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ReTPro in teacher education: Lessons learned from rehearsing teaching

Isabelle Grude Christiansen¹ and Thea Karoline Sømme¹

¹ Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

Teacher-in-role

Those of us who chose English as an elective were privileged to be the first preservice teachers to participate as co-researchers in the ReTPro project. Within the English course, the focus was placed on the drama convention teacher-in-role, and subsequent dialogic whole-class discussions instigated by a meaningful use of talk moves. Through both teacher-in-role and whole-class discussions, we were given the opportunity to learn by doing, experiencing first-hand what the two approaches entailed.

In the present article, we examine primarily teacher-in-role by delving into the four phases of the ReTPro rehearsing cycle, that is, (1) studying and modelling, (2) repetitive try-outs and simulations, (3) enactments in the classroom, and (4) analysis and reflections on the enactments.

Phase one: Studying and modelling

In the first phase, we were introduced to what we would later carry out ourselves, namely exploring different ways to use the teacher-in-role approach as part of a process drama. We learned through experience, and together with our English and drama teachers. We participated, for instance, in a teacher-in-role sequence in which the campus teacher in role as Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat (see article 3 in this anthology). This marked our first encounter with the method. The teacher modelled various teacher-in-role scenarios, and we took part in the demonstrations. This allowed us to quickly build confidence in stepping into characters in front of each other, even though none of us had considered pursuing a career in acting. It felt natural and educational because, at this phase, we were not yet performing our own teacher-in-role activities, but practising alongside the teacher and each other. Everyone was equally engaged, and no one stood out more than the rest, which made this phase an excellent introduction and preparation for what was to come later.

Stepping into characters before creating our own activities proved to be a significant advantage. It helped us build confidence and gain valuable skills

for the next stages of the process. Looking back, we do not recall facing any major challenges at this stage of the cycle. Instead, it gave us the self-assurance and motivation we needed to move forward into phase two.

This hands-on approach allowed us to see how teacher-in-role could be an effective tool for capturing students' attention and, more importantly, engaging them in discussions across various subjects. We gained a deeper understanding of the diverse methods within the teacher-in-role framework. This included learning how to transition into a role effectively, and how students perceive the distinction between us as their regular teachers and as teachers taking on a role. In the drama course, we were introduced to techniques such as letter writing, acting, and the 'hot seat' activity, while the English course focused on reenacting well known dramas as examples of how to implement teacher-in-role in practice.

Phase two: Repetitive try-outs, roleplays and simulations

One of the core texts for the English course that semester was Roald Dahl's novel *Matilda*, which served as a focal point during this phase. We were tasked with creating our own process drama activity inspired by the novel. As a group, we decided to base our activity on a scene in which Mrs Trunchbull enters the classroom. We also incorporated additional elements to make it our own.

At the university, we had several opportunities to rehearse and try out various roles and scenes that we had developed. This phase felt like formative assessment, in which we received guidance not only from our English and drama teachers, but also from each other during the rehearsing sessions. After adjusting based on feedback, we would perform the scene again. This process continued until we were confident in our performance, and the teacher felt we were prepared to effectively engage in a dialogic conversation afterwards.

One of the exercises involved enacting a scene where we could switch between different roles. The preservice teachers who were not directly involved in our drama played the roles of students we would later teach during our

practicum. This allowed us to practise dialogic strategies, focusing on building upon students' responses, rather than falling into the traditional IRE (initiation–response–evaluation) conversation structure. All our rehearsing sessions were recorded. While one might assume that being filmed would be distracting, it became an integrated and natural part of the rehearsal process. Watching the recordings gave us invaluable insight into our own performance, how we presented ourselves, how we spoke, where our gaze was directed, and even our facial expressions. The recordings became an essential part of the feedback process, providing clear, tangible evidence of what we achieved, what needed to be improved, and why.

Not only did this approach help us refine the specific task at hand, but it also gave us a greater understanding of how to improve our overall teaching presence. For example, we were able to identify if we were speaking too softly, where we were directing our attention, and how our body language might be perceived.

In many ways, we were fortunate to begin our studies at the onset of the RetPro project. It provided us with the unique opportunity to practise teaching in a classroom-like setting before stepping into a real classroom. This experience allowed us to become familiar with our teaching plans so that we could execute them without doubting whether we had forgotten something. Achieving this level of confidence is something we imagine often takes years of teaching experience. As a result, our first practicum experience was not as daunting as we might have expected.

Phase three: Enactment in classrooms

Stepping into a classroom for the first time can be both scary and exciting. In this phase, we were to carry out our teacher-in-role activity in our practicum class. We also video-recorded in this phase of the project. However, here the camera lenses were focused on us, the PSTs, and not the students, because we were primarily interested in how we enacted teacher-in-role. Informed consent had been procured by the practicum teacher from all participants.

It felt safe to be in the classroom since we had already rehearsed so much on campus. After all, we had planned, and had professionals who helped us organise and improve our teacher-in-role activities throughout the process. In the following paragraph, we will describe in detail what happened in the classroom:

In our practicum group, one of us used teacher-in-role, playing Miss Flower, a sweet and kind teacher who deeply cared about her students, and another of us played the role of the strict and mean principal, Miss Bummer. The teacher-in-role started with Miss Flower, who explained to the students that the principal was coming for a visit. She told the students to remove everything from their desks, for example, the flowers, the books, and to cover up the paintings. However, that day the class had welcomed a new student. The new student was late and had a messy desk. The principal did not like fun and chaotic classrooms. When she saw some of the things they forgot to hide, for example, a teddy bear, she became angry and threw the teddy bear across the room. She then started to argue with the new student and Miss Flower. The principal made deprecatory remarks about this student loudly in front of the class.

This teacher-in-role activity was our introduction to a subsequent whole-class discussion, in which we asked the students what the principal did wrong, and how she could have done things better. The discussion was supposed to make the students think about what was right and wrong to do in a classroom. They had to use critical thinking.

Both the teacher-in-role activity and the subsequent whole-class discussion were videorecorded. In doing so, we could analyse, reflect on, and discuss our performance afterwards on campus in phase 4 of the project, which we will examine in the following.

Phase four: Analysis and reflections on enactments

In the last phase, that is, phase four, we experienced that the main focus was on reflection not only on the enactment in the classroom, but also on the various stages we had been through. We had to prepare and organise a reflective Zoom session in which we, the PSTs, the practicum teachers, and the campus teachers participated. These stimulated recall conversations gave us the opportunity to express our thoughts about the enactment.

We, the PSTs, were particularly interested in questions of whether the enactment in the practicum schools matched with the rehearsals on campus. The campus and practicum teachers were, however, more interested in discussing ‘golden moments used’ to praise the PSTs, or ‘golden moments lost’ to show us the potential of teacher-in-role, which, for us, could be perceived as feed forward. Our perception of this was that the feedback here was not the same as feedback you usually get after other completed tasks in teacher education. Here you looked rather at whether you seized ‘golden moments’, that is, whether you made good use of an opportunity to develop the students’ understanding, or conversely, whether we missed or muddled such an opportunity.

An interesting and important aspect here is that, during this phase, we analysed whether we were able to anticipate some of the students’ responses. However, we did not only focus on their answers but also reflected on whether we carried out the lessons in line with what we had rehearsed at university.

In this final phase, we experienced how all the phases of the rehearsal cycle came together. It became easier for us to see the process as a whole. There was no time to see the video-recordings together on Zoom, but we saw the video-recordings individually to analyse whether and how we seized golden moments, both lost and used.

Reflections four years later

Today, almost four years later, we see what benefits we have gained from such a holistic experience of having to carry out teacher-in-role and later reflect on the use of this method. For example, we asked ourselves whether we stimulated student responses using talk moves meaningfully in whole-class discussions after teacher-in-role.

We now realise that this experience has had a lasting impact on our teaching practice. It has made us more aware of the importance of student participation, and how one might be able to integrate critical thinking skills into the classroom.

Furthermore, the hands-on engagement that comes with teacher-in-role and dialogic discussions has shaped and strengthened our ability to facilitate meaningful classroom interactions. It should be mentioned that learning to analyse and reflect on our own teaching has become an invaluable skill, which continues to shape how we plan and execute lessons today.

Now, as we are approaching the end of our teacher education and are about to begin working as teachers, we feel confident in our ability to identify and seize golden moments. This will undoubtedly continue to be a central part of how we create deeper learning experiences for our future students. In sum, we have learned to improve our self-awareness as teachers.

Part 3

Empirical Aspects of Rehearsing in the Project Rehearsing Teaching Professionally

