

"Thinking as Someone Else"

Using Avatars in Teacher Education and The Challenge to Think and Act as Someone Else

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Abstract

This article discusses an alternative learning project that was conducted in an online course at a teacher education program from Fall 2012 to Fall 2015. As part of the course, students had to create avatars, an alter ego, and think and act as their avatars when faced with educational issues. The project strives to overcome challenges that teacher education programs have to take into account when preparing students to become teachers. A qualitative research study was conducted in order to find out more about the students' thinking and learning in this innovative approach of the online class. Results of the study and the implications for the project will be discussed.

Keywords

Avatar, experiential learning, innovative teaching methods, teacher education, alternative teacher education project

Introduction

Teaching aspiring teachers, in particular what it means to be a teacher, is complex. Thus, teacher education programs must strive to support their students in understanding and experiencing the complexities of being a teacher in order to prepare them for the realities of the classroom. While it is impossible to simulate all the realities in a higher education classroom, teacher educators need to try by using experimental learning and teaching methods.

This paper describes a project that attempted to overcome these challenges. In the following, the project and its necessity will be described briefly (1), subsequently the research question and method will be explained (2), and initial results of the study will be discussed (3).

In conclusion, thoughts on the impact of the study's results on the future implementation of the project will be presented (4).

The Avatar Project - Necessity and Project's Course

Teacher education programs tackle complex problems. They must prepare future teachers for making the leap from theory into praxis (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007) and assist them in examining "their taken-for-granted-beliefs" (Feinman-Nenser & Norman,

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2000, p. 737) about what it means to be a teacher. Teacher education programs need to help their students to understand the complexity of teaching and being a teacher. Unfortunately, such programs often fail in regards to this task (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Leaman & Flanagan, 2013). The complexity of teaching cannot be understood simply through lectures or readings on this topic. Aspiring teachers need to experience what it means to be a teacher. Thus, teacher educators are faced with the challenge of creating an authentic classroom (Leaman & Flanagan, 2013). They need to go beyond traditional higher education teaching methods and implement experimental learning methods that engage students in meaningful ways and stimulate academic inquiry. Unfortunately, it is difficult, or rather almost impossible, to create such a realistic learning environment that prepares future teachers satisfactorily. The result is that new teachers often feel unprepared and overwhelmed when faced with an actual classroom. Traditional teaching and learning methods, lectures and conventional assignments do not sufficiently prepare students. Why is this so? It is helpful to outline at least a few of these challenges, as it will at the same time demonstrate the necessity and meaning of the avatar project.

When we think of teacher education, we have to recognize that teaching and the classroom is a place filled with human beings (and their emotions), and that learning is connected to emotion. But feelings and affect are normally not taken into account in higher education (Noddings, 1996). Usually, educational issues are discussed in an abstract way, without considering what they really mean for individuals. "In Western thought, affect and emotion have been distrusted, denigrated or at least set aside in favor of reason" (Noddings, 1996, p. 151). Emotions and feelings are not valued; rather they are neglected and almost seen as damaging. What we learn in higher

education is that we need to be objective and that emotions should not be guiding our decisions, because they impair our professional judgment. Emotions and affect are viewed as "signs of unprofessional demeanor" (Noddings, 1996, p. 151). However, this perspective limits students' learning experience and their understanding of what they are studying, as it reduces their engagement. Emotional responses are an important part of the overall learning process and should be valued (Volk, 2012). The understanding of human beings differs from other objects of study, because individuals have feelings and intentions, as well as values, and all these have an impact on their behavior. If we want to understand learning and how to teach better, we need to understand human behavior as well. Instead of ignoring it, emotions need to be considered and valued, especially when they are part of the phenomenon the students learn about, as in the case of teacher education. The understanding of human behavior "comes from trying to put oneself in the other person's shoes, from trying to discern how others think, act, and feel" (Patton, 2001, p. 49), so it follows that it is important to support students in acquiring such an ability. Teachers need empathy, the capacity to "understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others" (Patton, 2001, 52); a capacity that needs to be practiced. Thus, teacher education programs need to offer appropriate learning opportunities.

The avatar project offers such an approach towards learning. Just as Noddings (1996) argued for stories in teacher education, this project goes beyond the usual abstract and rational discussions. The avatar project constructs a place where conflicts and thoughts, reform ideas, and their consequences, are not abstract concepts to be examined and analyzed as an academic exercise, but as personal and emotional encounters. Using avatars supports students' understanding of the fact that teachers, principals, parents, and children are individuals

with feelings, and that these emotions have an impact on the decisions they make. Since the students do not think and act as themselves, but as their avatars, they must apply other perspectives to clarify and expand their own thinking. They have to "think outside of the box" and develop new ways of examining their values and assumptions. Trying to be someone else also helps students realize that educational situations can be ambiguous, and that the role of the stakeholder, be it a teacher, principal, parent, or child matters, and that it is essential to the decisions that are being made. In education, most situations are not "black" or "white" and decisions are not always straightforward. Students need to understand that there is not always a clear answer to a problem. Creating a scenario such as in the avatar project helps students to understand that various stakeholders feel, think, and act differently and that opinions need to be considered in a school context, and that such decisions have an impact on real people. Thus, teaching and learning become more real to the students – as much as this is possible.

Teacher educators should consider the challenges outlined above. One way to create a more realistic and engaging learning environment is the use of "avatars," i.e., asking students to create unique characters in order to investigate and experience real world scenarios from different points of view. Such an approach has been used successfully in studying history (Sheffer, 2009; Volk, 2012, 2013), and recently in teacher education as well (Wasmuth, 2015; Wasmuth & Pind-Rossnagel, 2015). I used avatars as an ongoing course assignment of an online course, "Introduction to Early Childhood Education." The project was developed in the fall of 2012 and was used with seven different classes since then. In total, 118 students have participated, acted and thought as their avatars, and provided feedback on the project¹. So far, it seems that the project enables students to better

understand the complexities of being a teacher (Wasmuth, 2015; Wasmuth & Pind-Rossnagel, 2015). Ninety-three percent of the students who provided feedback at the end of the course described the project as an interesting and meaningful learning experience. The Avatar Project seems to be a way to go beyond traditional learning and teaching, a promising way to create a more realistic and meaningful context that permits students to experience what it means to be a teacher (Wasmuth & Pind-Rossnagel, 2015).

How does it work? Students create an avatar and then think and act accordingly. An avatar, usually translated from Sanskrit as "incarnation", but more accurately means "appearance" or "manifestation", can be understood as the user's alter ego (Merriam-Webster). A person, here a student, creates a new identity and starts to think and act as this character. Thus, students are forced to present their ideas about educational scenarios from the perspective of their avatar – they put themselves in someone else's shoes.

Approximately three weeks into the semester, students receive detailed information about the project (Wasmuth, 2015). Subsequently, the students have to "give birth" to their avatars and create unique personalities. To achieve this goal, students are provided with only a few basic facts about their avatars: the age, gender, occupation, and the number and age of their children, if any. No additional information is provided regarding the avatar's personality, as the students should have the freedom to create a personality they can relate to: A character they like or dislike: the principal they loathed, the teacher they admired, or the teacher they hated wholeheartedly – this is the students' choice. "Giving birth" is the most important part of this assignment. The students have to decide, from the start, what kind of person they want to be. Once their avatar is "born", there is no way back, or at least that is

what I tried to achieve with this project. For this reason, the importance of this first step was emphasized increasingly and the students were encouraged to think carefully about their avatar's personality before presenting to the class. So far, "giving birth" has been one of the most fascinating parts of the project, and while the results in each class were very different, each time they were surprising in their own way (Wasmuth, 2015).

Once the avatar is "born", the students need to think and act as he/she would; or at least they need to try. I remind them continually to speak with the voice of their avatar and not with their own, that the project's purpose is not about what they think, but what their avatar thinks. Thus, all entries in the online course are published in the name of the avatar and I am the only one who knows the real identity of the avatar until the end of the project. The anonymity is an important aspect of the project because it gives the students the chance to present perspectives that are uncomfortable for them without the fear of being judged (Wasmuth 2015).

After the students introduce their avatars, they receive a new topic every second week. The topics cover important issues that need to be understood by future teachers in the field of early childhood education. Some of the topics are considered controversial. Examples of controversial topics are *Tragedy at Local School*, *New Tests for Early Childhood Education*, *The New Teacher Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR)*, *Governor Signs Bill Allowing Armed Teachers in the Classroom*, *New Reward System*, or *Spanking*. The students have approximately seven days to post their avatars' opinions; sometimes it is sufficient to write a statement, sometimes discussions between the avatars are encouraged.

Research Interest and Research Method

Initially, the project was meant to be fun and I wanted to create an assignment that was different compared to the traditional assignments in most teacher education programs and online courses. Instead of letting the students simply write another paper, I wanted them to experience something new. While I had anticipated that such a project would support the students in their personal and professional development, I was surprised by the project's potential for meaningful learning. After the first cycle, it became clear that the avatar project could be more than a normal assignment.

One indicator was the students' engagement, which was more passionate than usual (Wasmuth, 2015). Further, as mentioned earlier, the students' feedback at the end of the project has been very positive so far. Ninety-three percent of the students enjoyed the project even if they were initially hesitant or thought it would be more work, – something that cannot be said about too many assignments. More important, many described the project as meaningful and thought that it prepared them for their future role as a teacher (Wasmuth, 2015; Wasmuth & Pind-Rossnagel, 2015). As one student said,

"At first I wasn't crazy about the idea of this project. After the discussions were posted it was way more interesting than I could ever thought. I had to think like a principal would. It was fun to write in someone else's point of view, especially a principal."

What turned the project into a meaningful learning experience? As stated before, it is essential that students think thoroughly about their avatar's identity in order to be able to act and think as this personality later. However, it was immediately clear that many students had

difficulties staying in the role and acting as their avatars. Instead, students replied with their own opinions. One of the students wrote,

"It was a challenge to be able to put myself in my character's shoes with some of the educational issues that were presented each week. There were times I debated and struggled to write my own opinion, but was often reminded that it was not about me, but that of a parent who was struggling to understand all the educational changes his twin girls were undergoing."

I had not really anticipated this struggle, but found it quite interesting and started to wonder: How were the students actually creating their avatars and how did they manage (or not) to stay in role? To find out more, I added more specific questions to the general feedback questions following completion of the online course such as, *Were you really able to think as your avatar or did you express your own opinion? Was it difficult to think about these issues from a different point of view? When did you stop being your avatar and why?* Many students clearly stated their struggle to reply as their avatars during the course of the project. One student explained,

"For many of the topics, I was able to separate my own opinions from my avatar, but it wasn't necessarily easy! There were many times that I felt that my avatar character could easily bend to my own personal opinions in order to speak more on a point, but I felt a conflict in doing this as my avatar character dug their heels in deeper and deeper into their character with every passing topic."

By falling back into their own thinking, students jeopardized the whole experience. But why was it so challenging for many of them to stay in role? Were the ones who were successful

using specific strategies that enabled them to think as their avatars? And which situations made it so difficult for them to continue being their avatars? To get a better understanding of the phenomena, more specific research and data needed to be gathered.

To compile further data, a qualitative approach seemed to be the best choice (Merriam/Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2001; Wolcott, 1994). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative methods "can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods" (p. 11). For a project that values emotions, qualitative research makes sense because qualitative data can describe, capture and communicate the students' experience of the project in their own words (Patton, 2001). Qualitative research helps to understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, and what meaning they give to their own experiences (Merriam/Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a small number of students, their learning, and their thinking (Patton, 2001). Hence, to understand how students created their avatars' personalities, and why they struggled with thinking and acting as those, a qualitative method was chosen.

Various qualitative research methods exist that enable the researcher to collect the data needed to better understand the thinking of students. A method widely used in education is grounded theory (Bryant/Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2007; Corbin/Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory is a specific research methodology introduced by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and is now applied in all disciplines and fields of practice (Merriam/Tisdell, 2016). In grounded theory, the researcher assumes "an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data. The

result of this type of qualitative study is a theory that emerges from, or is 'grounded' in, the data - hence, grounded theory" (Merriam/Tisdell, 2016, p. 31).

Despite its popularity, limits and challenges need to be considered (Thomas/James, 2006). Grounded theory as qualitative research claims that theory is built from "*inductively* analyzing a social phenomenon" (Merriam/Tisdell, 2016, p.7). Real grounded theory claims to produce substantive theory. While I was interested in analyzing a social phenomenon, I did not aim to generate a substantive theory. Theory, understood as "as a set of statements telling us something new about the social world and which can be proved or disproved by empirical investigation" (Thomas/James, 2006), was not my research goal. I simply wanted to understand my students better. Thus, I am offering a narrative in order to learn more about my students' way of thinking during the avatar project. In other words, I do not claim to do grounded theory, but drew heavily from its ideas. I am also not following the specific procedures of grounded theory, which still seems legitimate, as the analytic thinking process in qualitative research should be "relaxed, flexible and driven by insight gained through interaction with data rather than being overly structured and based only on procedures" (Corbin/Strauss, 2008, p. 12). Hence, while I am referring to the systematic strategy for analyzing any data set provided by grounded theory, I am not claiming that I am doing grounded theory and that my result is a substantive theory.

To get a better understanding of my students' thinking and learning during the project, I contacted ten former students and asked if they would participate in a study by answering a questionnaire. Interviewing participants is a common qualitative research method that permits the exploration of particular topics of interest and enables the

participants to describe and reflect upon their experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Gubrium/Holstein, 2012; Kvale, 1996). Interviewing encourages the interviewee to share rich descriptions of phenomena while leaving the interpretation or analysis to the investigators. Thus, interviews contribute to a body of knowledge based on the meanings that the project experience held for the participants.

As the project had been part of an online course, I conducted the interviews online. Online interviews have become popular tools for data collection (James/Busher, 2012). Researchers have taken face-to-face approaches to interviewing (Gubrium/Holstein, 2012; Kvale, 1996) and modified them for the online environment (James/Busher, 2012). Online interviews can produce a wealth of data about people's experiences, thoughts, and feelings from their perspectives. For the study, asynchronous online interviews were used, interviews that are carried out in a time-lapsed manner. The result of such a mailed questionnaire are elicited texts, i.e., the involvement of research participants in writing the data (Charmaz, 2006). Elicited texts generate data that resemble interview data, but with the disadvantage that researchers cannot modify or reword a question once they ask it. There is also no immediate possibility of following up on a statement (Charmaz, 2006). It is also more challenging to collect in-depth data through online interviewing because repeated interactions and a closer reflection of the interview issues are not possible, and interviewees' mimic and reactions cannot be observed (James/Busher, 2006). Still, online interviews seemed the appropriate choice, as many of the online students did not live close to the campus. An advantage of online interview is that it enables the students to think carefully about their answers, which can produce more thorough answers, which was important for my research interest.

The students I contacted were participants of the project in the two semesters previous to the research study. I contacted only students from these two semesters because I was assuming that their memories of their avatar's lives would still be vivid. The students were not picked randomly, I chose students who had developed interesting characters and/or who had expressed difficulties with staying in role. One example is a student that stated, "There were a few posts like the Gay Teacher one where I just HAD to put my own opinion and morals [...]. It was such a challenge to think outside of my own mentality but I really enjoyed it." Further, I only contacted students who had enjoyed the project, experienced it as meaningful and/ or as a good preparation for becoming a teacher. While this of course limits the students' perspective on the project, it is justifiable as such students represent the majority of the participants (Wasmuth, 2015).

In the initial contact, students were informed about the research purpose, promised that their participation would be anonymous, and that their statements would be used to illustrate and find out more about certain aspects of my research interest. After the students agreed to participate in the study, they received an open-ended questionnaire (Attachment A). Open-ended questions are part of a less structured interview strategy, in which the interviewee is more a participant of meaning making than someone from which information is retrieved (DiCicco-Bloom/Crabtree, 2006). Open-ended questions permit the researcher to understand the project as seen by the participants (Patton, 2001). Due to my research interest, I had to specify the questions, which predetermined the students' points of view. However, the goal was to keep the questions as open as possible. More open questions such as "how did you feel when you answered as your avatar" would probably have revealed more the participants' feelings and thinking, but might

have provided less insight in my specific research interest. Thus, such guidance was necessary and warranted.

The questionnaire had two parts. The five questions of the first part referred to the challenge of creating an avatar's personality and acting accordingly, while the three questions of the second part referred to a specific topic, the issue of spanking. The students were informed that they were permitted to only answer those questions that they felt comfortable with, and that they should write as much as they deemed necessary. They were further informed that the research was not about "right or wrong answers" and that they should write what they thought and felt. Students could also take as much time as they needed to answer the questions.

Out of the ten students contacted, nine agreed to participate and eventually seven students answered the questionnaire. The participation of only seven students meant a very small study, but since the aim was to understand the students' thinking and their feelings, a small sample and limited data do not necessarily pose problems (Charmaz, 2006). The objective was not to generalize findings to a broader population, but to explain a specific phenomenon, and samples of this phenomena were, hence, sufficient (Corbin/Strauss, 1990).

After receiving all responses, the data coding started (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin/Strauss, 2008; Holton 2007). Coding "means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). Through coding, the researcher defines what is happening in the data and begins to grapple with what it could mean. To start, I conducted a phase of initial coding, naming each line or segment of data (Charmaz, 2006; Holton 2007). After a comparison of the codes, a phase of a focused coding followed, using the most significant and frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize the data

(Charmaz, 2006). The most important results of this process will be presented in the following chapter.

“Thinking as Someone Else” – The Students’ Interpretation

As said earlier, teacher education programs need to help their students to understand the complexity of teaching and being a teacher, and in order to be successful in this task, the programs need to overcome certain challenges. Students need to develop and practice the capacity to “understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others” (Patton, 2001, 52). One way to practice this skill is to put oneself in other’s shoes. Students also need to “think outside of the box” and develop new ways of examining their values and assumptions in order to realize that educational situations are ambiguous. While the avatar project seemed to be an innovative teaching method that could support students in developing these abilities, it also became clear that students had difficulties in staying in role and acting and thinking as their avatars. To learn more, I wanted to find out how students created their avatars, if they used certain strategies to think and act as their avatars, and in which situations they were not able to stay in role and why.

In the following, the most revealing findings of the coding process will be described. The participants’ replies discussed included the benefits of the project’s anonymity or their feelings when they received feedback or criticism, but the analysis will focus on the responses that were closely related to my research interest. Since it is the students’ interpretation of the project, I draw heavily on their original quotes, so that student voices can be heard.

The students’ responses varied to a great extent. While some participants answered every specific question, others gave more general

feedback on their experience as their avatar without answering each question. Together with their initial feedback, the responses represent the analyzed data. The most interesting findings will be presented in the following.

“Giving Birth” – Developing a Background Story

As mentioned earlier, “giving birth” is probably the most interesting part of the whole project. The students’ creativity was constantly surprising and many developed background stories full of details (Wasmuth, 2015). While thinking about why students struggled to stay in role, I asked myself: How do they create their avatars? Are they using strategies and do they determine which kind of person they want to be from the beginning? And how can it help them to act as their avatar during the further course of the project?

It is interesting to compare two responses from students creating avatars with the same background information: female, 19 years old, parent, one or two children to see the differences in how the students created their avatars. I had not chosen these two participants for the research because they had the same background information (which was, as I realized later, the case with two other research participants as well), but based on their interesting avatars and engagement in the project. However, it is interesting to know if and how the background information influenced the elaboration of the avatars’ personalities and the students’ interest in the project.

The first avatar, Sanaa², introduced herself as following,

“Hello. So sorry I am late with my post, but I have two jobs and sometimes don’t get in till after midnight, and by then I am too tired to be thinking about posting on some blog, but my girlfriend told me it was welcoming and safe here to post how I feel, so here goes: My name is Sanaa

Harper-Levine. I am a 19-year-old single parent. Life has not been kind to me. When my parents discovered that I was pregnant, my life changed dramatically. It did not matter that my lover was a professor at our local university. What mattered was that I was unmarried and had a secret relationship with a non-white, married individual. Both school officials and surprisingly, my parents, dismissed the fact that I was an honor student on scholarship. Thus, both the school and my so-called 'liberal' parents kicked me out. The term 'it takes a village' took on new meaning for me because my 'village' became a group of strangers who not only encouraged me and gave free lodging to both me and my child, but assisted in providing all the tools I would need to 'see the light at the end of the tunnel'. It is true that I made a mistake in judgment, and all of my so-called 'smarts' obviously excluded common sense. However, I never dreamed that we would live in a shelter run by a group of 'seasoned survivors' for an entire year and to this day. Now, I am enrolled in a community college, learning a skill that will allow me to obtain gainful employment and, with the help of the new school I go to, I found a job that though good (I'm a temp) cannot support both me and my child, which is why I work two jobs and don't have time for hobbies. During this time of extreme stress, I learned that there are all kinds of prejudice: against women in general and single women with children in particular; and, worst of all.....the willingness of "the powerful" to believe that a young person who is in serious trouble desperately wants to climb out of the barrel and move up the ladder of success. I am a living witness that, despite all odds, success is possible. Achieving it requires a unique

something within each individual that will keep them going no matter what the obstacles may be. I now have two jobs, and working on moving on my own and my little boy, Jaeson, (he's 4 years old BTW) is attending a great Montessori Day Care Program. There are those who will say that my story is the exception and not the norm. Not so. I submit to all readers that anything is possible despite all obstacles. If you have hope in your heart, a will to succeed, and angels to help guide your way, never looking for a hand OUT, but a hand UP.....then SUCCESS is in your future!!"

As can be seen, Sanaa introduced herself with a long and fascinating background story that included an affair with a married professor, an unwanted pregnancy, getting "kicked-out" by the parents, and living in a shelter. At the same time, Sanaa was described as a smart and strong personality, having been an honor student with a scholarship and now being in two jobs while attending community college. Obviously, the participant invested a lot of time in creating an avatar she was interested in and must have cared about. When asked about how she created the avatar, the Sanaa answered,

"I tried to think like the nineteen-year olds I see now, BUT this one had a little bit more on her plate because she was a single parent and had many more responsibilities than the average person her age. I wanted her to be strong but sometimes naïve about certain things that a 19-year-old wouldn't possess at such a young age."

Right from the beginning, a clear idea of the avatar's personality existed: Strong, but also a bit naïve because of her age, and somehow disappointed by her life experience.

The other avatar's name was Isamar. She introduced herself in the following way:

“Hello everyone,

My name is Isamar Maldonado. I am 19 years old. I am currently working as an Administrative Assistant at a private doctor's office. Also, I am going to school at night to earn a degree in Nursing. It seems that I am always juggling around with all of the things I have to focus on in my life. I am always doing something: working, going to school, homework, and spending time with my babies; let's just say that I do not have a lot of ‘me’ time.

I am a single mother of two beautiful children. My son is 4 years old and is in Pre-K. My daughter is 1 and does not go to school yet. Sometimes, I wonder how I am able to do all that I do but I know the answer to that: my mother. My mother has been my rock since even before I was born. My munchkins and I live with her. She is my full-time babysitter. She loves the fact that she gets to have a helping-hand in raising her grandchildren. She watches Jasmine while I am at work. I am able to take my big boy Jordan to school but she picks him up. The days I don't have class at night, are my favorite. I am able to go home and actually do ‘homework’ with Jordan, have dinner with my family, get him ready for school the next day, tuck him into bed, and read him a goodnight story. I wish I was able to be more involved with his life at school, but with my schedule it is pretty much impossible. I love him and Jasmine so much, and I just want to give them the best life they can have.”

Like Sanaa, she is a single mother. But Isamar has a very different background story. She is very close to her mother and receives a lot of support from her; altogether, she seems to be much more content with her life. Like Sanaa, she seems to have a strong personality, she is working in a doctor's office and attending school

at night; thus, creating a strong personality seems to be important for both participants. Interestingly, she is not mentioning the father(s) of her children at all. When asked about developing the avatar, Isamar replied,

“At first, when I ‘gave birth’ to my avatar, I originally went with the concept of a married 19-year-old, whose husband was in the military, and a mother of 3-year-old twins. After some thought, I changed her into a single mother of 2, a 4-year-old son and a 1-year-old daughter.”

Again, it becomes clear that the student put a lot of thought in the process and even modified the initial background story to develop an interesting avatar character.

These two cases are only examples, but it seems that many students really made an effort when “giving birth” to their avatars. Not only did they develop elaborate background stories, they also thought about their avatar's personality traits. As Earnest, a 42-year-old teacher, explained,

“I wanted to allow freedom to make future choices, but also be as detailed as possible to give my character some structure to work within. I thought it was important to give him a rich background story, but also put him in a new context and environment so he could be a little uncomfortable.”

It is quite interesting to look at these characteristics in more detail.

Who Am I? – The Avatars' Personalities

When asked, all of the study's participants were able to indicate concrete personality traits as well as personal/professional attitudes and beliefs that they wanted their avatars to possess. Let us take a look at Earnest again,

“Even though he was only middle-aged, for whatever reason, Earnest would

be politically conservative, have a stern tone, and a deep respect for authority figures and the system. I had intended for his personality to be firm and unwavering, coming from his professional experience, however, he often got stuck in logical reasoning and did not always easily decide on a side to take for certain issues."

Earnest was supposed to be "firm and unwavering", a teacher who "would really believe in classroom management and creating law-abiding citizens", but also someone who is "conflicted", looking for more information and thinking carefully about a case before making a decision. When asked about it, it was important for the participant to make clear that such a personality was not her/his own.

"The conservatism and 'respect for authority' that Earnest had is different than my own personality, as I often challenge existing practices and try to take fresh perspectives on issues."

As can be seen in the example above, one way for a participant to decide on an avatars' personality traits and beliefs is to reflect on the participants' own characteristics and opinions. Four out of seven of the participants chose such an approach. Sanaa provides an example,

"Some of the attitudes married my own when I was that age, and some of the beliefs I had were parallel to my own."

Isamar, the other 19-year-old single mother, followed a different approach,

"I wanted to really step out of my own comfort zone and create a person whose ideals were somewhat different from mine but in a sense had the same passion, independence, and responsibility as I do."

However, her starting point for creating the avatar's character was, again, her own

attitudes and ideas. Further, she also had a clear idea of the avatar's personality,

"I wanted her to be 'fiery' and not afraid to express her feelings or thoughts. I wanted her to be a strong independent woman, who regardless of being a single-mother, she was capable of achieving all of her dreams: work, school, and motherhood."

Not all participants chose such a strategy. Instead, the other three thought about the personality that an "ideal" principal or teacher in their opinion should possess. One example is Mario Polanco. He described himself in the following way,

"Hi All, my name is Mario Polanco; I am 55 years old and a Principal in a public elementary school in the South Bronx. I have worked in the same school for the past 30 years. I started as a first grader teacher for 10 years; I then worked as an ESL teacher for 5 years before I became an Assistant Principal followed by becoming the Principal. I have been the Principal of the school for the last 10 years. I am married to a high school English teacher and we have two daughters, ages 22 and 16 [...]."

Again, we can see a rich background story, this is actually only the first paragraph of a post that comprises 1002 words. There was also a very clear idea about the avatar's personality, based on the background story,

"I chose a very direct, straight forward and stern personality for my avatar because I felt that someone who has been in the system for 30 years has seen an incredible amount of changes over the years, must be flexible in order to work with all the changes he has experienced."

But in this case, the personality traits and beliefs were not developed by reflecting on the

student's own beliefs and characteristics, but by thinking about the role and tasks of a principal,

“He also needed to have a strong personality in order to be able to excel and grow within the school from a teacher to an assistant principal and finally to the principal. I feel that principals often face many difficult decisions and challenges where they are caught between their staff and doing what is required of them. A principal needs to be authoritative, respected and in turn may not always be liked and in this case I feel that's why principals need to be very transparent in their decisions. I wanted my avatar to be very honest, direct, fair and strong.”

Two more participants used the same approach. Richard Webber, again a male, 55-year-old principal, stated,

“The way I decided what kind of personality my avatar was going to have was by thinking of the type of principal that I would want for an elementary school to have. I thought about the characteristics in which I felt a school principal should have and I went from there.”

Starting from the idea of an “ideal” principal, these participants wanted to create an avatar with “strong leadership skills, reasonable, understanding, fair, responsible, and someone who cared about the staff and students.”

To sum up: While creating their avatars, the participants chose different approaches to “give birth” to their avatars and to equip them with personality traits. However, two questions remain, did the participants also use strategies to decide how their avatars would think and react when faced with different educational issues and how did the participants try to answer in a way that was consistent with their avatars' personalities?

Remaining True to the Avatar – Developing Strategies

While analyzing the data, two different strategies became evident. The first one is related to the idea described above, equipping the avatar with the personality traits of an “ideal” principal/teacher. Peter Froebel, a male, 57 years old head teacher was developed this way,

“I decided to go with an understanding, realistic, and kindhearted teacher. I decided on this personality because I wanted to create someone who was similar to a teacher that I admired.”

In this case, the admiration for a real teacher led to the avatar's personality. As before, both principals were created in a similar way and the participants continued to use this strategy to make the avatars' decisions. But how did the participants try to remain true to their avatar's personality? When prompted to react to the educational issues presented in the project, Richard Webber explained that he had “to keep reminding myself to separate my thoughts from the thoughts of my avatar.” Instead, the decision how the avatar would think was based on “considering how I believed principals would have handled the different educational issues.” Mario Polanco was also an “ideal” principal due to “the disposition and attitude that I described for my avatar are qualities that I hope to obtain.” Yet, this participant added another component to the strategy by considering the positions of all stakeholders and, most importantly, the students' well-being,

“I made sure to think of what the school district or superintendent would want the principal to do, what the parents would want the principal to do and then what the staff would want the principal to do. Then after thinking about all of those opinions, I finally would think of what would the principal feel would be the best for the child and that was how I would

come down to a final decision and reaction."

Two participants used a different strategy that can be described as "thinking the opposite." One example is Earnest. While the participant also tried to "think like an old man", more important was the intention "to answer questions completely opposite from my own views." While this strategy was used throughout, it was modified because "if I had been oppositional only for opposition's sake, it would not have been truthful to the character." Again, it shows how thoroughly the participant thought about the avatar. The replies, even if they were supposed to be opposite of the participant's opinion, had to be realistic for the avatar's own personality traits and beliefs.

Isamar decided in a similar way,

"I decided that I would look at each issue from my point of view, and then find an opposing viewpoint, which would become my avatar's point of view. I wanted to step out of my own shoes and view each topic from a different light, that way I could better understand others."

Again, we can see a strategy that has been described as "thinking the opposite."

If such strategies were in place, why did the participants struggle to retain their avatar's roles when faced with the educational issues?

Thinking as Someone Else – The Struggle with Being the Avatar

I originally started the research because I wanted to find out more about why it was so difficult for many students to stay in their avatars' roles. The gathered data regarding this question was less than revealing. While I learned a lot about the participants' ideas, strategies, and motifs, I still do not have a much better understanding of why this was so difficult for the students. Instead, I am not sure if they were really struggling at all.

The two participants who discussed their struggle in more detail, explained that they had difficulties supporting an argument that they did not agree with, even if their avatars had held such a particular view. As Earnest explained,

"For the Gold Star post, I had to try so hard to answer this one! I personally do not believe that kids should be motivated to learn by stickers and prizes. [...]. However, I knew Earnest would really believe in classroom management and creating law-abiding citizens. [...] For the Gold Star post that I mentioned before, it was especially difficult when my professor replied to my initial post! I was honestly really frustrated with trying to support an argument that I didn't believe in when an aspect of it was called out by my professor!"

For Earnest, it was the most difficult part "to further justify counterpoints that were raised in comments, when I personally agreed with them, but my avatar did not."

Richard Webber said something similar,

"It was a bit of a struggle trying to be someone else because not only do you not have any insight as to what stands professionals in those situations make, but if you strongly disagree with something that they may have agreed with, then it's hard trying to stand for something you do not truly stand for."

These participants felt that it was difficult to remain true to the avatar's character and ideas when they disagreed with the avatar's opinion and had to defend an argument they did not believe in.

Richard Webber's explanation touched on another aspect that made it difficult for some participants to answer with their avatars' voices. He explained,

“It was difficult to stay in the role of my avatar because I wasn’t sure if how I responded to situations was the way that a real principal would have.”

Even if this argument sounds somehow convincing, it still does not answer the question why the participant was not able to create an answer that fit the avatar’s personality.

Altogether, it seems difficult for the participants to express their struggle and the reasons for the difficulty. Interestingly, the interviews did not reveal the struggle that I had anticipated after reading the initial feedback of the whole classes. The participants’ answers were very mixed regarding this issue. Some mentioned a struggle, but it seems as if the students were more successful in acting as their avatars as originally thought. One example is Isamar,

“At first, I thought it would be weird or really hard, but once I figured out a system of thinking as myself, and using that as a starting point to come up with an argument for the opposite position, this really made the whole process a lot easier.”

It seems as if they were more able to remind themselves that it is not about their ideas. Mario Polanco provided a good example when he explained, “In certain instances it was difficult to stay in role because when I would first read the scenarios my initial reaction was my own so I often had to take a step back and think from all angles.” For this reason, he was able to state: “I honestly feel that I answered as my avatar in all of the posts.” For Sanaa’s creator it was also “very difficult NOT to put my own beliefs in many of the responses because the character has not experienced all the things I have at my ripe old age of 47, even though I do see sprinkles of my values throughout the commentary.” Although these participants answered from time to time as themselves,

overall, it appears that they were able to stay in role.

Others indeed explained that it was very difficult for them to forget their own beliefs. As Peter Froebel explained,

“It was difficult at times to step out myself and think through my avatar. I really tried to pretend that I was him, an experienced teacher. Although I was pretending to be someone else, I think that I stuck to most of my beliefs as well and did not really get far away from them.”

He further explained that it was difficult to him to voice a different opinion because of his own experience,

“One time was when I was describing the ‘reward system’. I think that I spoke as myself here because this is something that I have had experience with and it was successful for me. Being that I had experience with this type of reward system, I wanted Froebel to agree with it as well.”

Again, it showed that it was difficult for many students to think outside the box.

Conclusion

One of the main reasons for doing research on students’ activities, assignments, and projects, or in short student learning, is to understand, document, and generate public knowledge about how students’ learning can be supported best (Freeman, 1998). In the following I will discuss some of the findings and how they can help to address some of the general challenges in teacher education described earlier, as well as specific issues of the avatar project. My main research questions were why did the students struggle to stay in the role of their avatars, which strategies they used to stay in role, and when and why were they not able to do so?

The research study did not reveal as much as hoped about the students' difficulties with staying in role, but it clearly helped to better understand the participants' motifs and approaches to the educational issues, and therefore how this assignment should be implemented to be meaningful. What became very clear is that the students think deeply about their avatar and the avatar's personal traits, and that they invest the time to give birth to an intriguing personality. How are they able to put themselves in someone else's shoes? The analysis of the participants' responses revealed two strategies used to act and think as the avatar: "Thinking the opposite" and "thinking about an ideal teacher/principal." While both strategies seemed to be helpful in deciding what to say and what to write, both strategies also had weaknesses in regards to the idea of being someone else. The latter was normally a personality that was close to the students' own personality, as most students would give an ideal avatar personal traits they already possessed or would like to possess. They were thinking about what they saw as an ideal teacher and of course this was normally not the opposite of their own behavior or teaching style. While such a reflection can be helpful, it can lead (in an extreme), to only writing one's own opinion. This is exactly what one participant did throughout the whole project – she acted as herself: "I fell [sic!] like throughout the entire time I would be responding as myself." While this was, of course, legitimate, as such an approach was never prohibited, it is questionable to what extent that approach supports the students' learning. After all, the project's goal was to help students to understand that other stakeholder could think and feel differently about educational issues. I had never anticipated that students would actually simply write their own opinion all the time, as this would make the whole exercise irrelevant. I knew that they were struggling, but not to such

an extent. However, after reading this statement, I realized that this could be the case quite often. To make the project meaningful, a stronger emphasis should be placed on the idea that students need to create an avatar personality that is different to their own. Otherwise, it is not certain that they can realize what it means to be "in someone else's shoes."

While the other strategy, the one I have called, "thinking the opposite," seems to be more promising, it is also not without challenges. As said, one of the project's main objectives is to help students to experience what it means to be someone else. They also need to understand the ambiguity of educational issues and that the role matters when making decisions. Very often, there is no simple right or wrong. Due to their different backgrounds, experiences, and interests, people think differently about such problems and the project aims to develop empathy, the capacity to "understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others" (Patton, 2001), 52). However, if you use your own thinking as the starting point for the avatar's thinking, can you really be open to experience what it means to be and think as someone else, an almost impossible task anyway? You still start with your own ideas and you think about others from a superior vantage point of authority, but do not view the opinion of others as equal. Further, you fall back to a black-white thinking, because the opposite of your own thinking is not necessarily what your avatar's personality would think. An avatar who would emphasize the importance of strict rules (which could be the opposite of the participant's opinion), does not necessarily have to support a reward system (which could be again the opposite thinking). Why should a complex character always think in black-white categories such a black-white as the opposite of your own thinking? The two same people can agree and

disagree about certain topics. Students should not be “oppositional only for opposition’s sake”, as one of the participants called it. While a strategy such as “thinking the opposite” may help to decide how an avatar has to react, it is questionable if it helps to understand the complexity of human beings and their decisions. Again, this is an aspect that could be emphasized or even discussed in the course in order to make the learning experience more meaning.

The main purpose for doing this research was to find out why the students are struggling to stay in role and if strategies exist, that help students to stay in role. As said earlier, the study did not really reveal how much and especially why the participants were struggling with answering and acting as their avatars. It seems as if it is very difficult for the students to clearly reflect on this issue. Even the participants who realized this problem, were not always able to explain why it occurred. Interestingly, while all the other questions were answered by everyone, the following question were not answered by two participants: *Why was it so difficult to stay in the role of your avatar? If you reflect on it today, why were you struggling with being someone else?* While they were able to explain the process of creating their avatars and to describe the personality traits, as well as the strategies, it seems to be more difficult to really understand why it was so difficult for them to always act as the avatar.

A good example of this difficulty is Sanaa. She was able to give a concrete example of a situation in which she felt she did not answer as her avatar. But when asked regarding the concrete situation with the follow-up question: *Why did you not answer as Sanaa? Why was it important for you to share the insights that you have, but that you assume a 19 years old cannot have? Why couldn't you answer as Sanaa in this case, while you could in others?* Sanaa again

was not able to clarify why she decided not to answer as Sanaa in this specific situation. She was able to explain, why a 19 year old does not have the insights to answer in a way as Sanaa did in her reply, but not why she had to fall back to her own opinion instead of continuing as Sanaa. Again, this leaves the question unanswered, why she was normally able to answer as Sanaa, but not this time: a question that seems difficult to answer for the participants, even when they are forced to reflect on it.

A small study with only seven participants can of course not be significant in terms of deciding if such a teaching method is a meaningful way to go beyond traditional learning. However, the approach seems to be at least promising. Students need to be challenged in unorthodox and innovative ways and teaching methods if we want them to prepare for their future role as a teacher. They need to understand the complexity of being a teacher, and the avatar project is one approach that has could be helpful. It seems to be an approach that supports the students in more meaningful ways compared to the traditional teaching and assignments found in many other courses in teacher education programs. The struggle with staying in role is a challenge and it would be helpful to learn more about the students’ thinking and strategies. Still, the students are forced to think about their own and others opinions and how these impact their decision making, teaching and learning of children. And this can only help them prepare for their role as future teachers. Or, to finish with words of Mario Polanco, “It was a great exercise to learn to step into everyone else’s shoes and think of how they feel and now decide how best to resolve the situation.”

Notes

1. The number of students who have participated is higher, close to 140 students. Not all of the students have finished the course or gave feedback on the avatar project. For my research, I have only included the students who gave me feedback at the end of the course.
2. I will use the avatars' names when I am referring to the creators of the avatars. These are not the real names of the research participants.

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Attachment A

Avatar Research Project

Name of the avatar:

General

I. Please think back to the time when you “gave birth” to your avatar. How did you decide which kind of personality your avatar should possess? Could you please list some of the characteristics you wanted your avatar to possess? The certain dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs that you chose, were they the same or the opposite of your own?

II. How did you decide how your avatar would think about and react to the educational issues? How did you know what your avatar was thinking in each specific situation? How did you make sure that you answered as your avatar and not as yourself?

III. Please read all of your avatar’s answers again. After reading your avatar’s post, can you describe situations when your avatar clearly showed the characteristics you wanted him to possess? In other words, when were you clearly speaking as your avatar and not as yourself? If possible, please state a concrete statement (if you can think of many, please select two or three examples).

IV. After reading your avatar’s posts, can you describe situations when you did not answer as your avatar, but yourself? In other words, when were you clearly speaking as yourself and not as your avatar? If possible, please state a concrete statement (if you can think of many, please select two or three examples). Can you explain why you didn’t answer as your avatar?

V. Why was it so difficult to stay in the role of your avatar? If you reflect on it today, why were you struggling with being someone else?

Spanking

I. Spanking is a controversial and emotional topic for many. What would you say, did the safe environment and the anonymity of the avatar project enable you to voice a stronger opinion than in a normal classroom or online discussion? Can you explain why.

II. In this discussion, did you feel less attacked when someone confronted your avatar's opinion and statements? Was it easier to you to listen to criticism or even accusations? Altogether, were you able to realize that you were speaking and being confronted as your avatar, and not as yourself?

III. If you did not agree with an avatar's opinion, was it easier to confront and even correct/educate your dialog partner because you were not afraid of hurting someone's feelings?