Dramatizing gender: exploring gender constructs through drama-based strategies

Tish Bateman and Marié-Heleen Coetzee*

Drama Department, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa

* CONTACT Marié-Heleen Coetzee

Email: marie-heleen.coetzee@up.ac.za
Drama Department, University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20, Hatfield Campus, Pretoria, Gauteng 0028, South Africa

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which drama-based strategies were used to stimulate critical inquiry into constructs of power, gender and sexual orientation amongst a group of Grade 10 learners. Drama, with its emphasis on the human condition; and drama-based strategies (in specific role-play) with their empathetic, metaxical and metacognitive possibilities, are appropriate means to do so. By referring to learners' reflections on learning sessions, the article demonstrates how drama-based strategies, used as instructional tools, revealed the ways in which they understood gender constructs and how the sessions fostered critical (if not ontological) inquiry.

Introduction

This article reflects on the use of drama-based strategies for learning (hereafter DBS) to explore perceptions of gender and stimulate critical inquiry into constructs of gender and power amongst a group of grade 10 learners enrolled at a private secondary school in the Western Cape, South Africa. By placing specific emphasis on the metaxical and empathetic possibilities of drama-based strategies, we interrogate how these possibilities, in the context of performativity, fostered metacognition and critical inquiry (if not ontological inquiry) in to constructs of gender and power. The project took place as part of the Grade 10 Life Orientation (LO) curriculum.

LO dedicates a chapter in the Grade 10 textbook to gender roles, power and stereotyping (Atwell et al. 2011, 12-17). The textbook aims to speak to conceptions of gender that are prevalent in South African society (albeit not in a nuanced manner), across race and class. The chapter places emphasis on (what it terms) traditional gender roles in a patriarchal context and how these roles (and associated power-relations) may shift. In examples dealing with traditional and nuclear family set-ups, men are positioned as powerful and economically active. Women are positioned as objects of sexual attraction or reveling in domesticity and servitude. For example, the daughter is responsible for the cleanliness of her brothers' rooms: "it will help her one day when she is a wife" (Atwell et al. 2011, 12). As an example of how roles may shift, the textbook indicates that women can work and men stay at home.

Whilst the ideas that gender roles are not fixed and that shifts in traditional gender-relations as described in the textbook seem obvious, we wondered what learners' perceptions of gender were. Further, we view gender as an ontological inquiry, not just a set of differences to be negotiated. The question thus arose as to how we could approach the learning content to surface perceptions and to encourage critical inquiry into existing ontological assumptions of gender.

We now offer a broad overview of our understanding of gender and power to frame how we interpreted the learning content, mobilized DBS towards critical inquiry and read the ways in which

learners understood gender and power during their engagement with DBS. We use Judith Butler's (1988) notion of gender as performative and Michel Foucault's (1980) ideas on power to create a conceptual framework for our reflections on understandings of gender, as presented through learners' engagement and responses. Butler's (1989) views on gender as a process of becoming – an individual and a social process that plays out on the body as socio-cultural signifier – is well known. Social and cultural ideals, imaginings and restrictions are inscribed on the body and articulated via the body – a constitutive act. Gender is constructed through a set of pre-determined and stylized acts, representations, discursive practices and codes of behavior that are associated with masculine or feminine behavior. Not only can these acts/representations/practices *do* something in/to the world, they can create the world(s). She interprets 'doing' (or the enactment of) gender as dramatizing the body, a "ritualized, public performance" (Butler 1988, 526) similar to a theatre performance. But, whereas actors (and audiences) knowingly and temporarily suspend their disbelief to immerse themselves in the fiction of the performance, the continued performance of gender assumes the status of 'truth' and a core 'self' and becomes performative. She concludes that gender is thus "in no sense ontologically necessitated", but "socially compelled" and patrolled (Butler 1988, 528). The hegemonic strategy behind the performance of these acts is to maintain what we see as a sex/gender fusion and confirms gender as a binary construct in a heterosexual matrix (Butler 1988, 526). This supports not only 'traditional' power relations between and roles of the sexes, but also 'normative' sexual relations. Using DBS strategies in this study provided an opportunity to explore the concept of performativity in action.

Resonating with Butler, Foucault views identity as socially constructed, relational and produced via discourse and the operations of power. Power is embedded in knowledge, discourse and associated regimes of truth (Foucault 1980, 131), inextricably linking power/knowledge (and by extension, identity). The mechanisms and strategies of power can produce different kinds of knowledge(s) that are hierarchized assigned 'truth' value whilst others are subjugated (Foucault 1980, 81; 131). The dominant knowledge(s) define and organize individuals in relation to their social world. Power is a constitutive and polymorphous force (Foucault 1980, 96; 106) that is operative on macro and micro levels. For example, the models of power established in families interact with models of power in institutions and throughout the social corpus. Power relations are strategies that come into existence

through their relational application (Foucault 1980, 97). Individuals are vehicles of power; are constituted through power – "one of its prime effects" (Foucault 1980, 98) – and become part of the mechanisms of power. Individuals operate in a strategic field where power-relations materialize and interplay and where they simultaneously exert and experience power. Within this interplay of power-relations "certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be constituted as individuals" (Foucault 1980, 98). Whilst power as strategic interplay implies that individuals are implicated in the play of power–relations, it also implies that modes of power as strategies for resistance are possible. Butler (1988, 11) echoes this possibility through performative gender that excavates the potential to subvert dominant discourses that impose ideas of gender identity on men and women alike. She speaks about "the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (Butler 1988, 11). If the style of "bodily gestures, movements and enactments" can be destabilized, possibilities for change might arise.

In reflecting on Foucault and Butler, gender can be seen the basis, result and materialization of power - and *vice versa.* The interlinkage between gender and power shapes understandings of what power is, how power is distributed in in all spheres of life, as well as how the distribution of power impacts on understandings of gender. Important for our purposes, is that one of the ways the gender-power collusion can play out is as men's power over women and as power over other men based on a hierarcy of masculinities. In this study the use of DBS strategies, like still imaging and role play, allows experimentation with bodily gestures and movements in the context of gender and power that can demonstrate the shifting, relational nature of power and gender-power dynamics.

Research approach

Author 1 was employed *ad hoc* as an extra-curricular drama teacher at the private school where the research took place. Author 1 facilitated ten LO learning sessions of 35 minutes (with the exception of session ten) each as part of the formal schooling programme over a period of four weeks. Learners were not marked nor tested on these sessions. Sessions were recorded on DVD and learners kept anonymous journals. The participant group was a class of seventeen Caucasian learners in grade ten (fifteen to sixteen years old) from a middle-class background. Four learners were boys and thirteen were girls. They received tuition in English and have not had any prior exposure to drama.

We followed a generic qualitative research approach and combined the research position of a participant-observer, critical friend and (in retrospect) elements of phenomenography for engaging with/in the learning sessions and with data. The study used participant journals, class discussions, observation and recorded footage to create a thick description of the sessions and learner responses. Author 1 acted as participant-observer. Author 2 engaged with second-order action research - promoting reflective inquiry into session planning and the interpretation of responses. Learners' experiences, awareness, and reflections on gender as a group are the foci of the research, thus positing the research as phenomenographic. Ontologically, phenomenography views object and subject as interdependent – individuals cannot deal with a phenomenon or an object without experiencing or conceptualizing it in some form (Ornek 2008). We describe understandings of gender as it was understood by learners and framed by our understandings of gender and power.

We acknowledge that our backgrounds as middle-class, white, Afrikaans-speaking women unavoidably impact on our engagement with the research material. Further, that operations of power extend beyond learners' engagement with the learning, but also to the relationship between learners and teachers. However, discussing this relationality falls outside of the scope of this article. The tools we employed to create a thick description of sessions allowed us to remain aware of our personal subjectivities and how these interplay with the subjectivities of others. Rather than position this research as *truth* or *absolute*, we present a perspective on our engagement with participants in a specific context.

Drama-based strategies (DBS) for teaching and learning

Our understanding of the nature and efficacy of DBS is rooted in the interface between empathetic engagement and metacognition as stimulated by metaxis. We discuss this in order to illustrate why and how we argue that our use of DBS could facilitate an ontological inquiry into gender. DBS offers a way of learning *through* the medium of drama (Wagner 2007, 13), rather than making a performance. The application of DBS for us predominantly centers on ideas of action-reflection; dramatic play; empathetic engagement and role-play (Heathcote 2009) in an imaginary context. The imaginary context is strongly centered on human interaction, dilemmas, situations, behavior, and relationships in

relation to the learning material (the human condition). In the light of a human dilemma surfaced by the imaginary context, learners negotiate between their own beliefs and those of the role.[i]

The value of role-playing is that "we come to understand others via imitation and imitation shares functional mechanisms with…empathy" (Iacoboni 2005, 2). Empathy can be "evoked in us by an other, who can be real or … *imagined*" (Blair 2015). Following Iacoboni, neural-mirroring facilitates the imitatory aspect in that it allows access to, and understanding of, others by modeling emotions, actions and intentions intersubjectively within the matrix of one's own body (Iacoboni 2009, 653; Blakeslee and Blakeslee 2008, 166). Theoretically, the neural-mirroring facilitated by situated role-play allows learners to, to some degree, feel what someone else feels and to imagine themselves in another's situation (Blair, 2015). At the same time, they remain aware that they are not someone else and that they have the potential to act or respond differently. The continual oscillation between the imaginary and 'real' worlds and their simultaneous juxtaposition illustrate the concept of metaxis (Boal, 1995:13) that allows for interplay between distancing (cognitive engagement) and immersion (empathetic engagement), stimulating metacognition. Metacognition, operating on an epistemological level, refers to the ability to stand outside of one's own thinking, reflect upon it, reposition it and step back into it. Metacognition and critical thinking provide mutually supporting conditions for each other and together encourages the assessment of the "consistency and generalizability" intrinsic to one's own conceptions (Lai 2011, 12), which also relates to positionality.

As Boal demonstrates, the "both-neither" (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2010) principle of the concept has been applied beyond the domain of philosophy in which it is rooted. We propose that in the context of DBS, metaxis can indicate a continuous slippage in/of subject position, without any subject position being fully realized. This process of continuous slippage between subject positions implies that multiple self-reflexive states that stimulate critical inquiry could be created. Reflecting back on metaxis in the context of its Platonic roots, the in-between-ness it centralises has an ontological dimension (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2010). This idea was of particular importance to us in drawing our conclusions. As such, activating metaxis - oscillating between affect/immersion and cognition/distance - is a crucial part of DBS – not only to foster metacognition but also to effect in-between-ness *per se*. Below, we discuss our use of DBS in learning sessions.

Engaging DBS

We will focus on aspects of selected learning sessions that particularly foregrounded perceptions, identifications, and expressions of gender and power. After session one, each session started out with a recap of the previous session and introductory DBS activities to assist learners to enter the next phase of the engagement. This was followed by enrolling learners through narrative links, nametags and setting the scene for the dramatic activities to follow (spatially and narratively). During sessions, learners at times reflected in role on matters and after deroling reflected out of role in the form of class discussions and journal entries. Author 1 acted as facilitator of the practical process. In role, she was generally the secretary of the detective agency. This role gave information and asked questions (a role with low status to leave much of the decision-making up to learners). She also acted as a fellow agent (medium status) or the leader of the agency (high status). The latter was used to introduce new courses of action, for example requesting that learners prepare for an interview that they need to search a room for clues, et cetera.

Perceptions

The first session mapped learners' perceptions on gender with activities that included, amongst others, questioning, discussing images from popular media and reflective writing. For example, one image was a rugby ball and the image was unequivocally assigned to men. Upon mention of South Africa's national women's rugby team, responses were that it was "not normal" and "they are like butch" (class discussion). There were no exceptions. Dominant themes that surfaced in learners' responses to this session were the idea of gender binaries, sex-gender fusion; the man as breadwinner and the consequent assumptions about power and decision-making; the women as domestic, passive, feminine and emotional. In response to what gender is, learners stated for example: "what splits the world into two" (Journal 0016); "how a person acts him or herself out and appearance" (Journal 0030) and "separation just by physical differences" (Journal 0020); "what a man would be identified by to say he is male and a woman to say she is female" (Journal 0018). Learners defined a woman as being emotional and feminine in terms of her "body structure and body parts" (class discussion) and "feminine and loving, who loves pink and doesn't get down and dirty" (Journal 0016). Men are "working for the money", with physical strength, "more lazy than women",

7

having "short hair" (class discussion) and "the husband must do a physical job and must provide and protect his family" (Journal 0017). In the class discussion, a girl said that "men run after violence because they cannot love or care". The boys all responded with: "that is a lie". Besides the last interaction, boys and girls agreed on the ideas expressed above.

When asked about how they see themselves in relation to being a man or woman as per their earlier definitions, responses included: "I love looking pretty... I love to bake. My chores include dishes, cleaning up and taking off washing, which is mostly a typical woman's job" (Journal 0022); "I'm soft and emotional" (Journal 0018); "[e]njoy girly things like getting my hair done and painting my nails. I could never see myself doing physical and hard-core labour like men do. I do things in a very lady like manner" (Journal 0015). These comments demonstrate an essentialist perspective on sex and gender that supports ideas of the fixity of gender identity and sex-gender fusion. These comments quite literally illustrated Butler's (1998) views on gender as performative.

 The exception to rehearsing stereotypes was: "I am my own person and every other woman is" (Journal 0029); "I am female, it says so on my birth certificate, but it doesn't say anything about typical women" (Journal 0016); and "I care how others feel compared to the stereotypical man, who is violent (I am not)" (Journal 0020). Interestingly, most of the girls showed an awareness of gender stereotypes throughout the discussion, yet identified with the stereotype in their journal entries. The perceptions and comments that surfaced in this session, together with the textbook, prompted ideas for future sessions.

Entering the imaginary context

The second session introduced learners to DBS and power-relations. The first strategy we used was status images. Not only did this strategy offer a first step towards understanding role-play, it required of learners to process incoming spatial and visual stimuli, to derive meaning from spatial relationships between bodies and to visualize images.

In pairs, learners created still images to show one person occupying a position of power and another lacking power – initially engaging with power as a coercive force. They reflected on these images and

changed them order to create a range of different meanings. For example, learners stepped into the place of others to change the power relations in the initial images. Spatially, levels were used to indicate authority (height), perhaps demonstrating a shared perceptual framework. In many of the initial images, those demonstrating power performed a violent act upon the those portraying less power (demonstrating 'power over'). Learners seemed to associate power with violence and violence as being executed by men, in most of the still images - across sexes and despite the opposing views boys articulated in the class discussion of session 1. When asked to change the status pictures to explore alternative power relationships, spatial relations were the first to change. Interestingly most steered away from inversing power relations in their revised statues. The exercise "helped us to realize that power isn't within size" (Journal 0018) and "[s]eeing everyone"s view on power … was very educational" (Journal 0019). Embodying power relations assisted learners to connect concepts and mental visualization to action and felt experiences. Indeed, learners modeled actions and intentions intersubjectively within the matrices of their own bodies, thereby activating the neural-mirroring that Iacoboni (2005, 2009) views as central to empathy. Further, learners to engaged with complex social behaviors and strategized in order to engage with power-relations in a more nuanced manner.

The second strategy, two-line scenes, introduced the idea of role-playing. Learners were divided into pairs (persons A and B). All the A's played the role of mother and the B's the role of father. They had to converse about which parent will take the children to school the next day. Each person had one speaking turn per conversation round. No information about roles and responsibilities were given. The learners could insert their imaginings into the scenario through improvisation. Some same-sex learners paired up in this activity, but none of the boys took the role of the mother. All the pairs chose to present a nuclear family set-up, set up a central tension related to sex and gender roles and related negotiating power in scenes to financial control. An example is a scene where both parents had jobs outside of the household. The learner playing the mother continuously asked why the father assumes that she would automatically take responsibility for the child. The father eventually stated: "You had the kid so you have to" (personal observation). Much of the dialogue in scenes regarding who should take the children to school the following day became symbolic of a power struggle between the two roles that revolved around the domestic and the public domain, as well as assumptions around whom

should assume the responsibilities of care-taking.

In many scenes, an additional tension in the negotiation was that the father's job was considered more important than the mother's (whether she had a job outside of the household or as a homemaker). The scenes demonstrated the division of gender roles between primarily public and primarily domestic spheres, maintained through the binding power of sex-gender-role fusion. Further, how this fusion becomes a mechanism for control and coercive power. Here we see the gender-power collusion play out as men's power over women. Learners presented power relations through literally stylising actions. The statues froze learners in a moment of consideration. Their awareness of the illusion of their portrayal of statues and the enactment thereof in scenes create the potential for metaxis and critical thought. Further, role-playing and imitation allowed them to model emotions in addition to actions and intentions – another step towards empathetic engagement.

Session three set up a context for the imaginary space that learners were to engage with and made role-allocations. The context was partly set up by Author 1 (informed by learner's responses in sessions one to two) and partly by the learners. Learners, as agents in a detective agency, had to find a boy (Alex) who ran away from home. As members of a detective agency, they were to find Alex, find out why he ran away, and attempt reconciliation with his family. They had to create the personality traits for the roles of Alex's father and mother (it corresponded strongly to those presented in session two) and create interview questions for Alex's parents. Strategies were employed to build belief in their roles and the agency. As Journal 0018 reflected: "today was almost like creating a whole new world", indicating that immersion in role-play in the imaginary context (as necessary condition for activating empathy, metaxis and metacognition) took effect.

In session four, learners were split up into groups and had to select who would play roles of the father and mother, and who will remain agents. After a brief enrolling process, they commenced with the interviews. How the interviews developed was up to each group. Interestingly, during the role-play, all of the mothers maintained the stereotypical traits learners assigned to them with little attempts at agency or shifting position. Further, only girls wanted to play mothers. Responses to the role-play indicate an awareness of stereotyping and associated gender and power-dynamics were, for

example: "person [is] stereotyped to be either the one in power or the one not in power" (Journal 0025) and "stereotypes can alter power positions in society and families, because men are seen as superior to women and can act it out" (Journal 0019). Such responses also indicated an awareness of the divisionary mechanisms of power. Responses from the class as described in this section further indicated an understanding that stereotypical roles, (ine)qualities and behaviours attributed to men and women is based in the unequal distribution of power.

Multiple perspectives

Session five introduced a layering of DBS that saw learners move between the roles of detectives, in the roles of Alex' family members and even Alex himself - occupying multiple roles (and thus perspectives) in a single session. This classroom was pre-set to represent Alex's bedroom. Learners found clues that put part of the puzzle together. Learners found a photo of Alex and his family shortly before his disappearance and physically (re)created it with their bodies in tableaux. By using thought tracking and role swapping, they (in role) responded to questions as family members and as Alex himself – setting up tensions and alliances in relationships between family members in relation to the context already created. This aimed to deepen an understanding of Alex' world and the relationships and values, that shaped it. They also discovered the correspondence between Alex and a person called Joe that pointed to a forbidden, homosexual relationship. From the imagined roles of Alex's family, as well as from the correspondence, there were indications that Alex and his father did not see eye to eye about notions of what it means to be a man and that his father disagreed with his choice of future studies (the arts). Here, besides ideas of parental authority, we played with a hierarchy of masculinities.

Thought-tracking when learners were in role as Alex demonstrated the notions of internalized oppression and deprivation of power. Multiple voices playing Alex felt that he could not express himself and he does not feel accepted. For example, commenting in role as Alex: "I have a different personality and style ... I do not fit into the criteria" (personal observation). The oscillation between the symbolic (role) and the individual (real) opens up an in-between space that may activate ontological awareness.

11

The depth of learners' immersion in role-playing differed. Whereas many expressed themselves in role in the first person ("I cannot express myself for who I am"), others enrolled as Alex took a third-person stance ("Alex doesn't feel like he knows who he is at the moment"; he "does not feel accepted because he doesn't fit in"). The immersive, experiential and embodied engagements that the first person stance fosters are closely aligned with empathetic engagement. Simultaneously, them knowing that they are not Alex fosters metaxis and demands negotiation between their own beliefs and those of the role. This process can create a pace that stimulates critical engagement, not only with the role but also with the self, which negotiates an ontological perspective. The view of the world that Alex's parents hold is an example of a regime of truth that learners came to understand as a world and ideas that have the power to exclude, name and define – depriving Alex of the power to define himself and the world.

It was clear to learners that the gender role Alex is expected to fulfil and perform is at odds with his sexual orientation. In their journals, they reflected privately on the question as to how the power of stereotypical roles and the way it is embedded in human relations could impact on those who do not conform to those stereotypes. Responses included: fear of not being accepted, coercion and ostracization. For example: "If you are a little different to what the stereotypes say, then you get cut out and looked down upon" and "At school I have to back down and be conformed because of the stereotypes being displayed at school every day" (Journal 0016). Journal 0016 is aware that the gender stereotype is public, visibly embodied and reproduced. In this way, the learning content was personalized and the human condition related to the learning content was foregrounded.

Responses indicated an awareness of gender stereotypes being kept in place by social mechanisms; the fusion of sex and gender; heteronormativity and social punishment should the sex-gender stereotype not be fulfilled. Through these journal entries, learners could reflect on the consistency of their own conceptions and in relation to the class explorations and discussions, and assess the generalizability of their conceptions to a broader (and 'felt') context. This self-reflexivity together with metaxial engagement likely fosters metacognition and critical inquiry.

Sessions six and seven explored role expectations for men as surfaced in the previous session,

focussing on Alex's relationship with his father (exploring themes such as violence as an expression of power; financial control as synonymous with power and the man in a family setting). The session also drew from ideas linking men and violence that surfaced since session one. The class was enrolled again in the setting of the detective agency. Alex's sister (person-in-role from another class) visited the agency, adding an element of surprise by stating she found out Alex is seeking refuge at Joe's. She disclosed that she overheard Alex and his father having a fight after Alex's sexual orientation came to light. She heard the father hitting Alex, after which Alex left home. Learners decided that the agents needed to meet with Alex. Author 1, in the role of the agency psychologist, requested that agents must try to understand how Alex might feel in order to approach the meeting appropriately through two role-play scenarios.

Learners were firstly enrolled in pairs as Alex and his father in a confrontation after Alex's father found out about his son's sexual orientation. A visual image (Joe) was the stimulus for the conflict.[ii] After about four minutes, learners had to freeze at the emotional high point of their fights. Through thought tracking in role, the fathers had to reflect on how they felt at that moment in the conflict and why they were in a specific bodily and spatial relationship to Alex. Similarly, the learners playing the role of Alex reflected on the situation. Secondly, learners had to swap roles and continue the confrontation, focussing on Alex's father as a power-figure. The starting point was not directly after the emotional high point, but a little later in the same fight (learners thus had to imagine what happened in between the end point of the first exploration and the start of the second exploration) to continue with this exploration. It ended with a tableau of the emotional high-point of the conflict.

Some of the reflections on the role of Alex was that: "If you don't perform according to his standards, it makes you feel worthless" and "father is trying to compensate for his lack of emotional strength with physical strength"; "I am ashamed because I can see he isn't proud of me" (Journal 0025); and "I feel like I've been a disgrace to my family" (Journal 0028). Learners also offered views on how the conflict could have been handled differently: "He should have cared about how I felt instead of what other people think" (Journal 0029); "[he]should have talked to me about it"; "he could have sat me and my mother down and we could have could have spoken about it together and made a decision" (Journal 0021) and "[b]y hitting me he brought my self-esteem lower than it was" (Journal 0027).

Swapping roles literally required learners to look at a situation and relationship from different perspectives, whilst engaging their own positionality. This embodied, perspectival involvement requires learners to engage with the values and power-relations shaping these roles they inhabited, creating opportunities for action-reflection and empathic engagement.

The class discussion about managing the conflict differently brought up ideas to include the mother, having the mother and father discussing the matter with Alex together, and the father not approaching Alex in anger. Learners were asked to reflect on the role of Alex in their journals. Responses included: "My dad is the boss in my family and I don't feel that is fair" (Journal 0021); "dad is really dominant and my mom has almost nothing" (Journal 0014); "[m]y dad did not have to hit me. He could have tried to calm down and sort everything out like a man"…" (Journal 0026) and "let me be gay if I want to and not get into a physical fight" (Journal 0030). The responses clearly saw the role of the father as patrolling the borders of Alex's identity and as head of the household and a parent exercises 'power-over' Alex. Physical violence is framed as part of this coercive power. "[I] felt like a human puppet not being able to make my own decisions" (Journal 0020). This image and the responses that frame Alex's identity as passive and with little social agency is so reminiscent of Foucault's docile body and almost makes visible the operations of power. In reference to the mother, influence and the mother's lack of involvement in making decisions about his future: "Why can't she make the decision?" (Journal 0016).

In response to ways in which the father could have handled the situation differently, we observe the following reflections: "He should have cared about how I felt instead of what other people think" (Journal 0029); "[he]should have talked to me about it"; "he could have sat me and my mother down and we could have could have spoken about it together and made a decision" (Journal 0021). At this stage in the process, the voice of the mother has been silent and session seven served to create a space where her role could be explored in more detail. It was necessary for learners to have the opportunity for in-depth engagement with this role, as she represented the position of the woman in the context of gender in the family sphere.

14

In session eight, role-on-the-wall was used to explore the mother's role. This activity literally traces the outline of a person or role on a wall and learners fill in details about the role. They can include factual information on the character or role such as physical descriptions and key phrases that are attributed to the role. They can also physically take in the position of the outline, and others can position themselves in relation to that to demonstrate relationships. To provide a starting point, learners used pictures of Alex's mother (based on their descriptions in earlier sessions) to explore her role in groups of three to four. During the activity, they had to deliberate on the following questions: *What does she think are the worst problems in her family in the light of gender and power relations at play? How does she feel about the role she plays in her family? If she could change anything in her family, what would it be?* The role-on-the-wall activity again foregrounded neural mirroring that in an embodied manner modeled emotion and intentions and so fostered empathetic engagement with the role of the mother.

Learners wrote down their ideas in their journals after discussing the questions and experimenting with varied embodiments and relationships in the role-on-the-wall activity. The mother's docility, domesticity and caregiving responsibilities took center stage. For example: "She has no power"; "dad overpowers her" (Journal 0018) and "Mother feels that "her role is set out for her" (Journal 0014). If she could change anything it would be to "have a bit more authority" (Journal 0014); "she would be able to "make her own decisions" (Journal 0025). Lastly, she would want "equal power between her and her husband" (class discussion). Upon being asked out of role why they think the mother submits to the father's dominance, an answer was that she may be scared he will kick her out as "[h]e is the working one" and "he is her financial security" (class discussion). One response was that it is because "everyone knows their place" (Journal 0014). There was agreement across groups that without the father, the mother would be someone else. Should power relations in the family shift, learners saw the possibility for diversity and celebrating uniqueness, being "allowed to be your own person" (Learner 0016); more freedom of expression, equality in the household; and the son "would have more courage" (Learner 0019). These responses demonstrate some shifts in some of the learners' understanding of gender relations in comparison to what they foregrounded in the first session.

Learners recognized the stereotypical attributes of their expressions of the role of the mother in the

class exercises, but many learners re-expressed their belief in the stereotype that the man is the breadwinner and the financial power he holds gives him more weight. The role-play offered a symbolic space where binaries and stereotypes could be transcended, yet, many learners chose to re-rehearse stereotypes.

Session nine dealt with Alex's disappointment and his concern at his mother's disempowerment, stemming form the comments on the mother in the previous session. Agents also had to think of strategies to reconcile the family and part of that was to prepare for a meeting between Alex and his parents. Learners could select who wished to play Alex, his mother and father and they were enrolled through the use of symbolic props. The rest of the learners used their nametags as usual to enrole as agents. Author 1 acted as the agency psychologist to mediate the conversation between Alex and his parents. Any agent could stop the interview to make suggestions for the interview. They could also step out of role as agents and enrole as one of the interviewees by using the symbolic prop (as a marker of identity) should they wish to change the course of the interview or enact different sets of behavior that may shift relationships. This enabled the conditions for metaxis and enacted it by shifting between different voices, views, value-systems, and beliefs. Their enactments of the role of the mother demonstrated self-regulatory dimension in terms of upholding sanctioned ideals and values of the family, much in the same way that Alex self-regulated his choices before his fight with his father. Learners in the role of the mother looked for harmonious solutions, while learners in the role of the father asserted dominance and defended ideas. The role-play ended without a clear resolution.

The ability to stand outside of their own thinking, reflect on it and re-engage with it indicates a metaxis. The continuous slippage between subject positions (in-between-ness) that metaxis fostered (when assuming the roles of Alex and his family) facilitated multiple reflexive states. These states overtly stimulate metacognition, critical inquiry, self-reflexivity and intersubjectivity that points to an ontological dimension of the exploration. Further, the exploration introduced learners to power as a strategy and operating relationally within a field of power.

Session ten was the concluding session aimed at connecting class explorations to the learning content in the textbook and offering an opportunity for summative reflection. Due to a logistical

problem (not to do with us or the classes), we had to cut the session short. As the session lasted about 10 minutes, little data was generated. The agreement and permissions for the research was very specific and as such, we were not able to work repeat the session later. Learners were asked how they would re-write Alex's story. Responses centred on bettering the relationship between Alex and his father, Alex developing agency, enhanced modes of communication in the family and altering power relationships between the father and mother. There was acknowledgement of the emotional impact of living outside of heteronormativity: "they feel unwanted" (class discussion). The link between financial contributions to the household and the distribution of power remained: "the mother's role should change so that she also works and has more power in her family" (Journal 0029); "[d]ad and mom would both work, meaning the money would come equally; they would be equal" (Journal 0029). Two learners proposed swapping gender roles. These indicated awareness that to change power-relations, people need to change how they interrelate on the broader strategic field of power and change their relationship to the play(s) of power.

Whilst the learners defined gender mainly through biological differences in the first session, this idea expanded to include gender as also defined by the roles and relationships. Though the sessions, there was a marked shift away from violence as indicator of male power. Although there was a shift from stereotyping men as breadwinners, an acknowledgement of the possibilities for gender equality (including sexual orientation and gender roles), an understanding of power relations and stereotypes in the context of gender, the financial construction of power remained a prevalent idea amongst both sexes.

Limitations of the study

We were bound by the parameters set by the school to obtain ethical clearance for the study. Fears around the possible identification of participants were major considerations. As such, our focus is on the participants as a group.[iii] We were bound to a very specific time frame and to content, thus the leeway for learners to drive sessions was not as extensive as we would have liked. Should we have been allowed more time, we could have zoomed in on details and nuances surfaced in journal entries and class explorations, for example the persistent link between power and fiances. We acknowledge the limitations that the duration of final session impose on this study, however, we are of the opinion

that the data generated in the other eight sessions provide the information required to draw the conclusions below.

Conclusion

This article reflected on the use of DBS to reveal and engage with perceptions on gender, power and sexual orientation amongst a group of grade 10 learners, positioned within the learning content on gender in the LO curriculum. By placing specific emphasis on the metaxical and empathetic possibilities of DBS, we made a case for why DBS could be effective in such an inquiry. We demonstrated that these possibilities, together with exploring performativity in and through dramatic action, fostered metacognition and critical inquiry, if not ontological inquiry.

Through engaging with DBS, learners could recognize, understand, and explore problems related to constructs of gender, power and sexual orientation by engaging with the imagined emotions and intentions of others. The mirror-neural activity that imagining and enacting different styles of gesture and movement stimulate, foster empathetic engagement and recognise possibilities for change, Through DBS, learners could imagine alternative modes of engagement with others in and, due to the metacognitive possibilities of role-playing, arguably beyond the drama as well. This, in turn, could stimulate reflection on their own state of being as they necessarily see themselves relation to gender identity and the power relationships within gender.

Empathetic engagement metaphorically bridges the gap between the individual and the role, with the imaginary world serving as actant that unites empathy, action, and learning content. Empathetically engaging with roles yet knowing that they *are not* the roles they play created an oscillatory engagement with the intersection of identities and worlds – this slippage in/of subject position that metaxis fostered created perpetual awareness of positionality that in turn encouraged an (albeit temporary) ontological inquiry into gender.

References

Atwell, T., F. Clitheroe, L. Dilley, J. Falken, B. Lundall and S. Miehe. 2011. *Life Orientation learners book: grade 10.* South Africa: Oxford University Press.

Blair, R. 2015. Notes on Empathy, Cognitive Neuroscience, and Theatre/Education. *p-e-r-f-o-r-m-a-n-c-e* 2 (1-2): 1101.

Blakeslee, S., and M. Blakeslee. 2008. *The Body has a mind of its own.* New York: Random House.

Boal, A. 1995. *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*. Oxon: Routledge.

Butler, J. 1988. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, The Johns Hopkins University Press. *Theatre Journal* 40 (3): 519-531.

Butler, J. 1989. Foucault and the paradox of bodily inscriptions. *The Journal of Philosophy* 86 (11): 601-607.

Foucault, M. 1980. *The history of sexuality. Vol. 1: an introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage/ Random House.

Heathcote, D. 2009. Drama as a process for change. In *The Applied Theatre Reader,* eds. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, 200-206. New York: Routledge.

Hurley, S.L. and Chater, N. 2005. *Perspectives on Imitation: Mechanisms of imitation and imitation in animals.* Harvard University Press.

Iacoboni, M. 2005. Understanding Others: Imitation, Language, Empathy. In *Perspectives on Imitation: From Mirror Neurons to Memes, Vol. I: Mechanisms of Imitation and Imitation in Animals*, eds. Susan L. Hurley and Nick Chater. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Iacoboni, M. 2009. Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons. *Annual review of psychology* (60):653–70.

Lai, E.R. 2011. *Metacognition: a literature review*. [O]. Available at: http://images.pearsonassessments.com/images/tmrs/Metacognition_Literature_Review_Final.pdf.
(Accessed 12 November 2017).

Ornek, F. 2008. An overview of a theoretical framework of phenomenography in qualitative education research: An example from physics education research. *Asia-Pacific Forum on Science Learning and Teaching* 9 (2): 1-14.

Prentki, T., and S. Preston. 2009. *The applied theatre reader*. New York: Routledge.

Vermeulen, T., and R. Van den Akker. 2010. Notes on metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2(1): 1-14.

Wagner, B.J. 2007. *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a learning medium*. London: Hutchinson and Co. (Publishers) Ltd.

---

[i] The question as to the extent to which learners can transcend their own belief systems and cultural matrices has been a point of vehement debate and research. Engaging with this tension falls outside of the scope of this article.

[ii] The parameters of the exploration included that the enactment of physical violence could not take place.

[iii] In an ideal situation we would have had an equal amount of boys and girls in the class and we would have focused on, and reflected upon, differences between individual student responses per sex that could have added further dimension to the study and expanded our conclusions. The fact that the class contained more girls than boys, and that girls wrote more in their journals than boys, imply that there were more responses documented to draw on from girls than from boys.