

The Safety of Role

This is a term well understood by Drama teachers but not necessarily by all teachers engaged in role-playing activities. Role provides a safe place in which powerful emotions can be explored. Students take on roles that may or may not be like themselves. No discussion about whether or not the role is similar to the individual ever takes place in the classroom. In fact, comparisons between the individual and the role are not allowed in the public environment of the classroom. When a student plays a role, any actions and decisions belong to the character and not to the student.

The only exception to this rule is when it is obvious that the role is being used by the student to engage in unacceptable behavior such as hitting or punching or insulting someone. Then, it is not a defense to suggest that it was the character that was responsible. This is a behavioral problem because the ground rules have been broken, and should be handled as a behavioral problem rather than a “drama” problem.

However, when a student is struggling to handle a situation with integrity to the character and to the context in a safe manner, all actions are acceptable and are discussed and examined in the third person. For example, “Mila, when Susie [the character Mila was playing] walked out of the room and slammed the door, what was she feeling? Why did she do that? What could she have done if she had not left the scene?” The ensuing discussion will explore other feelings that people might have in that situation and may involve a generalized sharing of feelings. However, the teacher avoids **in-depth personal** discussion about what a particular individual in the room actually feels in that exact same situation. Deeply personal discussions about the individual’s emotions during a role-play are better handled one on one with the student or with a small group of students when there is a particular problem to resolve. If significant personal problems are revealed in a role play or through discussion, students must be referred to the appropriate trained professional.

I work hard never to forget the protection of role. The students may or may not choose to share personal stories. It is NOT essential that they do so. What they must share are honest beliefs, feelings and ideas. If personal stories are shared and the students wish to include them in the role playing, they are incorporated in such a way that several stories are blended and the student playing a particular character is never playing out his/her own history. Also, I try to be very careful to ensure that students are not inadvertently forced to become “victims” which reflect real, personal issues for them. For example, when working with a group of grade 8 students in a role play about teasing, everyone quickly decided that “Jason” could be teased in a scene “because he’s so short and everyone always teases him anyway about it and he doesn’t mind.” Jason was short and it was clear to me that he was sensitive about it and would mind. Because I had already explained to the students about not playing themselves in role, I suggested we give someone else that role. Once it was done, I asked Jason if he would have wanted to play that role. He was willing to say to the group at that point that it would have made him feel bad to play it. It was an important sensitizing lesson for the other students. The girl who took the role was not particularly short and certainly had never personally been teased about her height. The students then began to examine their own teasing during our role playing sessions which until then they had considered harmless and different from the “mean” teasing about which they were

doing their role playing. They were also able to move to a deeper understanding about how teasing victimizes people twice: first, because what is being said actually does hurt and second, because the person is afraid to look like a poor sport by objecting to it.

There are other “victim” traps to look for when role playing: you can avoid these by avoiding stereotypes. Always look at creating multi-dimensional characters, real human beings. Do not allow students to indulge in superficial thinking and one-dimensional characterizations.

Conflict is frequently the source of much role playing. While role playing, students often wish to work with situations involving unacceptable behavior in order to challenge it i.e. someone behaving in a homophobic manner. Role playing the actual hateful moment of conflict in great detail is rarely required. I almost always try to find a metaphoric or symbolic way to illustrate moments of pure violence or hate. The students can dramatize the “before” and the “after” realistically. It is the events leading to these moments and resulting from these moments which are most important in an educational setting. Focusing on and reenacting in detail the moment of hate may actually lead to a vicarious pleasure for group members who have not yet been sensitized or who are not interested in being sensitized.

It has always interested me how students can do things in role that they cannot or do not do when they are not in a role. When I was working with an autistic student who was experiencing difficulties with appropriate school behaviour, I saw that he loved to be in role. Working together with his Special Education teacher, we worked with him to develop the role of a student. When he was in the school, he was to be in this role unless he was in a different role in drama class or being himself at lunch and in the halls. Eventually, the teacher worked with this student on more specific roles such as friend and lunch mate. It was quite wonderful to watch him role-play so happily. My job was to engage him in the variety of roles that were part of our in class work. His special education teacher’s job was different and more personal, working with his parents as well as him. In fact, when he was being most seriously bullied, we were asked by the Social Worker and Psychologist who were working with him and his parents to develop a drama about this student to explain his autism to the students in the hopes they would be more accepting of him. A group of grade 11 volunteer students created a powerful piece, a mélange of role-play, collective creation, docudrama, movement and information sharing. I directed them and we did this outside of our class time. We presented to a couple of classes at a time over four periods in our drama studio with board psychologists and social workers available to answer questions afterwards. The student gave his permission to use this anti-bullying strategy but did not want to be present for the performances and the discussions that followed. He said he did not want to relive the sad and scary things that sometimes happened to him. No proper research was done about whether or not the bullying was reduced. I know it was not eliminated but I also know that there were caretaker students out there keeping an eye on this student and stepping in to intervene when they witnessed bullying. It was better but not fixed.

When I had a class with new Canadians from Sri Lanka, most of the females had difficulty making eye contact and did not speak up much in class. They also deferred to their more outgoing male classmates from Sri Lanka. In role, these young women spoke clearly and made eye contact with males as well as females. In discussion with some of the girls about this privately after class, they told me that they felt free to be different from themselves in role and

that they could experiment with different ways of being. The boundary for me was not to get involved with what they did with this observation about *in role* or *out of role* in terms of their personal lives. If they asked for help or clearly needed help, my job would be to get them that help. It was not to enter into this process as a therapist or guide but to recognize it as their personal process. My job was to work with them in role for the purposes of our classroom work.

Role is a safe way for students to learn. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that it is safely and creatively handled in the classroom.

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