this creates a "positive affective climate" (1985: 212).

According to Stephen Krashen it is necessary in a language class to keep the Affective Filter as low as possible (Krashen, 1982); when anxiety levels are high, students learn less in class. Lowering the fear levels in class allows students to learn more. The Affective Filter is important, I would argue, in any class but is especially so where role-play forms part of the teaching methodology. It is necessary for students to feel that they are working in a "safe space" in order to be able to take part in role-play successfully (Gayle et al., 2013). Other authors have questioned the existence of "safe space" especially in the classroom (Stengel and Weems, 2010). When doing role-play, there is always the danger that students will be derided by their classmates.

I draw on the work of Paul Ramsden (1997) in relation to students' approaches to their work. Students can tell teachers what they think we want to hear. How the students are approaching their work is important when considering students' treatment of role-play in their assessed essay. If they are simply saying things in essays to please their lecturers, these statements will not be a good indication of how they really feel about an intervention such as role-play. I will return to this concern later in the article.

The next section presents an example of the role-play.

Role-play on *Sochraid Neil*

One of the role-plays my students acted out was based on a short story which contains elements of both the oral tradition of storytelling and the modern short story. It was written by Donncha Ó Céilleachair and was set in the 1830's in West Cork. The plot is quite complex. A young woman, Neil, dies in childbirth. There is a fight between her own family and her husband's family as to where she should be buried. Because she died in childbirth, it is unclear in this society whether she is a girl who rightly belongs to her father or a woman who belongs to her husband. She has not completed the rite of passage (Riggs, 1996: 138). The students were told to recreate the turning point of the story. The turning point of this story was the point at which her father, Conchubhar, having been victorious over his son-in-law, Muirtí Óg, hands the coffin back to him and tells him he can bury her in his family plot if he wants to. Although the old world, Conchubhar's world, has defeated the young men, Conchubhar is wise enough to know that the old ways must give way inevitably to the new.

Two students, a young man and a young woman, performed this role-play. The action began with the female student, Muirtí Óg, carrying a small white lunch box across the stage. This box signified Neil's coffin. The male student playing the part of Conchubhar, who had positioned himself at the top of the steps to the left of the lecture theatre, came charging down the steps shouting and brandishing a long stick:

Young man: Give her to me!

He pretends to hit the young woman with the stick. She bends over in supposed agony. She lets him have the box. The young man walks solemnly with the box and the young woman follows behind. He then holds up a piece of paper which says "Reilig Bhaile Bhúirne" – Baile Mhúirne Cemetery. The audience laughs (maybe because holding up a piece of paper seemed like an odd thing to do at this juncture). He then turns to the young woman and says:

Young man: Ye can take the corpse now if ye like.
He puts the "coffin" down on the ground.
Young woman: Take the corpse? We're exhausted. We can't take the corpse.

Then the young man calls on his own men, students from the audience. Three female students come onto the stage and carry the box to the exit, followed by the two main characters.

Analysis of *Sochraid Neil*

This section of the story, the climax, was a very difficult passage in the story. There were lots of references to different graveyards and it was not always clear which direction the coffin was going in. The role-play was very simple and very effective. There was very little dialogue but a lot of silence and solemnity. The students had no time to practise the role-play within the space and

yet they had calculated everything perfectly. I was very moved by this role-play.

In the exam at the end of the semester, there was no confusion regarding the events at the climax of this story. It seems that the stripped down version enacted by the students served to clarify the sequence of events in the students' minds. Not only did the students involved in the role-play understand what was happening in the story, all the other members of the class did as well.

METHOD

Although I planned my research methods in advance of doing the research, I did make changes as I went along. This type of research can be seen as a path formed in the walking which is a metaphor used by Francesco Varela who was referring to a poem by Antonio Machado:

> *Caminante no hay camino* Walker there is no road
> *se hace camino al andar*[1] the road is made in the walking
> (my own translation)

During my research I was constantly planning and re-formulating the research question. I was making my path as I was moving forward like Machado's *caminante*.

The "change" I implemented in my lectures was role-play itself. It was not just the role-play, however, that affected the students but the whole learning process involved in role-play. My research was very suited to a case study because my research was based on one group of students, studying one module with me, whom I met once a week for two hours. There were clear boundaries associated with this research. In the first and second lectures, I gave the students a consent form that contained a description of the work we would be doing regarding role-play and outlining the student input I needed for my research. It also told them that their work would be recorded by video camera and photography. I asked them to read the form and sign it if they were happy to cooperate with the research. All of the students signed the form.

I used several folkloric "pre-texts" (O'Neill, 1995) with my students which we read in class and the students created their role-plays in response to these texts. The research tools that I used were classroom assessment techniques (CATs) which the students wrote after we read the pre-text and before the group work. These were written quickly by the students and without help from anyone. I collected these CATs before the group work took place. After ten minutes of working in groups of from three to sometimes eight students, the groups then acted out their role-plays. After all the role-plays had been performed, I distributed questionnaires to the class. The students filled these in individually. Mid way through the course I carried out a focus group with four students. The students wrote essays that contained a section on role-play. The grades for these essays constituted 50% of the total grade earned by the students for the module. I analysed the data generated by these research tools according to Norton's "thematic analysis" (2009) and triangulated the evidence.

CATs are a useful way of getting an immediate reaction from students. They are similar to brainstorming. Questionnaires allow the researcher to ask what the students think about particular issues. Focus groups allow the students to say whatever they want in response to the researcher's questions and to respond to other students' opinions in the group. Essays give students the time and space to elaborate on points they may have touched on in the CATs and questionnaires. They also give them the chance to contradict things they might have said in the focus group.

I did not explore the CATs (Classroom assessment techniques) that I carried out before each role-play in this article as they will form the basis of a future article. After reading each story with the class that I had chosen as a pre-text for role-play, I asked the students to write a CAT in which they outlined a role-play that they would like to perform based on that story. Often students were unable to think up a role-play of any kind or stayed within the boundaries of the original story. However, on discussing the story with members of their group, they were invariably able to think up a role-play and perform it in front of the class. The group work proved transformative. Blatchford et al. (2003) and Long and Porter (1985) have explored the merits of group work but I became aware of those merits from my own experience with my students.

I indexed all of the responses from the research tools I used. I analysed the results carefully reading and rereading the responses, by comparing students' answers, for example, between the CATs and essays and focus group, and by estimating the changing student appreciation of role-play over the course of the semester. I had some categories in mind from the beginning, *prior categories* (Wellington, 2015: 268), such as how the students *felt* about role-play. After the first questionnaire, it was clear that *nervousness* should form a p*osteriori category*, i.e. a category that emerges during the research (Ibid and 271-2). I used Norton's "thematic analysis" to categorise the data. The main themes were: the importance the students attached to group work; whether or not they felt they were learning from role-play; the ability to see others' perspective through watching other students' role-plays; and the decrease in nervousness over time.

I then scored the responses, e.g. what proportion of the class felt nervous before or during the role-play. Throughout the research I can see now that I tended to focus on what the majority was saying. This approach may not have been the only way to analyse this data. I spent hours pouring over the data especially when things were no longer making sense as happened after the focus group. At this point I decided to do another CAT and at last things began to settle down. Up until this point I felt that the research was in constant flux. I was writing right from the start of this research (Ibid 275). I kept a reflective journal in which I tossed around different interpretations of the data and recorded my own feelings about the research. I did not do any interviews as part of this research. That decision may have been an error as I am sure, in hindsight, that interviews would have generated a lot of rich data.

1. I heard this point being made by Prof. Joëlle Aden at a Scenario symposium (Second Forum) in U.C.C. (25/09/2015) on performative teaching and learning. The symposium was organised by Prof. Manfred Schewe.

Research Design

The following are the Learning Outcomes I have provisionally assigned to the module GA2019:

1. Students will be able to explore the message/theme of the stories.
2. Students will be able to apply the message/theme of the stories to their own lives.
3. Students will be able to recognise the climax/turning point of the stories.
4. Students will be able to act out the message/theme/turning point of the stories in front of the class in the form of role-play.

My research path took shape during the research. It was a true *camino*. The following schema attempts to show the various elements that made up the "research design":

1. Pre-text 1, CAT, group work session, role-play and questionnaire
2. Pre-text 2, CAT, group work session, role-play and questionnaire
3. Focus Group
4. CAT on learning ("What is learning?")
5. Student essays (containing a section on role-play)
6. Pre-text 3, CAT, group work session, role-play and questionnaire
7. Evaluation of the module
8. Exam (role-play was not mentioned in relation to the exam and no student mentioned it in his/her answer)
9. I discussed all stages of my research with the supervisor of my research and my course lecturer.

Focus Group

I carried out a focus group with four students after class in the sixth week of the semester (the half way mark). Although the responses were diverse, my thematic analysis identified a few key themes: role-play allowed students to understand stories from different perspectives; role-play was fun and sociable; role-play encouraged students to read; whether one learned anything new from role-play was questionable. While all of the students had some good things to say about role-play, it was very difficult for them to specify what, if anything, they had learned from it.

Two students mentioned that everyone could understand the story in a different way ((032/FG1/9); (035/FG1/9)). This emphasis on different perspectives facilitated by role-play was present from the start of the research. Finding out how their classmates viewed a story, as compared with how they viewed it themselves, seemed to interest the students.

Another student maintained that role-play was difficult but that because the students were all "in the same boat", it was more fun than work (034/FG1/9). It would appear from this statement that the classroom was functioning as a "safe space." This student does not think that role-play is work (034/FG1/9) and student (032/FG1/5) is unsure as to whether the class is even a lecture:

> *We got on very well. I met people I didn't know before and I made friends that I wouldn't have made if we had lectures, ordinary lectures. So, it was very good. (032/FG1/5)*

It seems that something is neither a lecture nor work if one is enjoying oneself. I asked the students if they would prefer to stop doing role-play in the lecture. No one wanted to give up doing role-play. One student said:

> *No. The start of the class is very good to just take a break from ordinary lectures where you are sitting for an hour listening to someone talking. It is much better to meet new people and to make friends, to do something different, to do something funny. I want to do it. (032/FG1/10)*

It seems from this quotation that students want diversity in teaching methods. They want a break from the "ordinary lectures."

One student (034/FG1/10) did not want to have role-play every week. This response seems to support the need for diversity in teaching methods: even role-play could get boring. Student (035/FG1/10) was very positive about role-play and said: "It gives us a break but it motivates us too to get into the stories and that. It is a wonderful thing, I think." (035/FG1/10)

I asked them a question that was not on my list: "It is worth doing role-play because you learn X from it. What is X?"

> *At the start you learn that the story is universal but after that it is the same thing. All the stories are…It is the same thing in all the stories. I don't know if you learn much from it but still it is something different. I think you remember the story for longer… because you did the role-play and you will remember it and then you will have the original story. (032/FG1/13)*

This feeling that role-play is repetitive may be due to the fact that the first and second role-plays were concerned with fables. The students seem to associate the learning here with the message of the fable. Once you know the message, that's all there is to it, or so it seems to appear to some students.

One student saw the role-play as motivating the students to read the stories (035/FG1/13). This is a very important plus for role-play, as reading is under threat from so many other sources of information (Schewe, 2004: 82). The same student went on to say:

> *As well as that it is much easier to do this [role-play] and to learn the theme and to discuss it than…to be in the library on your own reading a difficult story and saying "What is the most important theme here?" In the group, you have to perform it in front of the class and I think myself at any rate that it is much easier to discuss themes and things when we are preparing for the role-play. (035/FG1/13)*

Part of the reason that the majority of the students who took part in the focus group could not articulate the learning associated with role-play may have been that I did not specify a particular aspect of role-play in the question I put to them. If I had said - "What do you think you learned from the group work you did preparing the role-play?" - the students may have responded very differently. Similarly, if I had asked them what they had learned from writing the CATs or filling in the questionnaires, they would probably have been able to pinpoint something that they had learned. I did not do this because for me "role-play" had become enmeshed in all of these activities. I must take responsibility, therefore, for some of the ambivalence regarding the learning associated with role-play.

I also wish to stress here that the stories were in Irish, a second language for most Irish students. For some of the students, therefore, just reading the stories was challenging and speaking in front of the class in the Irish language was difficult. Many of these students had little or no previous practice of speaking in Irish.

CAT on Learning

My response to this ambivalence was to carry out a CAT. The next week I asked the following question: What is learning? The students wrote their answers on a piece of paper and I collected these responses.

Four students maintained that learning was learning a new piece of information ((040/CAT2b); (042/CAT2b); (044/CAT2b); (047/CAT2b)). "You are learning when you are taking in new information." (042/CAT2b) It is easy to understand why the students thought there was nothing new to learn when they performed the second role-play the second time. They couldn't see any "new information" here. For some students learning constitutes learning things by heart and being able to reproduce them in an exam situation:

> *I am not sure but I think that it is when you remember something that happened or that you heard in the class or lecture. And you are able to write that information on a page or in the exam. (043/CAT2b)*

Three students mentioned memorization in relation to learning ((036/CAT2b); 043/CAT2b); 047/CAT2b)). One student emphasized the importance of understanding in the learning process:

> *This is a very difficult question. I believe that it means getting to grips with things so that you understand them. If you learn things by heart, this is not real learning. You should be able to understand things, discuss them, create your own opinions and develop them. I believe that learning influences people, it changes the way they look at things…It has to do with understanding, if you are learning you will be able to understand things, new themes and concepts and to create your own ideas and to develop them. (039/CAT2b)*

This description of learning recalls the theories associated with TfU, something the student had no direct exposure to. This student sees learning as active. Another student also had a deep understanding of what constituted learning:

> *Sometimes "learning" is something that happens when a person's attitude changes, when something in the person changes. Something that forces you to continue your life in a different way. (038/CAT2b)*

Two other students saw learning as being an active process:

> *It is easier to learn something when you do it rather than when you read about it from a book or listen to a teacher… (041/CAT2b)*

Physically doing, "physicalization" (Spolin, 1973: 15; Schewe. 1993: 8), allows one to learn more directly and more effectively. Being able to discuss the work is proof of learning for another student:

> *when you are able to talk about it, if you can give your opinion about it and discuss it with other people. (037/CATb)*

The opinions of some of these students (039/CAT2b; 038/CAT2b; 041/CAT2b; 037/CAT2b) are very close to David Perkins' theory of understanding: "understanding is the ability to think and act flexibly with what one knows." (Perkins, 1998: 40)

The Essays

The essays that were due in the tenth week contained a section on role-play that was mandatory. The section addressed the learning the students associated with role-play. The essay mark constituted 50% of the overall mark for the module. It could be argued that students were influenced by these marks when giving their answers. The essays were signed by the students. Perhaps it is not surprising that all of the students claimed to have learned something from the role-play experience. The reasons they gave for this were compelling, however, and I am inclined to believe their claims that they had indeed learned various things from doing role-play. Thinking about learning in the CAT may also have helped the students to gain a wider and deeper idea of what constituted learning.

I used *open coding* (Khandkar, online article) when first reading through the essays. I looked for any concepts or themes in the essay section on role-play that seemed interesting. Much of what the students were saying was very interesting and pertinent to my research question. I then analysed the emerging themes and found that there were some common threads running through them: role-play helped students to see a connection between the stories and the modern world; role-play helped students to visualise the story; students saw the parallel between the role of storyteller and their own role when engaged in role-play; students stressed the importance of technology in their lives and the ways in which role-play could help to balance this by encouraging them to read; students saw role-play as allowing them to see the stories from a different point of view; students reported that their attitude towards role-play had changed during the semester; students said role-play was fun.

One student reported having understood the modern-day relevance of the stories through doing role-play:

> *The role-plays were done in different and interesting ways by everyone. It was easier to remember the stories and the themes of the stories after doing the role-play…Our lecturer had told us at the beginning of the term that the stories were still relevant to the present day. But really I didn't see this connection until I started doing role-play. The class had to think of the stories in the context of the present day. Maybe we thought that there was no place for these stories in the modern world but when we had to think about the stories more deeply we saw the strong connection between the stories and the modern world. (093/Essay/part two)*

This is the same student who had said in the focus group that there wasn't much to be learned from the role-play on Aesop's fables (032/FG1/13). It is clear that she has changed her mind since then. The essay probably gives the students more time to think about the topic and to write a more measured answer than the focus group where they are speaking spontaneously and the questionnaires where they write down the first thing that occurs to them. The following student stressed the importance of the visual aspect of role-play:

> *…A role-play can be done based on any story to get a better understanding of it. It is easier to understand the story when you are looking at it rather than listening to it, in my opinion. I was studying Folklore last year but we didn't do any role-play, and I have to admit I didn't have a great understanding of the stories because of that. As Bó Almqvist said: 'Rud beo is ea an béaloideas'/ [folklore is a living thing] (Almqvist, 1997). He is right in my opinion. To understand folklore completely, you have to see and hear it instead of reading it. (095/Essay/part two)*

This is the point made by Schewe (2004) regarding the importance of the visual in the modern world. I think the student is correct. In today's world students need to see things acted out rather than being confined to the written word.
The students saw a parallel between role-play and the job of the storyteller:

> *In my opinion, the storyteller has a huge gift and it takes a lot to tell a story well and to have fun at the same time. The role-play gave us a chance to be storytellers and we got better at it every week. (096/Essay/part two)*

Another student also saw this connection between storytelling and role-play. She researched both on the internet and concluded that there is life in the story while it is being told by a storyteller and similarly the actor/student puts him/herself into the role-play while acting. Role-play is a form of storytelling (097/Essay/part two).

One student mentioned in her essay how important technology was in the students' lives nowadays and said that they don't talk as much to each other now. The student enjoyed reading and doing role-play as a change from using technology. Reading a book sounded as a big a novelty as doing a role-play. Both were different and provided a "break from real life" (099/Essay/part two):

> *…nowadays everyone has an 'iPhone' and an 'ipad' and that is the reason that we don't talk to each other much! We are preoccupied with technology. Therefore, I love reading a book and doing role-play in class, it is very different and as well as that, it is a kind of break from real life. (099/Essay/part two)*

These students are part of the gadget generation. One would hope that they will discover the joys of reading books through courses like GA2019. If they don't begin reading books, one wonders what the relationship of their future students will be with books. The majority of the class intend becoming teachers.

Students' attitudes to role-play had often changed over the course of the semester. One student claimed to have been very "cynical" about role-play at the start of the course because it seemed "childish":

> *and [I thought] there were no advantages to it in third level education. Having said that, after the first role-play I did, I noticed that it was handy practice and that it was a good method of learning and that it should be used more in university teaching. (102/Essay/part two)*

A student argued that she felt that role-play allowed her to see the stories in "another light" and that this is what was needed by students as literary critics (105/Essay/part two). This idea of seeing stories from another point of view was prevalent in the responses across the research methods.

One student learned that the storyteller's job is a difficult one and that storytelling is "active". Given that the role-play happened in groups, this was easier than being a lone storyteller. (106/Essay/part two) Another student said that role-play involves "idea exchange". She gained self-confidence from doing role-play. Role-play was fun. (107/Essay/part two) Yet another student emphasized taking a message from one story and putting it into another story. Again, she saw the similarity between the role of a storyteller and the role of people doing a role-play:

> *I learned also that the storyteller is doing the same thing when he is telling a story. He is also role-playing. The storyteller changes the story for the audience to make it suitable for them. I believe that role-play is not too different. For the role-play, I was like an actor, and I had to convey a message to myself but also to the audience. That was my job, I think, and when I was learning from the role-play, the audience was learning from the role-play I had chosen. Basically, everyone was helping everyone else, and everyone was learning from everyone else. This helps with the challenge and it was more enjoyable because we were all in the same boat. (108/Essay/part two)*

The comment here that the students were "in the same boat" once again confirms, for me, that the students felt that the lecture theatre was a "safe space". The ideas expounded in the students' ideas here were supported by the responses in the third questionnaire which was anonymous.

It could be argued that my students were trying to please me in these essays which were, after all, assessed. Paul Ramsden discusses this problem in his work on the "context of learning" (1997: 198). However, I would argue that the essay question I set required reflection and that the answers the students gave were authentic. There was no room for "reproductive approaches" (Ibid 204) as students were required to draw on their own experience of the stories and the role-plays. One student gave a different analysis of the learning associated with role-play in her essay to the analysis she had given in the focus group (093/Essay/part two). Ramsden terms this kind of event "different approaches in different contexts" (Ibid 202). Different "approaches to learning" (Ibid) and different approaches to assessed tasks make it difficult to judge how this student really felt about role-play. I have argued that her different answers were likely to be due to having had more time to reflect when writing the essay than during the focus group and the transformative impact of the CAT on learning that followed the focus group.

Some of the themes that emerged from the essays had already emerged in the focus group: role-play is fun; role-play allows one to see things from a different perspective; role-play encourages students to read.

Earlier in the course, when I had carried out the focus group, there was a lot of ambivalence as to what they were actually learning from the role-play. However, after I did a CAT with them looking at the question: What is learning? – attitudes began to change towards role-play. A few weeks later when they wrote their essays it was clear that their ideas had transformed. It seemed as if a door had opened in their minds and they were now allowed to call all sorts of things learning that they had not considered learning before. They had seen "information" and rote learning as key to "learning" in the earlier questionnaires and in the focus group but now they had a much more nuanced view of what could be seen as learning. As evidenced in the essays, they argued that learning is active, that it takes place when a student gets to grips with material and can perform with that material. Some of the students had developed a position on learning not dissimilar to that of David Perkins himself.

As we shall see, all of the students were positive in their evaluation of the module and this was anonymous.

Student Evaluation of the Module

I felt the need to justify the use of role-play in literature lectures both to myself and to my colleagues. At the end of the course, therefore, I gave the students an evaluation form to fill in regarding our use of role-play in GA2019. 11/12 students thought the

module was "very good" and 1/12 thought it was "fairly good". The students were very positive about the whole experience:

> *I look forward to the class every week because we have to do something in the class and I don't feel tired.* (074/Q3/11)
>
> *Without any doubt, the best module!!! Every lecture was very interesting. (076/Q3/12)*
>
> *We did all the work, we analysed each story but we still had fun!* (077/Q3/11)
>
> *It was very different and the stories were interesting.The fun was unbelievable always. I would like to do role-play in other lectures.* (079/Q3/11-12)

Role-play had been a success. The students stressed the active nature of the lectures. They said they were fun, but that we had still managed to cover the course. All of the student comments regarding the module were extremely positive. Students actually like learning this way. I was surprised by this finding. It took time for role-play to grow on the students. The nervousness they had reported earlier in the semester had completely dissipated. One questionnaire based on one role-play would have given the wrong impression. It seems, from my research, that it is necessary to research role-play over a period of time in order to observe these changes in student position.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that there is a learning process involved in role-play. It takes time for students to get used to it and to appreciate what they are getting out of it. The CAT before the group work, the group work itself, the role-play, the subsequent questionnaire and crucially the essay all help the student not only to reflect on the role-play but also to explore the "pre-text" itself. The research I did on GA2019 became part of the teaching methodology. I would include CATs and questionnaires in future classroom situations. It is abundantly clear to me that if I had only introduced one intervention, one role-play for example, and one questionnaire, I would have gotten a very incomplete picture from the data.

The positive response to the module in the final questionnaire surprised me. The anxiety that students had reported feeling in relation to earlier role-play in class had to a large extent vanished. The "anxiety filter" becomes lower in these circumstances (Krashen, 1982). Students praised role-play as a learning method. They have become very conscious of teaching and learning methods in the course of the semester. On a more sombre note, some students had left the module after the first or second lecture during the period when students can "shop around" from module to module. I do wonder if some of them left because of role-play. If students are too anxious even to try role-play, then no benefits are derived from it.

There are different levels of understanding involved in the process associated here with role-play: these levels can be seen in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy (Kennedy, 2007) and they help to accommodate the student voice within that model. The CATs before the group work correspond to the basic level of Knowledge and Comprehension; the group work itself and the role-play correspond to Application and Analysis and the questionnaires after the role-play and the essays correspond to Synthesis and Evaluation. It is encouraging to observe that Creativity/Synthesis has now been placed at the top of the pyramid in the revised taxonomy (Anderson et al, in IACBE, 2014-2016 and Owen Wilson, 2016). The work involved in role-play is profoundly creative and involves a process of understanding moving from one level to another of the taxonomy. The CATs, role-play, questionnaires and essays can also be seen as performances of understanding (TfU). We need to include the students' own opinion of what they have learned in both the TfU framework and Bloom's Taxonomy. The student voice is a key component of my own research. If the student believes that s/he is learning and values that learning, we can expect him/her to be more positive and to be more motivated.

When triangulating data gathered from different research tools, it is usual to expect similar outcomes that will prove a theory or hypothesis or justify a particular intervention. My research tools showed a progression from initial sceptical reactions to role-play to a gradual understanding and appreciation of it.

In response to listening to the students' voice I propose to use more role-play, more CATs and questionnaires, and more group work in future offerings of GA2019. I want to see students as partners from now on.

From the data I have gathered, I can say that my students reacted very positively to role-play and reported having learned many different things from it. I am convinced that role-play would work well in other literature lectures. Poetry, short stories, extracts from novels and plays could be used as "pre-texts" and role-plays could be devised and performed based on these. Doing role-play is most beneficial when accompanied by reflective exercises such as essay writing. Students reported having learned about the stories through role-play. The learning outcomes of the module, listed earlier in this article, were achieved: the students sorted out the themes of stories through having to apply the meanings of fables to modern day situations (I did not concentrate on the relevant role-plays for this point in this article); complex turning points in the stories were clarified by acting out the plots as evidenced by the role-play on *Sochraid Neil.* Role-play is one way in which reading can become an active skill. It is necessary to make reading active to ensure that it will live on as a fundamental part of student life.

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