

**Spotlight on Role-play:  
Interrogating the theory and practice  
of role-play in adult education from  
a theatre arts perspective**

*by*

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**PhD thesis**

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# Abstract

This thesis addresses the use of role-play in adult education. It is a piece of scholarly research that aims to further develop ideas of theory and practice in this area. It is also hoped that this research will provide a framework for practice that will encourage both adult educators and learners to feel more confident using role-play as a learning approach.

The research arose from problems that the author experienced in her practice as an adult educator using role-play in adult vocational education training programs in higher education. The key problem identified was how to involve participants in a role-play but at the same time encourage their critical awareness so that they could learn from the experience. Questions of involvement and its converse, detachment, also relate to the *emotional* content of learning, and how this can be safely and productively managed in a role-play situation.

Role-play in adult education is an under-theorised area, and the available literature offers inadequate answers to the problems identified above. There is, however, a great deal of research and information about role-play in theatre arts and related areas such as drama-in-education and dramatherapy, but this is rarely referred to in adult education. This may be because role-play is often presented as an aspect of simulation and gaming, which are strategies that tend to adopt a scientific rather than an arts approach to learning. Also, since much of the theatre arts literature that is relevant to role-play comes

from drama-in-education, it refers to child or adolescent learning rather than adult education.

This thesis argues that the positioning of role-play in the theoretical field of simulation and gaming is limiting. It proposes that it would be more productive if role-play could be seen as a theatre arts strategy. It demonstrates the significant benefits role-play could gain from an analysis of the available literature in this area, and how this could beneficially alter the way role-play is conceptualised and practised.

Once role-play is positioned as a theatre arts strategy it is possible to explore how its 'significant form' engages participants, yet also enables them to remain critically detached from the role-play so they can learn from it. The thesis also presents the proposition that aesthetic learning may have something significant to offer adult education.

Theatre arts can provide a comprehensive framework for conceptualising and using role-play in adult education. If role-play were to be utilised within this framework, then adding an arts perspective to adult education could potentially transform learning in this area.