

Learning from Role Play

Role-play is NOT acting out a play, even though the pupils do take on new identities. It is closer to group discussion than to theatre. It is used when we want to feel what it is like to be in a certain situation. It is played by a whole class to show a variety of perspectives on the situation, as different people take on different roles. Role-play can also show, if we want it to, how certain democratic procedures work out – in a law court or a public inquiry. Both of these could be very valuable for citizenship.

This is how a Role-play usually works out:

- The class gets introduced to the situation in much the same way as in a small group discussion. At best this might be done by a video or some slides. Alternatively, but this is not so good, by means of printed information sheets.
- The pupils get into small groups, 3 or 4, and each one is given a role card telling them what character they will be. It may also suggest some questions for which they need to prepare answers for the plenary session.
- The groups discuss together the answers they would give, while getting into role. They may need 15 minutes for this part of their work. At the end they decide which one of them will take on the role in the plenary session.
- Now the plenary session is set up. There may be a judge and jury, or some journalists and TV cameramen, or just the classroom with chairs and tables rearranged. There needs to be someone – it could be the teacher – who calls for each character in turn to come to the front to answer questions.
- In the plenary session it may be the teacher who asks the first questions. That helps everyone else to see what kind of person the character-in-role represents. Then other members of the class are allowed to ask their questions.
- At the end there is usually a vote that may decide who is guilty in the court of law, or who is right as far as the class thinks, or what the consensus is about a moral issue.

If you are new to role-play, it would be helpful to look at *Jabs for James Phipps*, a very successful role-play in an historical setting which I wrote with Mick Nott in 1991 (¹ From *Exploring the Nature of Science* Solomon, J. (1991). Glasgow. Blackie and Sons). It begins by suggesting a cartoon film-strip as one way of introducing the story of Dr Jenner's discovery of vaccination against small-pox. An alternative way to introduce the story is for pupils to learn about scientific process words by a cut-and-paste method, which shows them the sequence of observation, hypothesis, prediction, experiment and conclusion. It also tells them the story. There are seven role cards and you can see that each character takes a different attitude towards vaccination – all historically valid, I believe.

To construct a new, up-to-the minute role-play for citizenship studies, you begin by thinking of an issue that includes moral positions about which people hold a number of different views. Try not to line the characters up as 'for' or 'against' in a very simplistic way.

Role play - Hunting with Dogs

In the following new role-play I decided to use the ill fated bill *Hunting with Dogs*. At the time of writing (December 2001) the bill had twice been passed by the House of Commons and then twice rejected by the House of Lords. At the moment it seems rather unlikely that the government will find time to look at it again in the immediate future. So that gives my role-play a longer life span before it becomes history. In any case the subject is interesting and contains quite a lot of science, at least that is the way I tried to write it.

Making your own role-play is quite easy. You would begin by getting some good information from the Internet. I downloaded bits from the Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs, which was presented to the House of Lords in June 2000. It may already be more than 12 months out of date, but it was thick with good data, mostly qualitative, about all sorts of points connected with hunting.

Then I had to pick out eight fictitious characters, at least three of whom have a scientific aspect to their approach to the question of hunting. With eight characters I would be able to divide the class into small groups of three or four to discuss their way into the characters. That is 'getting into role' and is better done in small groups, who then cope with the kind of question they may be asked at the end in the plenary session. You will find the questions at the end of each role card or specification. The group has to decide which one of them will present the character in the plenary session. All get the chance to ask questions.

The plenary session might take place in a 'Public Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs', perhaps not in the House of Lords but in some village hall, and presided over by a 'Professor' from London. You could be the professor dressed in a long black gown calling the witnesses one by one? You decide.