Role-Playing for Different Viewpoints (Review)

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Being able to stimulate students in the classroom is a problem most college professors experience during their teaching careers, especially today; the bulk of the students in college have barely developed their thinking skills while in high school. In their article, Duncombe and Heikkinen present the "two-hat debate" as a means which not only keeps students awake during a lecture, but also increases the level of knowledge they acquire about the subject matter.

This technique consists of the use of appropriate hats which the instructor puts on and off whenever differing points of view are presented. Each hat identifies the opinion of a group or a person in a debate over a given issue, as presented by the instructor who keeps switching hats to express the ideas presented, or to offer a rebuttal. Duncombe has used this technique in courses such as Introduction to Political Science, State Government, History of Political Theory, and Comparative Government.

According to the authors, this technique allows students to join the debate at any point, to agree or disagree, without inhibitions, since they are not expressing their ideas to the instructor but to the character portrayed by the hat that he/she wears at the time. This puts the discussion between faculty and students on "a more equal footing" and the instructor can destroy the point of view of a student "without putting the student down" since he is not the instructor, but a character portrayed by a hat.

Referring to the work of David Ausubel, *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View*, the authors feel that the technique provides a framework for the entire lecture and as such, serves as an 'advanced organizer.' The imagery provided by this technique helps convey abstract ideas as concretely as possible, but the authors warn that it should not be overused because it would "lose its effectiveness."

It is obvious to me that the "two-hat" technique may be successful in keeping the students awake and in stimulating class discussion, but anyone concerned with the cognitive development of the college student will find that such a technique tends to perpetuate the inability of today's students to deal with abstractions and increases their fascination with images. The French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard, in his essays on "Precession Simulacra" and "Simulations" explains that because of our excessive use of images we have social relations between people which take the form of relations between images. In his now famous successive phases of the image, he thinks that contemporary society has already left the phase at which the image marks the absence of a basic reality and has reached the phase where the image has no relation to any reality whatsoever. Thus it becomes its 'own pure simulacrum.' The "two-hat" technique seems to exacerbate this problem by feeding right into the already exaggerated fascination of today's students with images which do not reflect any basic reality.

Moreover, Duncombe and Heikkinen's technique raises the question as to whether or not the end justifies the means. In this context, the answer is no, since the end of a college education is to liberalize the individual. Education in the United States has been under very strong attacks because the system has consistently been producing a weak product, especially in terms of basic critical and analytical skills. Although the students exposed to the "two-hat" technique demonstrate a higher level of knowledge of the subject matter in their exams, the essential question remains whether or not the student's thought
processes have reached a higher level of development. If this development has not taken place, the liberalizing process is handicapped in that it is tied to the imagery presented by the "two-hat" technique; therefore, without the image to identify it, the thought is lost.

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