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Strategic use of figurants in vocational training

Cecilia Jonsson¹, Susanna Lif²

Centre for Police Research and Development, Linnaeus University, Sweden ¹

Centre for Police Research and Development, Linnaeus University, Sweden²

Abstract

Bridging theory and practice, scenario-based exercises with figurants is a common learning tool in vocational training [1, 2, 3]. However, to deliver the desired outcome, several pedagogical challenges must be met. While previous research often focuses on the exercises' design, level of realism and complexity [1], there is a lack of knowledge regarding the figurants' role in the context [4, 5]. The study's purpose is to develop this knowledge by mapping how figurants are used and what significance and challenges they bring. Theoretically, we derive from a development of Aristoteles' principles of knowledge in terms of *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis* [6] and lean on Dreyfus' and Dreyfus' [7] to explain how these exercises help students develop professional *praxis*. Methods used are participatory observation and interviews with students, teachers, and figurants regarding experiences of scenario-based exercises in Swedish police education. The empirical material identifies three types of figurants generating specific benefits and challenges; as well as difficulties in matching; unclear expectations and insufficient feedback. Several learning objectives relate to scenario-based exercises with figurants. However, a strategic selection and use of figurants, adequate preparations and understanding of their role are imperative in reaching the desired outcome.

Keywords: *Figurants, scenario-based exercises, vocational training*

1. Introduction

Like vocational education world-wide, Swedish police training contains theoretical and practical elements as well as scenario-based exercises with figurants [8]. The latter, below referred to as *figurant exercises*, call for the students to use both theoretical – *episteme* – and practical – *techne* – knowledge in realistic scenarios aiming at enhancing their professional *praxis* – *phronesis* [9]. That is, preparing them to act competently in the sense of professionals performing on well-founded choices and assessments [6, 9, 10]. In short, figurant exercises are intended to bridge theory and practice [1, 3, 11].

Figurant exercises are much appreciated, though highly demanding in terms of time and money. To ensure the desired outcome, extensive preparations are needed, including administrative arrangements like recruiting, selecting, and booking, to implementation based on simulation capacity and constructive, forward-oriented feedback and reflections [2, 4, 12]. While previous research focuses on the exercises' design, level of realism and complexity [1], there is a lack of knowledge regarding the figurants' role and the administrative process in this context [4, 5]. The aim of this paper is to discuss what implications the choice of figurant type and the administrative process' may have on the pedagogical implementation. The study is based on empirical material from field observations of figurant exercises and from 42 semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and external figurants in Swedish police education.

2. Results

Developing police *praxis* is a process merely starting during police training. Mastering operational policing skills and developing police *praxis*, require competencies that cannot be obtained through books alone. In this context, teachers and students interviewed regard exercises with figurants imperative in the students' learning process, as illustrated by the following quotes:



This kind of exercises is incredibly beneficial, it's what you learn the most from. Having studied [a theoretical course] for four months, it [the knowledge] would never have settled as well as when you got to do it in practice. /Student 3

That's when everything falls into place for the students. After all the time they have spent /.../ reading paragraphs, it's when they are out on the scene [during figurant exercises], that's what they need. /Teacher 1

Putting the knowledge in a practical setting clarifies what the students must learn and why. Figurant exercises thereby offer several pedagogical ways to gain and consolidate knowledge, helping the students from novices towards experts as described in Dreyfus' and Dreyfus' [7] model of skills acquisition.

Ensuring the desired pedagogical result requests an awareness of what type of figurant best matches the purpose of the training element. Three types of figurants are mentioned: *External figurants* are unknown to the practicing students and could be actors, retirees, students from different faculties and other people working extra as figurants. *Semi-external figurants* are students from other classes or semesters within the same program, unknown to the practicing students. *Internal figurants* are teachers or students from the same class, making the parties involved aware of each other's capacities. The results indicate that the use of external figurants is the most appreciated as illustrated by the quotes below:

When we have [external] figurants it becomes something completely different, because you do not know how they will act. The more people [various figurants] you have met and got to practice the entire process on, the more routine-based it becomes and the more natural it feels. /Student 6

Another benefit is that we can have [people of] all ages, which we can't when using students [internal or semi-external figurants]. /.../ Crime within close relationships do in fact occur among the elderly as well, which makes it important to have older figurants too. /Teacher 8

You notice that they [the students] become engaged and act as if it was for real. One was about to give me mouth-to-mouth when I was pretending to be unconscious. /Figurant A

Provided that the essential characteristics of a figurant are met, that is, an interest in acting coupled with the ability to perform and follow instructions, external figurants bring an unmatched notion of realism and variety to the exercise. To ensure as accurate portrayal of a certain situation or behavior as possible, professional actors or figurants with specific expertise are sometimes recruited. Still, ensuring the right number or matching a figurant with a suitable exercise can be a challenge, as exemplified by the teacher and administrator below:

There are plenty of people interested [in being figurants], who wants to work sporadically. The difficulty lies with the major exercises where you need many figurants on the same occasion. /Administrator A

I have an exercise where a character is suicidal. Although I had clarified what kind of exercise it was, people [figurants] attended who on site conveyed they felt distressed because had personal experience of trying to commit suicide. Once we had to change figurant three times. /Teacher 15

The matching problem often derive from a lack of dialogue between administrators and teachers as from insufficient time devoted for the recruitment of figurants. The administrative part of the process is thereby downgraded, a common organizational error.

Another challenge regarding external figurants is late cancellations. To prevent the negative consequences this may cause, more figurants than needed are sometimes booked. At times, the

scenarios are made adjustable in terms of roles that, if necessary, could be excluded, or by making the characters flexible to easier match the present figurant's age, gender, and other characteristics without losing the exercises' pedagogical purpose.

Semi-external and internal figurants may help secure enough figurants and the level of knowledge needed for a specific role. Scheduling students as internal and semi-external figurants is the general practice in scenario-based exercises at one of the universities providing police education in Sweden. Several interviewees at other universities find it desirable, but administratively problematic. The diverse approaches are likely due to differences in terms of routines and traditions in using the respective figurant types.

Portraying a certain behavior, practicing simulation capacity and experiencing the counterpart's perspective is of great pedagogical value to internal and semi-external figurants. Being a figurant for other grades also generates new knowledge or rehearsal. The quotes below reflect some of the benefits:

/.../ the main value, I suppose, is that if you feel you are being treated well you might be influenced by that student's manner [in your future profession]. In turn, should you experience a not so proper treatment you might refrain from behaving like that yourself. /Student 2

First and foremost, it [being a semi-external figurant] means that the younger students gain important knowledge and a visionary image of their own learning process. /Teacher 4

Semi-external figurants add realism to an exercise by being unknown to the practicing students. However, since police students often share certain characteristics in terms of age, body types and knowledge, their performance is more predictable to the practicing peers compared to external figurants.

The main challenge when using internal figurants is the risk of personal relations affecting the exercise, making it less serious or a contest between students. As one student describes it:

Personal relations have a huge impact /.../ The status you have in the group and the relations between [individuals]. Who has what [previous] education and so on /.../ It all matters when you are wrestling with each other. /Student 9

Furthermore, the results show the students' appreciation of getting feedback on how they handled the situation and treated the figurants, another reason for ensuring the figurants are well informed about the purpose of the exercise and what is expected from them.

6. Conclusion

Three types of figurants with specific benefits and challenges can be distinguished: external figurants, that is, staff hired externally that are unknown to the students; semi-external figurants from other classes and semesters, often unknown to the practicing students, but with shared certain characteristics regarding age, body types and knowledge; and internal figurants, i. e. teachers or students from the same class and as such known to the practicing student. Preferably, the respective figurant types should be chosen based on the specific exercises' desired outcome, the expected level of realism, the experience of the counterparts' perspective. The pedagogical challenges mainly concern the simulation capacity among the figurants, including their motivation, interest, and ability to act and follow instructions, but also in the understanding of their role and the task. This calls for the teacher in charge to properly prepare and instruct all the parties involved.

For the exercise to deliver the expected outcome, appropriate planning, a strategic recruitment and selection of figurants, sufficient instructions of figurants and students, as well as efficient, functioning and acknowledged routines regarding administration and communication among the involved parties, are equally important as the adequate choice of figurant type.



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