

FINAL REPORT

Project Title: Evaluating role-play in history teaching

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Short summary:

The project involved an element of role-play introduced into the seminar teaching of undergraduates in History at the University of Southampton.

Report:

Two lecturers (one teaching medieval European history and one later modern French history) have devised one role-play topic as part of the seminar programme for their respective Year 1 and Year 2 undergraduate courses. Role-play is a common enough teaching tool for History in the school sector, perhaps mostly as an exercise in encouraging empathy, but it is relatively uncommon in higher education. Asking students to recreate an event or episode from the past can increase their seminar participation, focus their attention on primary sources, and foster a micro-historical approach that shifts the basis of their interpretation 'from facts to factors'. What evidence is there, however, that such an approach is effective as a teaching tool? Does it help to achieve learning outcomes more efficiently and enjoyably? Do some historical episodes lend themselves better than others to role-play? How well can role-play render the complexity of the past? This research into the effectiveness of role-play in History teaching raises just such questions and problems and seeks to compare a role-play cohort with a non-role-play cohort in drawing its conclusions.

Role-play topics:

Medieval history: siege of Antioch (Year 1); being a medieval man (Year 2)

Later modern French history: trial of Louis XVI (Year 1); feminist congress in Paris, 1900 (Year 2)

Observations and conclusions:

Our intention was to encourage the understanding of past worlds and to focus student minds on the words and actions that were possible in the historical scenario in question. We wanted students to ask questions about the grounds on which a certain point of view was put forward and defended (in the 1792-3 trial of a king during the French Revolution); the reasons why a particular event took one course and not another (during the First Crusade); the plurality of positions taken by nineteenth-century French feminists (at an international congress in *fin-de-siècle* Paris); and the ways in which a gender system worked to determine male experiences in the medieval world just as much as female ones. In many ways this involved advocacy, or enactive representation, rather than role-play itself, not least because we dealt in documented events for the most part rather than imagined yet plausible scenarios. We also minimised the performative element by avoiding a theatrical division between role-players and audience and did not insist on the use of first person (the latter was something that all our students showed an aversion to in any case). Student response attests to the popularity of such exercises, especially as a break from the usual seminar format, and they facilitated full student participation in discussion. The role-plays allowed a meaningful incorporation of diverse primary sources and developed a problem-focused inquiry that permitted the diversity and complexity of the past, and which suggested how the outcomes of historical crises are not inevitable. Yet it is hard to single out the role-play factor in drawing such conclusions and it may be that it is the task-based, structured, or novel, nature of the exercises that worked best. And while many of our students, especially in Year 2, built their research essays and exam revision around aspects of the role-play, the exercises themselves did not appear to lead to greater historical understanding.

We will shortly be submitting for publication in the *Journal of Higher Education* a summary of our results and a full description of the role-play exercises themselves.