Stories of Hope

Reimagining Education

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16. The XXXX game: A character-based tool for learning

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Abstract

This chapter explores a dynamic teaching method that uses performance-based role-play to deepen participants' understanding of complex concepts within their field of study. Central to this approach is the XXXX Game, an immersive activity in which participants embody assigned characters aligned with a particular topic. Inspired by Yuli Rahmawati and colleagues' (2021) ethical dilemma story pedagogy (EDSP), the method provides minimal character detail, encouraging learners to interpret and perform their roles through a constructivist lens. By engaging in this embodied and imaginative exercise, students are invited to confront assumptions, challenge misconceptions, and gain deeper insight into the experiences and perspectives of others. The chapter reflects on the transformative potential of this approach to foster empathy, critical thinking, and reflective practice, suggesting that such performative pedagogy can profoundly enrich the learning experience.

Keywords: constructivist pedagogy; ethical dilemma learning; student empowerment; critical pedagogy; theatre of the oppressed

Introduction

The simple premise of this chapter is that understanding others creates optimism and hope for a better future. In *Hope for the Flowers*, Trina Paulus (2000) refers to a more meaningful life based on an authentic understanding of those around us. She asks, "how can [you] step on someone [you've] just talked to?" (Paulus, 2000, p. 31). For Paulus, taking the time to know others generates an opportunity to bring positive change. The XXXX Game[1] provides a creative and participatory means to engage with others and rehearse for real-life situations. It was developed in response to the sudden shift to online teaching at the onset of the global pandemic in 2020 (Svihus, 2023). Initially intended as a short-term solution until in-person teaching could resume, the aim was to provide an engaging and participatory experience for students to replicate active learning. What transpired is an approach that can be used in multiple sites of teaching, either online or in person, for a range of topics.

   The chapter begins with a brief summary of what is involved in the XXXX Game, which is followed by a description of some of the theoretical influences that shaped its development, such as Freire (2018) and Rahmawati and colleagues (2021). The chapter then outlines key considerations for educators using this approach, such as the need to set clear guidelines for the game and the importance of provoking deep discussion on topics that could be contentious. Finally, it examines how participants have, or may, experience the game as liberating, challenging or empowering.

The XXXX game

The activity can be used in multiple settings, for example, in school, further, or higher education. It can be used to teach a variety of topics, from sociology to housing studies. The activity takes the format of a role-playing game in which students play various characters, informed by their own perceptions, and discuss a range of scenarios connected to

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1   See   https://figshare.com/articles/media/The_XXXX_Game_Constructivist_
     Pedagogy_for_Higher_Education_pptx_mp4/19326065/1 for a recording on how to
     adapt, set up, and implement the XXXX Game in your teaching context.

the topic under investigation, for example, homelessness, social inequity, or the age of consent. The game enables students to discuss a range of themes with less personal jeopardy; thus, it promotes active discussion skills and enables students to develop skills in building arguments.

Participants empathetically put themselves in someone else's shoes as they discuss related themes, reimagining themselves—and the topic— together. The game combines short lecture inputs on the chosen topic, with topic-related scenarios that participants discuss. Participants are invited to take part in the game as a character that relates to the topic. The invite begins with the question: "Do you accept this challenge?", which also helps to create a dramatic—and exciting—atmosphere. It is important that the characters are somewhat familiar to the participants, so they can supply some "back story". They can play the character in whatever way they choose, creating their own interpretation of the persona, imagining potential responses to the scenario prompt. More introverted participants may simply participate as a de facto version of themselves—others may embrace a more rounded alternative persona or character, but there is no pressure to be a perfect actor; rather, the aim is to imagine different responses. This can be a stimulating and liberating experience for both those who have a penchant for acting, as they can fully transform, changing their mannerisms, attitude or even their accent, as well for those who are ordinarily quiet in a group setting.

The game begins with a short lecture on the topic, before participants are presented with a topic-related scenario. Participants are then asked to consider the ideas/concepts/theories in relation to their chosen persona or character. The game works online, or in person, with participants randomly allocated to smaller groups to discuss the scenarios presented as their chosen characters. One key to the success of the game is that participants do not reveal their character until the end of the game, even when the teacher asks for feedback from the discussions. Further detail on the role of the teacher, as well as what participants might experience, is included at a later point in the chapter. What follows is a brief insight into the theoretical influences that helped to shape this game, which has the potential to create hope and optimism.

Shaping the game

Paulo Freire's theories (2000, 2018) and principles for practice (1996) are inherent in my thinking and my approach to education. To counter "banking education", in which participants are seen as empty vessels, Freire (2000) developed an approach to education that asks people to question that which is taken-for-granted. He proposed that learners are active in the process, re-constructing knowledge; authentic dialogue is necessary. He noted, "dialogue is the opportunity available to me to open up to the thinking of others, and thereby not wither away in isolation" (Freire, 2018, p. 119). The opportunity for participants to deepen their understanding of others was essential in the design of the XXXX Game.

Rahmawati and colleagues' (2021) ethical dilemma story pedagogy (EDSP) reflects another element of the game—that participants imagine themselves as different characters. EDSP "uses carefully constructed stories to engage students cognitively and emotionally in contemplating how to resolve commonplace ethical dilemmas" (Rahmawati et al., 2021, p. 452). Enabling participants to rehearse for real-life encounters and situations builds their confidence and creates optimism for more hopeful futures. Horkheimer (1972, p. 245) asserts that 'the world and subjectivity in all its forms have developed with the life processes of society'. The potential to gain an understanding of different viewpoints seeds hope. This also reflects Freire's (2018, p. 81) assertion that "our making and remaking of ourselves in the process of making history... [t]here is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope". Educators must create spaces in which learners can wrestle with complex ideas and, in doing so, they enable learners to build tolerance and an understanding of others. Educators play a crucial role in helping learners to navigate unfamiliar terrain.

Leading the game: The teacher's role

As in all educational experiences, the teacher plays a crucial role. In the XXXX Game, the teacher can enhance the learning experience by playing a highly active role in the proceedings. It is important that educators are aware that they can make, or break, the experience. Therefore, the teacher's enthusiasm for playing the game should be obvious to

participants. bell hooks (2009, p. 40) came to realise "the ways [her] presence [was] as much a teaching tool as the work because it embodies the practices of engaged pedagogy". One of Freire's (1996, p. 127) seven educational principles,[2] "the importance of pedagogical space", is highly relevant. The teacher should create the right atmosphere for the learning experience. In his vision of transformative education "care for the space is necessary to connect with the frame of mind needed for the exercise of curiosity" (Freire, 1996, p. 122). The XXXX Game provides the opportunity for participants to be inquisitive about other people's perspectives on situations related to their field of study. In the process, participants must get a sense that the teacher is fully committed to playing the game as this encourages them to perform with gusto. As an active critical pedagogue, the teacher provokes a meaningful discussion in response to feedback from the topic-related scenarios; active listening is a must. Feedback from discussions might reveal preconceptions, misconceptions, or bias. Acting in character, participants may say things that do not represent true feelings; it all depends on how they defined their character. From the safety of their character, they may even say things they would never, ordinarily, say aloud. All of this provides the basis for critical discussion, or dialogue (Freire, 2000), which leads to a deeper understanding of others.

Playing the game: The participants' experience[3]

Based on the assumption that beliefs are socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1996) and therefore change over time, the XXXX Game enables participants to re-evaluate, re-affirm, or change their perspectives on topics and situations that relate to their field of study. Participants are invited to take part in the spirit of openness. Having been asked, "Do you accept the challenge?", they have the freedom to decide upon the traits, disposition, and ideological position of their character. They should feel free to play their character in any way they

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2   For an exploration of Freire's seven pedagogical principles in relation to Youth Participation Practice, see Sheridan (2018).

3   It is important to note that this section is based on reflection and anecdotal evidence; empirical research on participants' experience of the XXXX Game has not yet been conducted.

choose. This would be difficult if the characters were unfamiliar, as was the case when the game was used in Finland.[4] When they start the game, they are unaware of who the other characters are, and unaware of the characters that their peers are playing. The game enables participants to consider scenarios that relate to their field of study from multiple viewpoints. With the guidance of the teacher, they rehearse for real-life situations, gaining critical insights that deepen their understanding of the world. The XXXX Game provides new knowledge through the short lecture inputs. However, the topic related scenarios provide the opportunity for emotional engagement. This reflects Augusto Boal's (1993) suggestion that role-play offers a way to enable participants to discuss lived realities and situations from the "safety" of a character. Feedback from those who have participated in the XXXX Game confirms that it is an engaging, creative, and fun way to learn about a topic, with one participant describing the experience as liberating. An illustrative example is the adaptation of the XXXX Game into the "Academia Game", tailored for use by colleagues within a university setting. With characters including students, a Dean of Learning and Teaching, and Lecturers, the participants discussed a fictional proposal by "their" university to introduce artificial intelligence (AI) as a key feature of teaching and assessment. The room was filled with lively debate, enabling people to understand different perspectives on a potentially divisive proposal. A liberating educational experience is certainly a strong foundation upon which to instil hope.

Conclusion

The XXXX Game started off as a short-term solution to re-create a participatory learning experience for online teaching, but it became apparent that it was so much more. It is a flexible tool for teaching that can be used for many topics, or fields of study. It can be used for in-person and online teaching and can easily be adapted for different audiences. The teacher plays a crucial role in creating a conducive and safe space for learning and creates opportunities for participants to critically engage in dialogue that relates to real-world situations. Participants gain the

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4   For the Finnish example, see Kylmäkoski & Sheridan (2023).

chance to learn about new topics but, more importantly, deepen their understanding of others. In a world in which injustice exists, education must create opportunities for people to build trusting and tolerant relationships. From these, hope for a better future will grow.

Steps toward hope

- Implement performance-based role-play to deepen understanding of complex concepts within various fields of study.

- Utilise immersive activities, such as The XXXX Game, where participants embody assigned characters to interpret and perform roles, and learn through empathy and co-construction.

- Engage students in embodied and imaginative exercises to confront assumptions, challenge misconceptions, and gain deeper insights into diverse experiences and perspectives.

- Recognise the transformative potential of performance-based role-play to profoundly enrich the learning experience.

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