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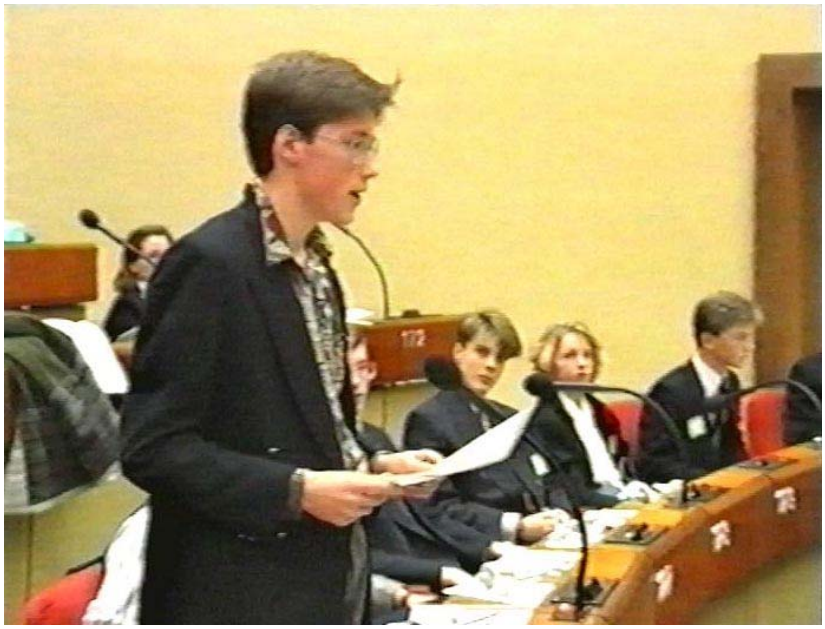
Role-playing Simulations

A brief description of role playing as an educational technique



Some Preliminary Remarks

All too often, school students who are politically and ethically "aware" rush into opinions.

The majority have liberal, idealistic and generous views – this is refreshing in our world of "Realpolitik". But they often fall short in their knowledge of the "facts of the case". And all too often, they are dismissive of the opinions of others.

This is a perfectly understandable consequence of "being a school pupil" and yet it shows a certain naiveté which needs addressing.

Role-Playing Simulations are increasingly used for educational purposes – the idea is for students to see issues from a wide variety of perspectives by forwarding opinions which are not necessarily their own.

Role-playing can successfully be used both on a large and small scale and specifically in the field of politics. However there is no reason why it cannot be extended to deal with purely moral topics, particularly those raised by recent advances in science.

With increasing capacity of humans to control their own environment and thus their destiny, the biologist cannot escape the moral issues that science opens up. Nature is increasingly influenced by the new techniques which biology and related sciences have made possible. The more mankind can understand the greater the extent to which it can control its own future and evolution. "*Brave New World*" by Huxley was little more than a hypothetical amusement on publication - now governments are legislating on measures which may lead to its realisation. To take but one example, stem cell research is now being put "to the people".

It is imperative that students know why a serious disparity of views exists on such matters and role-playing is a good way creating an understanding.

In these simulations, participants are more or less randomly assigned to relevant "interest groups" and have to argue on their behalf, irrespective of their own views.

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The procedure is a simple one:-

- The teacher picks the issue (ethical issue of, for example cloning, stem-cell research, xenotransplantations, see also later in the text).
- The teacher lists (with the help of the students) the different interest groups/schools of thought involved (for example Catholic church, political parties, animal rights group). (Appendix – Interest groups)
- The teacher allocates the roles (see later comment in main body of the text).
- The teacher decides which "forum" is to be simulated (United Nations/National Parliament/European Council/Municipal Council) and then allocates participants to the different committees. (Appendix – Committees).

Each participant is assigned to one of the different committees with their own specific debating topics to discuss. The committee chair(person) then reports the findings of the group discussion to the concluding Plenary Session where a "final" vote is taken.

If you pick an issue from natural sciences; like cloning, stem-cell research, xenotransplantation, abortion etc you can chose different groups like:

1. Vatican Ethics Committee
2. (Atheistic) humanist Group
3. Human/Animal Rights Group
4. Pro-eugenics Group
5. Left Wing Political Party
6. Right wing Political Party
7. Lawyers
8. Research Scientists

The sessions need preparation – some of the materials should be supplied beforehand to all participants for example: -

1. A dossier is compiled with the "facts" about the issue, including a summary of alternative views. Alternatively the participants are asked to find material themselves from the library or/and the web.
2. Guidelines are provided to committee chair people.
3. Assignation of participants to interest groups and committees (Appendices). Either the teacher designates these or allows the students to choose. The former is better because the students may choose groups with views close to their own and that defeats the purpose of the exercise!

What do participants get out of this? Most importantly it helps them understand the views of others. Instead of dismissing opponents' arguments out of hand, school pupils realise that others have very different paradigms or "world views". If they want their own views to prevail through the use of argument, then they must be acquainted with their opponents' fundamental beliefs for it is these which result in the opinions they contest. As Harper Lee writes in *"To Kill a Mocking Bird"*

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

A science teacher and philosophy teacher can make a very good team as the philosopher can be helping the scientist to see the "wood" as well as the "trees" – the two disciplines can play complementary roles in simulations, one emphasising the moral side and the other the technical.

The lion's share of the teacher's (and students') work is done before the exercise. The crucial role of the organising teacher is to direct the students in vital preparatory research. During the simulation itself, the teachers should simply observe (and enjoy!) the fruits of their labours.

The Practicalities

Introduction

1. Explain the concept of "role playing" to the class—they will find it strange at first that they are not able to express their own views but only the views of others. However they adapt very easily to this, much more easily than adults!

2. Draw up a list of "interest groups" (for example, for Cloning this might include; the Vatican, Eugenics group, Left wing party, Human rights specialists, Animal rights militants, Legal experts etc).

3. Divide the class up into groups. The number of groups should obviously be the same as the number of interest groups you would like represented. In our cloning example, there are six interest groups, so in a class of 30, there would be 5 pupils in each group.

4. Tell these groups which interest group they have to support—do not allow them to choose! (see above). My advice is not to manipulate the allocation so that you have mixtures of active and passive students—if anything, create groups of purely passive students (they will become "active" surprisingly quickly!). Allocate the passive groups to the extremists, the active groups to the moderates.

5. Prepare and present the proposals (*i.e.* burning questions which characterise the issue, *e.g.* Is it right to clone animals? Is it right to clone humans? Is it wrong to interfere with the "natural" order of things?). In a short simulation, there would probably be only one proposal to be discussed by each committee. Each committee is composed of one member of each interest group so that all views are represented. In our example, there would therefore be five committees of six members.

6. Get the students to research all issues involved—they won't do well unless they are well informed! The Internet is the obvious resource but if there is time the "real" interest groups can be contacted and consulted.

The Role-play

Prepare an afternoon programme in the following way:

1. General plenary introduction (but in role playing mode—parliament, United Nations, Court of Human Rights etc). Formal introduction run by student (see below). (Picture 1).

2. Hold committee meetings in separate rooms. Their goal is to reach a consensus on their proposal. Each interest group should provide a "chairperson" for one of the committees and each should provide a "rapporteur" (= writer of minutes, the record of the debate) but of course they should not sit on the same committee. (Picture 2).

Picture 1. General plenary introducion

3. Time in the programme should also be provided for interest groups to meet together to harmonise their policies.

4. 2nd plenary session. Each chairman reports on his/her committee results. (Picture 3)

5. Each proposal is briefly discussed in a third and final plenary session (so that members of other committees can contribute if they wish) and a final vote is taken on each of them. The Proposal becomes law if it gets 2/3 vote? (you can decide these details!) (Picture 3)

Picture 2. Committee meeting

- N.B. Programme a couple of "coffee breaks" and even lunch - you'll probably find they will continue to discuss the issues during these!
- You should have as LITTLE to do with the session as possible (sit back and enjoy it!). Get a good student to run the plenaries?
- It is of course possible to devise a shorter role-play so it fits into a couple of lessons, but a whole afternoon makes the play more realistic. The role playing exercises I run at the European Schools run for two days!

Picture 3. "2nd plenary session

Examples of possible issues for discussions

It is very important that the students have gathered lots of information beforehand. Here of course the teacher could help with literature and web-addresses

Human cloning

Why clone? Why ban cloning? (Consider also ethical aspects)

Some people might want to clone to produce a child with certain characteristics, e.g. a copy of themselves.

Some might want to clone to help supply a sister or brother with an organ.

Scientists might want to clone in order to learn as much as possible about how genes and environment affect the development of an organism from embryo to adulthood.

A committee might want to decide which ethical considerations need to be addressed now that cloning is technically possible?

Should it be allowed to use aborted human embryos for cloning?

Should it be allowed to use embryonic stem cells from fertilised human eggs that anyway are going to be thrown away?

Cloning controversies raise fundamental questions about how technology affects our lives and what it means to be human. Are

there reasons to believe that cloning will lead to a “Brave New World” scenario? Would a human clone be treated differently than other people? Should the government control cloning research?

Animal cloning

Why clone? Why ban cloning?

When you have a suitable animal for some reason you want to clone that animal. It can be a cow which provides a good milk yield or a horse that runs fast or a pig that has organs suitable for xenotransplants to humans. Is this ethical?

What ethical considerations need to be addressed in the cloning of animals?

PowerPoint illustrations: Committees

Powerpoint illustrations: Interest groups