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Role playing vs RPGs as teaching strategies in educational procedure

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to shed new light on an innovative teaching strategy and specifically presents the comparison between the use of Role Playing and the use of Role-Playing Games (RPGs) in the educational procedure emphasizing on the unique characteristics of the latter. I will present the theoretical framework of Role Playing and RPGs as well as their benefits and characteristics, concluding to their substantial difference.

Keywords. Role playing, RPGs, meaningful learning, innovation

Introduction

From a tender age, role playing is a considerably decisive milestone for one's development as it indicates the proper regulated growth of certain developmental stages. It seems to be an effective way for children to explore and understand their environment around them and simultaneously to develop their socioemotional skills among others. The fact that autistic children have an incapacity to pretend or show regulated development of a theory of mind shows that there is a correlation between specific activities (Baron-Cohen, 1987).

Besides the aforementioned natural tendency of a toddler to imitate the daily activities, Role playing can be found in various environments and in different fields. In education, as a teaching technique, in workplaces as a training method, in psychology as a psychotherapeutic means, in sexual life, in Gaming as a whole genre known as the Role- Playing Games (RPGs). However, our daily and regular role play occurs in real life by assuming our social roles. 'In everyday life, we "put on faces" and "play our parts" as required by the endless succession of social occasions, gatherings, and rituals until we reach the last act, our own funerals, where, for once, we only have to show up and can leave the acting to the others.' (Deterding S., Zagal P. J., 2018)

In the field of education even if there are plentiful strategies and tools that may be adapted to learners' needs in order to accomplish a meaningful and active type of teaching and learning, Role Playing and by expansion RPGs could be one of the most powerful.

There is a surrounding atmosphere of misconception that games are merely a joyful recess of the lesson. In the hands of a highly knowledgeable educator, games may offer not only meaningful and active learning but also a significant development in several skills necessary for tackling all daily challenges of life.

Subsequently, both meaningful and active learning is substantial for the well-being of a learner in terms that they become a part of an experiential, interactive, challenging and integrated procedure and eventually they turn out to be critical thinkers.

This present paper introduces in broad terms the Role playing in education in contrast to the use of the tabletop RPGs. It outlines the similarities and the substantial differences between the educational strategy of Role Playing and the usage of RPGs in teaching as it highlights the beneficial holistic experience of a campaign (that the latter offers) for the learner.

1. Role Playing as a teaching strategy

1.1 Introduction

The learning procedure can be sometimes unbearable, stressful and unedifying for students and the burden is mainly on teachers. The choice of the appropriate methodology and teaching strategy can undoubtedly define the effectiveness of the lesson and there are plentiful teaching methods that can offer a well-tempered prosecution of a productive lesson.

Nonetheless, the learning process is more than a desiccated and a well organised curriculum, taking into consideration that it involves human beings with different personalities and consequently different types of learning. The difficult role of the educator includes their ability to identify, to acknowledge, to opt for the suitable teaching strategy and tool for the desirable results depending on various factors. Role playing is a widespread strategy.

It is intuitive that role playing as a pretend play, plays a vital role in various aspects of learning, through mimetism of real-life situations, as children use any subconscious information and daily images they receive along with their imagination and subsequently, they gain experience via this procedure.

1.2. Origin

J. L. Moreno was the person who first founded sociometry, sociodrama and psychodrama. His life's goal was to change the society and thus, to bring all individuals together and eventually to function as unity. In order to succeed this, he created "a technique of freedom, a technique of balancing the spontaneous social forces to the greatest possible harmony and unity of all" (Moreno, 1936)

Role playing is a methodology derived from sociodrama and can be used by students in order to understand literature in depth, social studies, science and mathematics. (Bayiati, 2014) It is an educational tool that potentially can offer a holistic interdisciplinary educational experience, depending on the appropriate preparation of the educator. In broad terms, it is a tool that can offer knowledge in depth and real-life experiences as it can effectively provide not only cognitive but also a plethora of skills.

1.3. Defintitions

There have been various attempts for the definition of the Role Playing. For the needs of this paper are opposed the following.

Van Hasselt, Romano and Vecchi define role-play as "simulations of real-world interpersonal encounters, communications, or events" (2008, p. 251).

Another clarified definition is given "Role play is a dramatic technique that encourages participants to improvise behaviours illustrating expected actions of persons involved in defined situations. A scenario is outlined, and character roles are assigned. The scenario can be scripted and rehearsed but it is usually unscripted, relying on the spontaneous interplay among characters to provide material about reactions and behaviours for students to analyse following the presentation." (Bradshaw J.M., Hultquist L. B., p.211)

As I aforementioned, Role Playing is widely used in different fields as a learning and teaching strategy in education, as a method in psychology or in a workplace as means of training or evaluation, with miraculous results around the world. Role Play has found its right place to the group of innovative teaching strategies and it has an application in all educational grades (nursery, primary, secondary, tertiary).

1.4 Stages of a Role Playing

It is undoubtedly a necessity for every educator to prepare their lesson plan before every lesson for the finest prosecution of lesson. Naturally, it is required the proper preparation and a pre-set groundwork before the implementation of the Role Playing. There are some specific stages that must be followed in order to be a successful activity.

The basic stages of a Role Paying activity are the following:

1. *A social matter is chosen*
2. *A scenario that describes the issue is created.*
3. *The rules of the game are being explaining*
4. *The vulnerable social group are mentioned*
5. *Each team assume the suggested roles*
6. *Each team make a case and though the procedure of idea- gathering sessions they try to find a consensual solution.*
7. *Finally, there is the feedback phase in order to discuss the educational procedure.*
8. *(Bayiati, I., 2014)*

Logically it is inferred that the educator plays the most significant role due to the fact that it's their obligation to prepare the aforementioned first 3 stages thoroughly and taking into account possible anticipated problems.

1.5 Characteristics -Benefits

In their presentation concerning strategies for staff development L.Jarvis, K. Odell and M. Troiano (2002) prominently outline the benefits of using Role Play as a teaching strategy.

- It is intriguing
- Provides the involvement of all students,
- Offers the opportunity of understanding different perspectives and fosters empathy as the learners represent and experience a character,
- it also has the flexibility of miscellaneous settings,
- Introduces, stimuli the interest of students and unaffectedly motivates them
- Encourages
- Helps so that the learners can embed various concepts
- Helps students to reach outside their world and embrace feelings, emotions and plights of others.

Undoubtedly, it is a method that leads to a meaningful learning as it is a type and a profound example of an active and participatory learning. The active learning is the means of achieving deep learning. The latter's objectives are the retention of the given information and knowledge and the recall of facts. (Kilgour P., Reynaud D., Northcote M., Shields M.,2015) Thus, by remembering and conceptualizing experiences the learners acquire in depth not only the subject that it is taught but also various of other skills and attitudes.

It is a common ground that the vast majority of educators want to cultivate the critical thinking of their students. Nevertheless, several educational systems are orientated to a different

type of education which is easily controlled and its fundamental principal is the retention. The is an imperative need for a change. Role Playing is a holistic teaching method that inculcates the process of critical thinking, instigates emotions and moral values, ad inform about factual data. (Bhattacharjee S., Ghosh S., 2013)

One of the main characteristics of Role Playing is that it is a teaching strategy that fits within the social family of models (Joyce and Weil,2000). Consequently, it highlights the social aspect of learning, taking into account the social and intellectual development. “The various uses of role playing have evolved from substantial theory and research on social relations and social interaction, the universal experience of all people, beginning with the young child's awakening to the social world around him and continuing throughout his life.” (Chesler and Robert Fox,1996) It is of paramount importance that Role playing as a teaching strategy offers the opportunity to the learners to assume different social roles and in this way, they can develop, improve and evolve their multiple intelligences in different circumstances and situations related to any topic.

Another benefit that can be spotted in Role Playing is that it supports student's independent learning (Erturk E., 2015) in that its educational setting is learner centred specifically when it is designed accordingly.

In his paper ‘Role Play as a Teaching Strategy’, Erturk (2015) distincts the strategy into two sessions: Session 1 involves learning by doing and session 2 is about peer feedback allowing to the observing students to comment on the sample role play. The peer feedback is a truly worth mentioning point taking into consideration that it is rare in other strategies.

As far as the efficacy of the Role Playing as a teaching method, we need to consider that it is an active and experiential activity so that the students learn by doing. “Integrating experiential learning activities in the classroom increases interest in the subject matter and understanding of course content.” (Poorman P. B., 2002)

Thus, using the Role Playing as a teaching strategy could be more than beneficial in multiple ways and different levels. It's a holistic teaching method that inculcates the process of critical thinking, instigates emotions and moral values, and informs about factual data. (Bhattacharjee S., Ghosh S, 2013)

2. Role Playing Games (RPGs) as a teaching tool

2.1 Introduction

The implementation of an RPG in the educational procedure can be challenging with multiple of issues to be tackled but also a unique, integrated and holistic experience for both educator and learner.

Due to the lack of a proper and adjusted to the learners' needs educational system, the need of a new and innovative tool of teaching is more than imperative. A tool that respects all types of learning including the students with difficulties in learning -exploiting multisensory teaching techniques-, all personalities and adjusted to any specific circumstances required depending on the different educational grades. A tool with an unimaginable flexibility.

2.2 What is a Role- Playing Game in the field of Gaming? (Definition, Types)

Role Playing Games are worldwide known highly or low fantasy games based on a certain set of rules and guidelines as the engaged players assume the roles of characters that have already been placed spatiotemporally in a fictional setting. In a different perspective “Role playing is the art of experience, and making a roleplaying game means creating experiences” (Pettersson 2006, 101)

The players are responsible for assuming these roles within a narrative acting, through a process of structured decision-making and character development. The actions may succeed or fail depending on the system of rules, the dice and the oral description of the actions. There are three main different forms of RPGs: Tabletop RPGs/pen and paper, LARP (Live Action Role Playing) and electronic media RPGs (MMORPGS, text-based MUDs and offline video games).

Eventually, “Role-Playing-Game is getting together with some friends to write a story. It's joining around a campfire or dining room to spin some tall tales. It is being creative and having fun with friends.” (Jerry Stratton, 2009)

2.3 Origin

The precursor of RPGs is alleged to be the improvised theatre. In 16th century, in Europe travelling groups of actors were performing a type of improvisational theatre known as the Commedia dell'arte. In the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th several board games included some elements of role -playing.

Viola Spolin, an innovator of the American theatre created a series of acting exercises and she established the “Theatre Games” carrying forward the concept of using theatrical games in the classroom. In the 1920's some assassin-style games were played in New York by adults and in the 1960's some groups made a step towards making creative history games.

The first official role-playing game is called *Dungeon and Dragons (D&D)*. It was created and published in 1974 by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. In 1971, though, Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren had created the game *Chainmail*. Both based on the wargaming of the 18th century (the alleged modernized chess) and on J.R.R. Tolkien's published fantasy book “*The Hobbit*”, *D&D* is one of the most popular fantasy games around the world. Many communities in US and UK experimented with activities and practices that we now recognize as *Role -Playing*. (Peterson J. ,2018)

It is set in a fantasy world where there is a variety of classes and races that you can choose to embody, such as elves, dwarfs, dragons, trolls among others. It has its own cosmology and it describes in detail all the aspects of the world. Hundreds of books have been published in order to help the conduct of the game and enhance its experience. Through the passing of time several other fantasy games appeared. Today, numerous scenarios and different types of RPGs exist. They are mainly fantasy- based but there are many others based on aspects of real life with slight differences such as *Cthulhu* and *Dresden*.

2.4 Implementaton in the educational procedure

EduLARP

There are few formal definitions concerning the term *LARP*. However, J. Tuomas Harviainen (2011, p. 176) defines the *activity* of larping with the following three apropos criteria:

- Role-playing in which a character, not just a social role, is played.
- The activity takes place in a fictional reality shared with others. Breaking that fictional reality is seen as a breach in the play itself.
- The physical presence of at least some of the players as their characters.

The main difference between *LARP* and the other types of *RPG* is that there is a presence of the players as the characters they embodied. Thus, they are dressed and they behave as their character. Essentially, it is like a real improvised and participatory theatrical play.

Furthermore, “*LARP* is an active and engaging method that creates intrinsic motivation. A different reality helps to distract the players from their everyday problems and stimulates

their interest in the topic. All the senses are activated, physical and emotional engagement support deep learning.” (Olsson S., Madison O., Pullerits L., Leppik K, , Ojasoo E., Säre M., Eessalu M. ,2020)

Taking into account the aforementioned, we can infer how vital LARP could be in the educational process. “LARP for educational purposes, or an EduLARP, is an opportunity to integrate traditional and playful ways of teaching and learning. LARPs are often associated with historical sword fighting games, but there are numerous other possibilities: laboratory-based role-playing games for science classes, environmental and socio-economic conflict games for biology and geography, etc.” (Olsson S., Madison O., Pullerits L., Leppik K, , Ojasoo E., Säre M., Eessalu M. , 2020)

Tabletop Role Playing in Education

Recently in Brazil, a project was presented concerning the use of tabletop RPG for educational purposes and its challenges in a class of 20-30 students or more. They came up with a promising method for the needs of a class called Didactic Ludonarrative. It is ‘a method in which the participant to experience a narrative game in which he or she will experience a story and create a character, a plot, a setting or -- 3 -- even a whole new story. This creative experience mobilizes competencies and existing knowledge from the participant through narrative gaming, desire and fantasy, and allows this person to build new competencies and knowledge.’ (Bettocchi E., Klimick C., Rezende R., 2016)

Despite the anticipated problems, it seems that it meets the expectations of achieving the learning goals.

Additionally, another research, concerning using RPGs as a methodological approach in higher education for teaching cellular biology, took place in 2013, yet again in Brazil, drew the conclusion that the new methodology is accepted.

The research included 230 students who attended the RPG classes and the 78,4% responded that it was an effective tool for learning as more than 55% thought that RPG classes were better than lectures but cannot replace them.

2.5 The benefits of an ongoing adventure in the Classroom

While experiencing an ongoing adventure/scenario for an extended period of time, the learners will have the opportunity to bond with their characters and their co-players and hence to develop their traits and their personality in every level.

Outstandingly, the RPGs, as educational technique, have the *unique* characteristic of an ongoing campaign. They have a continuance and they give the opportunity of fulfilling their contextual learning goals in the form of a continual adventure.

Essentially, the classroom is transformed into a parallel world in which learners/players play their character’s lives facing simulations of real-life situations in a fantasy context depending on the choices. It is a means to escape from the reality they live, the difficulties that they face and they enjoy a different but constructive lesson.

An RPG may provide to the learners with a multitude of skills and abilities in both cognitive and experiential level. Learners can cultivate their skills.

Moreover, they can also evolve in finding spatiotemporal connections; they can learn how to compare facts and to formulate inductive and productive syllogisms. Furthermore, by playing tRPGs they:

- learn how to interact and grow their interpersonal relationships and initiatives
- learn how to conduct a productive and constructive discussion

- determine their co operational abilities and learn how to manage disagreements and juxtapositions
- increase their capacity to do a research and settle problematic situations
- learn how to configure evaluation criteria, grow their critical thinking and be decision-makers

Also, in their innovative interdisciplinary research paper Kilgour P., Reynaud D., Northcote M.& Shields M. (2015) highlighted that an upright quality of learning relies on a combination of components such as commitment, encouragement, respect, independence, cooperation and improvisation. These components provide mainly motivation and inquiry active, experiential learning as well as interaction leading to a meaningful learning which is the final aim. RPGs include all the above components and effortlessly lead to the abovementioned aim.

Summarizing, learners through RPGs acquire the skills and abilities that they can acquire in real life, in a short period of time and in a controlled simulated environment as they obtain knowledge though meaningful and deep learning.

Conclusion

This present paper broadly presented on the one hand how Role Playing as an educational tool functions and its beneficial existence in the classroom and on the other hand how RPGs may be a powerful and unique educational technique for experiential learning through an ongoing campaign offering knowledge in multiple and deeper levels.

Role playing is undeniably a successful technique throughout the years of its implementation in classroom. It has explicit advantages to the learner and encourages the experience in real life situations in small sessions or acts.

However, RPGs' implementations have shown an intriguing and auspicious tool for achieving improvement in both educational and personal level especially while learners exploit the in-game experience. The substantial difference compared to the Role Playing is the commitment of the ongoing campaign as the student-player builds and evolves the in-game character in the long term. Also, from the handful of studies and researches that have been conducted, the objectives which have been addressed, were met.

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that RPGs in the classroom is a promising field and it seems to be a strong combination between enjoying a productive lesson and experiencing a unique method of holistic and interdisciplinary way of learning. Few researchers have addressed to this field of gamification of education and future researches could fruitfully explore it.

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