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Design, conduct and critically evaluate a close-to-practice research project (lesson study) focusing on the model of the transformative teacher in developing practice that has a positive impact on the learner.

Does role-play increase levels of student engagement in a KS3 classroom?

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Introduction

This assignment will outline the findings from a recent 'Lesson Study' that was undertaken by my research partner and I. A 'Lesson Study' entails the research of a group of students with the aim of targeting an identified area for development in their students' learning (Teacher Development Trust, 2015). The concept of a Lesson Study originated in Japan, where teachers believe that time spent studying and scrutinising lessons subsequently improves the quality of teaching and learning (Rock and Wilson, 2005. p. 78).

Research Context

In our Lesson Study, my research partner and I aimed to investigate the effect of role-play on student engagement in a Year 7 classroom; our research question was thus '*Does role-play increase levels of student engagement in a KS3 classroom?*'. We decided to implement role-play into our Lesson Study as role-play is a more student-controlled learning activity compared to teacher-controlled. Based on findings from research suggesting that pupils are more engaged in a 'student-controlled lesson' (Shernoff et al., 2003), we hypothesized that the majority of pupils in a KS3 classroom would be more engaged in a class where they were able to escape from the usual lesson environment.

The research was carried out using two separate focus groups, in two different subjects and in two different schools within the same area. The first focus group were in a History lesson in *School X*, and the second focus group were in a Drama lesson in *School Y*. Within each focus group, three 'case pupils' were chosen to be observed and interviewed.

Due to BERA (2018) guidelines, the names and locations of *School X* and *School Y* cannot be disclosed in this assignment, but both schools are situated within the South Wales area. *School X* is considerably smaller than *School Y*, with an intake of around 1,200 pupils compared to *School Y*'s 1,700 (My Local School(a&b), 2020). However, *School X* has an intake of pupils from more deprived areas and, as a result, experiences a greater level of behavioural difficulties amongst pupils which effects student engagement holistically. This can be indicated by the FSM percentage (for the impact of the FSM percentage on pupil engagement and behaviour: Department for Education, 2012, p. ii), in *School X*, over 25% of all pupils receive FSM, whilst the percentage is significantly lower in *School Y* at approximately 7% (ESTYN 2015 & 2018).

Literature Review

This Lesson Study is useful as it explores a gap in literature on the effectiveness of acting in the classroom. Whilst many researchers have evaluated the importance of role-play on other crucial aspects of pupil development and learning, there have been few modern studies that have been carried out that reflect the value of role-play on student engagement within lessons.

Duveen and Solomon (1994), for example, experimented the use of role-play in the teaching of the Great Evolution Trial. Whilst they found that it was beneficial for learning knowledge, they added that they 'watched this role-play in operation, ... but [they] cannot be said to have evaluated it in any rigorous sense', as they believed that 'true learning' cannot occur when pupils are being meticulously observed (pp. 581-582); no observations were made on how engaged the pupils were before or after the task. Baruch (2006, p. 45) briefly mentions that 'acting in class is one of the most effective ways to engage students', but argues that role-play does not always have the aim of engaging pupils. Cherif and Somervill (1995, p. 28) claimed that role-play provides opportunities for pupils to improve social skills, subject knowledge and an 'understanding of self and others', but only vaguely allude to engagement: 'teaching methods that use student experiences can help generate enthusiasm for active involvement in the learning process'. In addition, McDaniel (2000) and Kitzerow (1990) have also explained other benefits of role-play in the classroom; for example, McDaniel (p. 360) emphasises that it gets pupils to interact with each other rather than talk or listen to the classroom teacher allowing them to formulate their own arguments, and Kitzerow (p. 225) adds that students become more 'ready' to discuss difficult topics having been immersed in them already.

On the other hand, Stevens (2015, pp. 489-490) concluded from her observations that role-play did increase engagement as it required 'all students to participate and learn from each other', whilst also acting as a tool of motivation and inclusion. She found that role-play was appealing to the majority of students and allowed them to empathise with given characters and challenged them to articulate ideas of which they may have personally opposed. Her students were inspired to do more independent learning around the given topic, and she ultimately found that role-play was a good complement to traditional teaching.

Despite being aimed at university students, Stevens' research concluded in a similar manner to ours. My research partner and I found that our pupils became immersed in their characters, we observed how all pupils were included regardless of their abilities, that it complemented their prior knowledge and ultimately engaged the vast majority of pupils.

Stevens (pp. 488-489) utilised a closed question-based questionnaire within her research to measure engagement and motivation. Whilst thus being able to come to clear conclusions of the benefits of role-play in education, it could be argued that the validity of her research was

limited. The information that Stevens gathered for *Table 2* and *Table 3* is descriptive and quantitative, but does not explain *why* pupils either agreed or disagreed with the statement in *Table 2* or *why* pupils were encouraged to learn more about the topic in *Table 3*. As stated by Drever (2004, pp. 5-11), the use of such research may have caused Stevens' evidence to become superficial. The usefulness of Stevens' questionnaire may have been reduced as the data did not give the researcher the means to formulate an adequate conclusion.

Conducting interviews with pupils involved in the study may have improved the validity of Stevens' research. Questionnaires are 'inflexible' once they have been printed, but interviews allow probing for clarification and reasoning, an awareness of body language and manner, and the ability to receive responses that had not been planned when conducting the questions prior to the study (Drever, 2006, p. 3). Whilst interviews are more time-consuming, they also provide a relaxed context for both researcher and pupils, and act as powerful evidence for presenting data and making conclusions (Koshy, 2005, p. 93).

Stevens may also have opted to use strategies during the lesson to aid her research, such as questioning, which may have given an indication as to how engaged her students were with the task. The use of teacher questioning was a vital tool within our study in the monitoring of progress within the lesson and pupil engagement.

Cotton (1988, p. 1) has assessed the importance of questioning, concluding that it has a crucial purpose in the:

- development of interest and motivation for pupils,
- evaluation of pupil knowledge and preparation for the lesson,
- development of critical thinking skills,
- nurturing of classroom relationships,
- assessment of achievement and engagement.

Importantly, it is added that questioning 'stimulates students to pursue knowledge on their own', and therefore interesting them in a topic. Arslan (2006, p. 94) reinforces that pupils 'convey their enthusiasm' through their answers to teacher questioning and the questions themselves generate interest. Engagement through questioning is easily measured – during discussion, it can be observed who talks to whom, when, and in what ways (Naz et al., 2013, p. 152).

There are other, modern, valuable methods in increasing student engagement. For example, giving pupils access to a variety of new technology to use within the lesson 'enhances their interest', engaging the learners enabling them to increase their learning outcomes and academic achievement (Gregory, 2016). This is because the present generation of pupils are

more captivated by hand-held devices involving e-participation than traditional teaching methods (Patil & Dharwadkar, 2020).

Lesson Study Design (Methodology)

Before deciding on our methods, my research partner and I undertook some research for appropriate methodology (Drever, 2006; Munn and Drever, 2004; Simpson and Tuson, 2003). From our research, we decided against questionnaires as they did not offer much detail in responses, but to use semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation.

There were six main components of our research, these were: the choosing of the focus group and 'case pupils', the application of the same structure of lesson for both groups, the use of observation sheets, the implication of an adapted 'Leuven Scale' in our observation, the use of semi-structured interviews, and the compounding of data .

For this study we have utilised the responses of two separate focus groups; focus group 1 consisted of 28 pupils within a History classroom in *School X*; focus group 2 consisted of 28 pupils within a Drama classroom in *School Y*. The focus groups were both of mixed ability. The use of mixed ability classrooms allowed for a choosing of three 'case pupils' from either class that were of different capabilities. Case pupils had been chosen prior to the lessons based on the prior-observed levels of engagement in that subject; a child of previously consistent high engagement, a child of medium-high engagement, and a child of medium-low engagement were chosen in each group respectively to be observed over the course of each Lesson Study (see *fig.1/2/3*). The case-pupils were unaware that they were case-pupils until after the lesson had finished, in an attempt not to alter their behaviour. All pupils in the class had given their assent, and each pupil's parents had given prior consent for their child to be studied – this meant that all pupils may have believed that they could have been case pupils. The case pupils were to be interviewed following the end of the lesson, with the aim of getting their feedback both on the lesson and on general use of role-play in learning.

To be able to measure the effects of role-play on pupil engagement it was firstly needed to be embedded into the lessons after a non-role-play task, with a tool of measuring engagement consistent throughout each lesson. Therefore, both observed lessons were structured in the same way. There was to be a 'normal' introduction, where the pupils were to be welcomed in their usual respective manners, and then a starter task was then implemented, where both focus groups would complete a piece of work that involved no role-play. Following this starter, there was to be a questioning task, during which all pupils (non-case pupils and case pupils alike) were to be invited to share their knowledge and understanding of the topic at that point

in the lesson. After this first questioning period, each class would partake in a role-play activity, which would improve on the knowledge that they had learned earlier in the lesson. There was then to be another questioning task in the same format as the first, and then a usual plenary. As researchers, we found it important to make sure that each lesson was structured in the same way to provide a fair sample, and to limit the difference in behaviour with an introduction, starter and plenary that were as 'normal' as possible to each group.

During each lesson, the case pupils were observed using an adapted 'Leuven Scale' shown in *fig.10* (adaptation based on: Lavers, unknown date) and prior-created observation sheets. My research partner and I opted to utilise written observation as opposed to 'just looking', as we wanted to use a more systematic approach (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, pp. 4-5). This adapted version of the Leuven Scale was utilised for this research as it is the most explicit and thus appropriate tool for the observation of pupil engagement. The case pupils were given a rating of 1-5 during different phases of the lesson (see *fig.4* and *fig.5*); the higher their rating, the more engaged the pupil was in that phase of the lesson.

My research partner and I opted for silent, non-participant observation; this is described by Simpson and Tuson (2003, p. 56) as a 'fly on the wall' type observation. This also limited the amount of influence that the observer would have on the pupils' engagement during the lesson, again allowing each lesson to remain as normal as possible. It was agreed that the observer could move around the classroom during role-play tasks to observe the pupils from a better angle, as long as there was no communication between the observer and the pupils, and that the observer did not invade social groups within the classroom—we were mindful of the Hawthorne Effect, where pupils' behaviour may have changed as a result of being in communication with, or in close proximity of, the observer (Cherry, 2018).

With regard to data collection, as well as the use of observation sheets, case-pupil semi-structured interviews (Drever, 2006, p. 13) were audio-recorded on encrypted software and also transcribed in note form during the interviews to complement them. Data from observation sheets has since been used to create line graphs and tables (see *fig.11*, *fig.13* and *fig.14*). This has allowed my research partner and I to clearly see trends in engagement over the course of both lessons. It was planned to compare how engagement differs in both subjects, and if engagement increases holistically.

Ethical Considerations

Jane Zeni (2001, pp. 9-10) has outlined five 'statements' that teacher-researchers should follow when undertaking research in schools in order to maintain the 'highest ethical standards':

1. The 'Teacher-Researcher Role', where the researchers are always teachers first. Respect for the well-being of both students and professional colleagues is strictly upheld;
2. 'Research plans' – researchers share, review and adapt ideas based on opinions of colleagues and supervisors;
3. 'Data Collection' – researchers collect information and use data from the 'normal processes of teaching and learning', and have permission to research in the school itself;
4. 'Research Results' – researchers are honest in their results and are open to share with colleagues, participants and parents. Researchers are also aware of the effects of their research on children;
5. 'Publication' – teacher-researchers have both the assent of pupils studied that may be under the age of eighteen and the consent of their parents. Confidentiality of both the participants and the school is to be upheld. Teachers may then publish their findings.

Our research has been undertaken strictly in line with these statements. My research partner and I acted in the 'normal', professional manner when teaching and observing; plans for the study were shared with our respective mentors and university module coordinators; lessons were planned to be as 'normal' as possible (*see methodology section*); parents and teachers have been invited to learn the findings of our research that has been concluded in an honest manner; finally, my research partner and I had created forms to be filled in by **all** pupils and their parents to declare their assent and consent before the lesson studies were undertaken. Confidentiality has also been upheld throughout our findings.

Furthermore, as alluded to by Nind et al. (2016, p. 80), it was important to my research partner and I that there was no stress put on us as teachers during the course of the research process. It is a reasonable assumption that any teacher would become nervous or stressed whilst being observed, and that this would be even more likely if that teacher was still in training. Thus, we emphasised to each other that our Lesson Study was aimed at the improvement of pedagogical practise and not as a critique of our teaching abilities.

Lesson Study 1

Lesson Study 1 took place in *School X*. It was a history lesson based on a medieval town for 28 Year 7 pupils. Pupils entered the lesson in their usual manner, this included writing the title, date and lesson objective, and were then introduced to the observer. The case pupils remained unaware that had been chosen. The objective of the lesson was for the pupils to 'identify the key features of a medieval town', and each pupil had access to a descriptive painting of the same town for the entirety of the lesson (*fig.15*).

The two non-role-play tasks that pupils undertook in the first phase of the lesson involved pupils identifying different people and events that were taking place within the town. Firstly, the pupils drew around their hands in their workbooks and wrote five aspects from the picture into their drawings. This task was straightforward and acted as a simple introduction to the town, where pupils only had to look at the image. The second of the non-role-play tasks encouraged pupils to think in more depth about the image and the town; pupils had to place themselves in an area of the town and state what they could see, hear, feel, taste and smell. Through this task, pupils were able to grasp a better understanding of the town, but it also acted a bridge between the written and role-play tasks.

Following these written tasks, pupils were questioned on their knowledge and understanding. Debating was encouraged and pupils' answers were elaborated on by through the use of probing. This entailed questions such as: 'why do you think the town smelt this way?', 'who was the most important person in the town? Why?'. This allowed both the observer and I to grasp both how engaged the children were in the lesson and how effective the teaching had been in the first phase.

For the role-play task, the classroom was split into two halves to represent two separate medieval towns, with 14 pupils in each half. Pupils were given a character each; all characters represented a person that played an important role within the town (see *fig.16*). The pupils all took the role of their given character and had to converse with other characters. The aim of the task was for each pupil to meet with as many other characters as possible and understand how each character contributed to the overall town. The task was highly successful, many pupils were able to elaborate further on the given information about their own characters, and put on impressions of their voices and body language.

Following this, there was a further questioning task. The pupils were asked about the other characters as well as their own. Finally, pupils were questioned on whether they would personally like to live in the town. If they would have wanted to live in the town, they were to stand at the left-hand side of the room, if they would not have wanted to, they were to stand

on the right; those who were unsure stood in the middle. Pupils were then again randomly questioned based on their position in the room.

On reflection, the lesson was successful in reaching the lesson objective of identifying the key features of a medieval town. It could be argued that the lesson objective was too basic for the what the pupils went on to achieve in the lesson. The pupils were able to engage with different characters within the town, use their senses to imagine what the town may have been like, and see a range of different aspects of it using a picture. The plenary also allowed the pupils to come to a final judgement.

Personally, I believe that I would deliver the same lesson again with some alterations. For example, I could have used different techniques when questioning to ensure that a wider variety of pupils were engaged in questioning activities. For the purposes of this assignment, this was not necessary as the observer and I were looking for pupils to *want* to answer questions, but in future practise I will aim to distribute questions more randomly across the classroom. This may remove the boundary of certain pupils being 'overlooked' whilst sitting along the perimeter of the classroom, removing 'blind spots', or the instinctive questioning of the most knowledgeable pupils (Arslan, 2006, p. 91).

Lesson Study 2

Lesson Study 2 took place in *School Y*. It was a drama lesson taught by my research partner for 28 Year 7 pupils. Similarly to Lesson Study 1, the pupils entered the lesson in their usual respective manner, sitting in their regular horse-shoe shaped layout around the perimeter of the classroom. The focus of the lesson was for the pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding of an aspect of Welsh culture using three concepts: motif, freeze-frames and soundscapes.

For the first phases of the lesson, the pupils discussed what they believed 'mythology' was and if they already knew any mythological tales. Following this discussion task, pupils were shown a series of images on the board relating to a Welsh mythological tale, and the pupils aimed to identify what the tale was, or what the myth entailed at the least. These tasks acted as an introduction to the topic and pupils were generally enthusiastic in sharing their prior knowledge on mythology. The pupils were then questioned for a short while on their understanding and of the general concept of myths and legends.

This lesson was structured in a slightly different way than the history lesson in *School X*; instead of the lesson being half written or discussion task and half role-play task, there were aspects of writing and discussion throughout the lesson. These tasks were intertwined with

the role-play tasks to assess pupils' understanding and engagement after each phase; drama lessons are already heavily role-play based; thus, half an hour of writing or discussion would have been out of the ordinary for the pupils in the class.

The role-play tasks involved pupils creating motifs, freeze-frames and soundscapes based on a section of the story that had been provided to them. The horseshoe layout of pupils around the room were split into small groups, each group being given a small folder with a unique section of the story within. Pupils created sounds, experimented with body actions, gestures and tones of voice, and also created 'gif' images to portray their given scene. Similarly to the role-play tasks in *School X*, the acting was a highly successful aspect of the lesson, and most pupils were visibly enthusiastic during it. The pupil's enthusiasm and the breaking down of the myth into several parts allowed pupils of all abilities to achieve the lesson objective.

The pupils were questioned again post-role-play task. The questions revolved around their knowledge and understanding of the story after having performed in groups and seen other groups perform. The pupils were also questioned on their knowledge of new concepts, like soundscapes, that they had learned about and used in the lesson.

Discussion of Research Findings

Our research findings suggested that role-play in the classroom *does* increase levels of pupil engagement in KS3.

As can be seen in *fig.13*, all three case-pupils observed were at their most engaged within the lesson whilst taking part in the role-play task in the history lesson in *School X*. *Pupil A1*, of whom is usually highly enthusiastic throughout all lessons in the subject, was given a further boost by the introduction of the character-based activity. *B1* had been given a low score of 1 and 2 in tasks prior to the role-play task as they had been visibly disengaged and passive in their body language, but was also given a boost by the acting activity. *C1* also reacted in a similar manner. This can be reflected in *fig.8*, where all three pupils in this class were enthusiastic in their response to the questions: '*do you enjoy role-play activities? Why?*'. The pupils all requested that role-play activities are to be done more often.

Furthermore, all three pupils *felt* that their knowledge was more greatly improved by the role-play task than either of the previous 'normal', writing tasks. This is also reflected by the observations made for *fig.11* and *fig.13*, pupils *A1* and *C1* gave more informed, enthusiastic responses to teacher questioning after the role-play task than they did in the questioning task before it, whilst *B1*'s observed score was the same. Finally, as can be seen in *fig.9*, all pupils

responded in the interview claiming that the role-play task was their favourite aspect of the lesson.

There was a slight difference in the drama lesson in *School Y*, but it was again found that role-play increased levels of pupil engagement. One pupil's engagement increased (from 2-4) and one pupil's stayed at a consistently high level (4-4). In contrast, one pupil's levels of engagement lowered (from 5-2). A2, the pupil of whom saw a drop in their engagement during the role-play task, was observed to have been more engaged during tasks where they could contribute more to classroom discussion (see notes on *fig.4*). However, this is not as reflected in the results from the interviews. As can be inferred from *fig.6* and *fig.7* and the audio recordings of the interview, all pupils were enthusiastic on reflection of the role-play task done in the lesson and on role-play tasks in general.

Perhaps, *Pupil A2* enjoyed the role-play task and may have *felt* that they were engaged, but their engagement and enthusiasm caused them to misbehave and receive a lower score. This may be a limitation of our study – it could be that the Leuven Scale adaptation (see *fig.10*) that we used for our research did not take into account that misbehaviour or disruption does not always mean disengagement.

The main strength of our overall Lesson Study were that pupils were not taken out of their normal style of lesson. In both schools, pupils entered and exited the classroom in the same way as they would usually, were taught by the same teachers, and no tasks were out of the ordinary. This limited the amount of impact that the study would have had on student behaviour. Also, using the case pupil 'fly on the wall' (Simpson and Tuson, 2003) observation combined with interviews allowed us to get an in-depth view of how role-play affected the pupils' levels of enthusiasm towards the lesson. The case pupils that we observed in both lessons were of a range of abilities in mixed ability classrooms. The study took into account all ethical considerations, and both lessons were planned to challenge pupils of all abilities by using a wide variety of tasks. The combination of the strengths of our study has arguably made our research findings reliable and valid.

However, there were a few limitations of our study. The use of only three case pupils has arguably hindered our conclusion, as it has not given us a wide enough sample of students. The same could also be argued both about the amount of observers and the amount of lessons in the study. The biggest weakness of our study was that the case pupils were not chosen at random, despite our attempts to choose pupils of a range of abilities, pupils may have been selected at random using a random name generator. Furthermore, there may have been an impact on pupils during both the lesson and interview as a result of the Hawthorne effect, I personally noticed the change in some pupil's attitudes whilst walking around the classroom

in *School Y* during the role-play task. This may have been a factor due to the pupils' prior knowledge of the experiment (Cherry, 2018), as both classes had been given forms to complete before the day of each lesson.

A further weakness of our study was that the lesson in *School Y* was a drama lesson. In that lesson, the use of a role-play task would have been expected by pupils and thus may have had less of an impact on their engagement. However, the results of the observations in *School Y* did complement the results from *School X*. Perhaps, the Lesson Study could have encapsulated a wider variety of subjects to enable us to formulate a better understanding of role-play's impact on pupil engagement over a variety of subjects in the curriculum.

Conclusion

Our Lesson Study has concluded that the use of role-play is well received by pupils and does improve their levels of engagement if implemented during a lesson. Supplementary to our in-lesson observations, pupils claimed that their interest in each topic was positively impacted by the role-play tasks, and that they felt their knowledge was also improved. The more explicit results from *School X* may suggest that role-play has a greater impact on student engagement when it is not in a lesson where role-play is an expectation of pupils. Role-play in lessons outside of drama may have a larger impact on pupil engagement than role-play within the drama classroom.

Recommendations

In a future lesson study, I would aim to test further the hypothesis that role-play has a greater positive impact on pupil engagement in subjects that are not drama. However, I would alter some of the methods that have been used within this lesson study:

- More observers could be involved with the study, similarly to a Japanese-style lesson study, to give a more in-depth review of the lesson (Hanford, 2015);
- More case-pupils should be involved within the study to give a better insight into the engagement of all class members;
- More subjects and lessons should be added to the study to allow a deeper understanding of the effects of role-play across the curriculum.

With regard to future teaching practise, the drama-based lesson in *School Y* incorporated a variety of different role-play tasks that may not be incorporated into a history classroom. Having witnessed the positive effects on pupil engagement of styles such as the creation of

soundscapes and freezeframes in *School Y*, and the positive reactions of the pupils in *School X*, I will endeavour to incorporate different role-play strategies into future lessons in my history classroom. I believe that widening the variety of teaching styles will aid my professional development and increase the attitude to learning of pupils within my classes.

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