

## **‘Not the White Tights Again!’:**

*In many ways, this article from 1989 is the beginning of the path that led to Thinking History. It records earlyish attempts at role-play from the mid-1980s onwards. Re-reading this over 20 years later, what’s intriguing is how the principles were clear but also how hesitantly I put them forward.*

### **Role-play in History Teaching at Degree Level**

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‘More than anything, it made me realise that the events did not just happen as a matter of course, but that there were actually people making decisions which could govern the course of events ... and decisions were very difficult.’

‘The adverse effect stemmed from the sheer force of the king’s point of view which was very difficult to challenge and argue against.’

‘It was very difficult to explain the fun and enjoyment of this type of activity, but one word of advice – steer clear of dressing up as Margaret of Anjou.’

These are three different reactions that reflect the value, dangers and fun of role-play which, like other activity methods, is being urged on teachers as part of GCSE’s drive to develop pupils’ positive participation in the classroom. Working in a teacher-training institution, it should always be necessary for us to try our own medicine. Hence, clinging to the assumption that effective teaching methods are likely to be effective with any age of student, we have been investigating the use of role-play at degree level. You don’t need RADA training, you do need to be prepared to take risks – of various sorts – but the results, allowing for inevitable teething problems, have been very rewarding. More generally our experience may suggest an overall strategy for involving students in role-play that could be used at any level of history teaching.

Why take risks at degree level? After all, the students are well-motivated, they listen politely, take notes ever so diligently and history’s a serious business when finals are only a few months away. Well, up to a point, Lord Dacre. It may be that these are the very reasons why any teacher at degree level should be trying out the possibilities of alternative teaching methods. Variety and experiment shouldn’t be the sole province of those desperate to keep adolescents interested on a Friday

afternoon. All teachers in higher education should be aiming to provide models of good practice for students to learn from in terms of methodology, openness to new ideas and professionalism.

## **Teaching in Higher Education**

Teaching at Trinity and All Saints College has its own particular demands. We are a college of higher education offering degree courses validated by the University of Leeds. Most significantly, our students divide their working time equally between an academic subject, such as history, and one of three professional studies – Education, Public Media and Business, Management and Administration. All students have professional placements, and while education students are coping with the rigours of the classroom, the Media and BMA students are hard at work in advertising agencies, retail management, banks or local radio stations.

For the most part our students don't expect their academic and professional course to interlink when they arrive. Many are attracted by the opportunity to develop professional skills while spending the rest of their time studying the subject that most interests them. Certainly, history is seen as being interesting but not useful. Very few interviewees, indeed, are able to suggest any way in which their studies in history to A level might prove useful to them in the future.

If we see this as a challenge, the college's degree structure provides a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate how the study of history, our teaching methods and the students' resulting activities can contribute clearly and significantly to the development of student's professional skills – even if this inter-connection does take them rather by surprise and constantly needs reinforcement.

## **Providing a Model**

Integral to this approach is the development of teaching strategies and methods which provide models of good practice for our students. It isn't sufficient to discuss teaching methods in 'methods' classes as part of professional training. We need to provide daily models on the academic history course and we need to consider how our practice can provide guidance for students on the other professional courses. While lecturing and small group tutorials are effective teaching methods in certain circumstances, they do little to prepare students for working with 7, 9 or 11 year-olds.

These requirements have meant a sharp reduction in the number of lectures given – they are now used only when they provide the most appropriate teaching method and not as a matter of course. There has been a corresponding increase in small-group work within whole class sessions when

perhaps 8-10 groups of 3 students work with sources and questions before we open out into a whole class discussion.

We have also increased the use of computer-assisted learning and fieldwork and have used coursework assessment to stress the importance of the development of skills of oral presentation – students presenting the main argument and conclusion of an essay orally as part of the coursework assessment. This takes the form of a presentation to the year-group, with students using OHP's and other visual aids, with the presentations video-recorded so that techniques of oral presentation can be discussed and improved and the final version assessed.

### **Working with Theatre in Education**

A further element in this pattern has been the use of role-play, largely as a result of an in-service course run at the Tower of London. Part of this course was run by Rosemary Linnell of the ILEA Curtain Theatre, who demonstrated and discussed techniques for involving pupils in role-play situations which didn't require the command of large quantities of information about past events and individuals, but did raise questions for pupils about the thoughts and ideas of people of a past time by asking them to make decisions for themselves.

During this session Ms. Linnell said that her methods worked well with adolescents but she was less sure of their suitability with sixth-formers or students. While this wasn't quite the throwing down of a gauntlet it seemed to offer another possibility for the development of the college's teaching methods.

Its particular application appeared to be in developing students' understanding of the ideas and philosophies that determined attitudes and actions, notably for medieval courses where ideas rarely appear explicitly in the sources. Classes had previously followed a standard question and answer and 'discussion' pattern so that students, at best, knew that certain views were held. They didn't necessarily see them as central to the process of explanation of events. Role-play, demanding that students plunge into situations where they need to adhere to certain ways of thinking and then use and respond to those patterns of thought, appeared to offer the chance of a greater depth of understanding.

So we did plunge in – and two years later role-play activities have become standard practice in two courses. Results have been enjoyable and beneficial for students' understanding. Rather to my surprise, a structure has also appeared (see Table I) that introduces students to role-play gently

before stepping up the demands upon them. It seems likely that this structure could apply to work with pupils of other ages, provided the pattern of staged involvement of pupils in role-play is maintained.

**Table 1. Stages in involving students in role-play activities**

<b>Stage 1</b>	Only the teacher is in the role. Students ask questions of the historical character to develop understanding of his/her ideas/decisions.
<b>Stage 2</b>	Students represent a general group – e.g. 15th century nobility – responding to the teacher in role. Students do not have named, individual roles.
<b>Stage 3</b>	Each student has a named, individual role but they are manoeuvred through a series of decision points by structured questions on motives and consequences of actions.
<b>Stage 4</b>	Students have named individual roles and freedom to discuss, negotiate with others within a general framework of objectives.

## The Role-play Structure

### Stage 1

Students are not required to take on a role from the past themselves but to make enquiries of a person from the past portrayed by the teacher. Students are therefore introduced to the idea of role-play without having to take risks themselves, either in terms of their knowledge or their self-confidence. The onus is entirely on the teacher!

An example of this stage can be cited from a Year One Historiography option, which looks at the development of historians' views on King John and the Magna Carta. At the start of this course students have two potentially conflicting needs – to gain a swift overview of the events of 1199-1216 and the issues involved, and to realise that historians' differing interpretations have produced a continuing debate about John and the Magna Carta. Role-play offers a means to meet both these needs.

As preparation for the first class, students are 'set up' by reading from J.R.Green's *A Short History of the English People*, edited to present an almost entirely critical view of John, and including a couple of extracts from chronicles that appear to lend substance to the criticisms. They are asked to read this and come prepared to discuss John's faults. They are not told that they are going to discuss them with John himself!

Thus, the class begins with my entrance as King John, dressed in borrowed medieval costume and wig, and with a request that they give voice to their criticisms so that I can answer them. Assuming that the initial panic/giggles/bewilderment quickly settles down – which it always has done so far – this situation offers the teacher the opportunity to develop the idea of differing interpretations in a very clear but subtle way.

Students begin to offer criticisms which John can reply to pleasantly and perhaps patronisingly, putting right their ‘understandable mistakes’. Thus, there is a direct set of disagreements with the set reading. When students appeal to the chronicles as evidence there’s the opportunity for John to undermine their reliability by asking when they were written and by whom and, while becoming angrier, why such bigoted sources should be given credence. From there John is on a downward path, gradually showing signs of paranoia as he accuses any student showing signs of taking notes (and there’s bound to be one) of passing information to my (sorry, his) enemies. At the end students usually have two widely-differing interpretations of John’s character. They have heard evidence for both and have been introduced to a more subtly shaded character, which should suggest why there is continuing room for debate. They have also taken on-board a lot of information about the issues of the reign in a relatively painless and effective way because they have used it as part of an argument. This example has a particular value within the course on John. More generally, this kind of activity establishes role-play as part of the pattern of teaching and learning without pressurising students by making too many differing demands on them – but after that it’s time to take them out of the twentieth century!

## **Stage 2**

Students again have to respond to the teacher’s portrayal of a character from the past but now they must do so from the perspective of people from that period. However, they are not required to take on the roles of named individuals. They represent a general group and the extent to which differences appear will be a product of the initiatives of individuals within the group.

The following illustration comes from a role-play used early on in our third-year Honours degree Special Subject option on the Wars of the Roses.

Students tend to begin this course with the assumption that the nobility were only too eager for war and would readily agree to the bloody deposition of kings. The role-play is designed to tackle these assumptions by requiring the students to take on the role of a group of nobles who are being badgered by Richard, Duke of York, to agree to the deposition of Henry VI.

The situation is set deliberately vaguely around 1452/3. The preceding classes look at events up to and including Cade's Rebellion and, in the context of that rebellion, note the absence of direct criticisms of Henry himself from the rebels' complaints. Thus, students have some general awareness of attitudes to the king but have not directly discussed the likely responses of nobles asked to agree to Henry's deposition.

Again, students have no warning of the impending excitements! A colleague summons the students from the usual classroom to a different venue, equipped simply with a table around which the nobles sit. Here they are welcomed by Richard, Duke of York, who argues the case for the attainder of his arch-rival, the Duke of Somerset. The argument covers the problems at home and abroad, again serving as valuable consolidation of information. Peroration concluded, York appeals for the nobles' support and leaves the scene briefly. On returning York usually encounters problems, as not all the nobility may be easily swayed, some arguing that an attack on the king's chief minister is effectively an attack on the king himself. However, an appeal to patriotism and the reminder of how they had previously disposed of Suffolk wins them round to York's viewpoint.

Enter Somerset, determined to put an end to this treasonable talk but fated not to do so (at least, he hasn't succeeded yet!). For the purposes of the occasion, the value lies in Somerset's giving voice to the argument that the king is God's anointed, and therefore beyond criticism and in the responses required of the students, forced by Somerset to differentiate between their opposition to him and their loyalty to the king.

As Somerset retreats, York's case still intact, the third phase begins as York appeals for support for the deposition of King Henry. So far, York has not succeeded, as the nobility have been determined to do nothing that would suggest disloyalty to the king. Again, the value lies in the development of the arguments.

The first time we tried this we had, towards the end, one unexpected gain. Having failed, York tried to pretend that he had only been testing their loyalty and hadn't really intended treason. At that point the debate continued along these lines:

*Nobleman:* Don't play games with us, York, you might not keep our support. We can be dangerous to you.

*York*: Can you? No, you need me and must be loyal to me. You have told Somerset that you oppose him – you cannot go back on that. You have committed yourself to me and will do as I direct.

The reality of faction had made itself apparent. Students said afterwards that this was when they felt pressure and vulnerability as a result of having been seen to commit themselves against someone in power.

Those familiar with the Wars of Roses will realise that such a scene is unhistorical. York, as far as we know, made no such move against Henry until 1460. Amongst other things, the role-play helps to explain why. Even if he had wanted to, York's support would have been negligible.

Thus, students are drawn into a general situation where they do not need specific knowledge but only the beginnings of an understanding of ideas of the time. Additional, useable information can be fed in stages by the teacher so that students can respond to and use it in their own arguments. The discussion session afterwards is of great value for untangling students' previous assumptions and what they have learned. This prepares the way for Stage 3.

### **Stage 3**

Students are required to take on the roles of named individuals but do so under careful guidance from the teacher. The role-play is, in effect, choreographed for them.

Soon after exploring the ideas above in the Wars of the Roses course we need to explain why, given the nobility's reluctance to challenge Henry VI, factions developed and the battle of St. Albans came about. Here we need to examine motivation – both the general concerns of the nobility and the particular motives of individuals. Our natural starting points, the narrative sources, provide little information that illuminates motives.

Worse, the complexity of the issues and events means that most secondary material is at a rather daunting level if you do not already have a reasonable familiarity with the events of 1452/55 and with the relationships of the nobles concerned. It is all too easy to get your Somersets and Salisburys in a twist, put your brain into neutral and wait for something simpler to come along. Hence, the role-play acts as a gentle introduction to the required reading as well as an exploration of motivations.

Students are allocated individual roles and given brief information about their own position – what their relations are with other key figures, any details about, for example, land-holdings that are going to be relevant. For no individual does this amount to more than ten lines – usually only five. Students are then asked to take up places which reflect their relationships with York and Somerset in 1452. As Figure A in Table 2 shows, York is isolated.

**Table 2:**

<b>Figure A</b> <b>Early 1453</b>	York	Warwick	Salisbury	Henry
		Northumberland	Buckingham	Somerset
			Exeter	
<b>Figure B</b> <b>Late 1453</b>	York	Warwick	Salisbury	Buckingham
		Northumberland	Exeter	Somerset
<b>Figure C</b> <b>Late 1454</b>	Salisbury		Exeter	Somerset
	York	Warwick		
	Henry	Buckingham		
		Northumberland		
<b>Figure D</b> <b>May 1455</b>	Salisbury		Buckingham	Henry
	York	Warwick	Exeter	Somerset
			Northumberland	

This physical representation of the changes in relationships is the key to this role-play. Students are led through a series of events by the teacher's questions. They first respond verbally to the problems posed and then have to decide whether to adjust their physical positioning. For example, Warwick and Salisbury first become slightly detached from the court circle as a result of Warwick's dispute with Somerset over lands (Figure B). Henry's illness then changes the situation more dramatically, but only once York is Protector (Figure C). Finally Henry's recovery and his restoration produces the clear split that is shown in Figure D.

Throughout, students are required to consider their reactions in role and also the consequences of any action they take. The results are:

- a) some sense of what mattered to people of the period,
- b) an awareness of the complex and conflicting pressures faced by individuals that made decisions difficult,

c) an initial understanding of the pattern of events that can be explored through further reading.

The whole activity takes around 20-30 minutes, with at least the same time used for de-briefing. As ever, some of the most fruitful discussion comes when students' first thoughts have differed from the actions of their alter-ego in the 1450's. Having introduced students to the task of assuming responsibility for an individual role it is time to move onto Stage 4.

#### **Stage 4**

Students take on individual roles but now have the freedom to discuss with their allies and negotiate with potential allies before relaying decisions to the teacher, who again acts as a ringmaster.

The example here is again from the Wars of the Roses course where we have been looking for a way to explore the pattern of events leading to the outbreak of war and the success of Edward IV. Students are given individual roles within groups of allies – Queen Margaret's party, the Yorkists and a group of more or less neutral nobles. Henry VI is an off-stage presence and occasional influence.

Again problems are posed which reflect the developing political situation, beginning with the aftermath of the first battle of St. Albans. Groups have to agree political objectives and suggest possible courses of action.

Immediately, students discover the great importance of the neutrals, who must not be pushed into opposition. Therefore, for some time Lancastrians and Yorkists try to avoid political errors and so the pattern of events unfolds slowly.

The first time we used this role-play it took three hours to work through from 1455 to 1459 when the two sides were on the verge of war. To my surprise we then raced through the events of 1459-1461 in less than half-an-hour. Discussing this afterwards we realised that once the war was under way there was little room for political manoeuvring for either of the two sides. They simply had to react to survive and hence our headlong sprint through battle after battle.

Again, informal and enjoyable means had given students an introductory understanding of the pattern of events and the motives of those involved. For the future, we had established questions for investigation, which could only be answered by turning to the sources. These questions were a

product of stopping at each ‘decision point’, coming out of role and discussing the reasons for the decisions made. By now students had sufficient familiarity with the nature and purposes of these role-plays that such movement in and out of roles caused no problems.

Stage 4 provides as much freedom as is possible when we are exploring the reasons for a particular pattern of events or the motives of an individual. The teacher is needed as ‘ringmaster’ to prevent the groups straying an unhistorical distance down the path of alternative possibilities.

### **Further ‘Role-play’ Opportunities**

Other kinds of role-play are clearly available, along the lines of various commercial publications which recreate the lives of a classful of individuals in fourteenth century villages. Here there is more freedom for students than in those activities described above. We don’t currently use such activities as there isn’t a course element where such an approach would be required. However, if in the future, we do include such a wide-ranging free activity, it might well be most effective if students have been through the stages already described.

One final activity that has been successful is, perhaps, the fulfilment of every history teacher’s dream – to create their own version of Richard III. This has also been prompted by the need for variety and to provide a helpful introduction to a new area of investigation. Instead of beginning with questions about Richard’s reign and character and then turning to the sources, I have given students my own version of Richard and his motives. This interpretation then, provides a target for investigation – does it stand up when we look at the sources? If not, how should we alter this interpretation? Do some elements of the interpretation stand up to scrutiny and others not?

These, then, are the kinds of role-play activities we use. As the scope of the examples indicates, role-play has not run riot in every aspect of the degree course, but has been used where it has offered a means to improving students’ understanding and this has coincided with staff interest. Obviously the use of such methods is related to staff enthusiasm and willingness to experiment with teaching methods. What should not stop teachers experimenting is the feeling that they are not good at drama. You don’t need to have been nearer a stage than row H of the stalls!

### **Creating the Right Environment**

Acting skills are much less important than the creation of the right environment. A helpful element in this is the use of a different part of the building.

Even another classroom suggests that something different is taking place. Our ideal location has been the college chapel, cut off from the normal activities of the college. The twentieth century does not keep walking past or knocking at the door! Appropriate music as a background when students enter also helps the creation of the right environment. Beyond that, in stages 1 and 2, when the brunt of the task falls on the teacher, costume has helped. In my case its main function has been to distract attention away from my lack of acting ability.

If, as teacher/role-play leader, you do use costume, it's almost inevitable that there'll be a degree of unease, verging on the hysterical. The key requirement is to keep a straight face when all about you are losing theirs. King John made his sixth form conference debut recently and, instead of fielding criticisms of his reign, was assailed with cries of 'who's your dressmaker'. However John's refusal to hear anything but the right kinds of comments brought thirty unknown sixth-formers to heel very quickly and the ensuing criticism and royal defence lasted over half-an-hour. The same pattern has been observed before – students may be thrown initially but, provided the teacher remains in role, they quickly settle into the situation.

## **Conclusion**

Has it been worth the effort – not to mention the nervous tension? The benefits of the use of role-play have been the following in no particular order of importance:

- the addition of further variety and entertainment to courses.
- the provision of a further example of teaching methods for education students' consideration.
- the provision of effective but gentle means of acquiring information about complex patterns of events.
- students' greater readiness to look for the range of pressures on, and motives of individuals in the past as a result of considering the issues from the 'inside.'
- students' heightened perception that events were not inevitable but were the product of particular combinations of circumstances which could themselves have varied.

A further unexpected bonus has been the opportunity created for students to help local schools with similar activities. Students are usually willing to take part in simulations in schools or at historic sites, perhaps attracted by the fact that our first such effort brought a five minute slot on BBC's 'Look North! Kirkstall Abbey was revitalised by seventy 9-year-old monks and even the most observant might have been hard-pressed to identify the clothing, worn by our band of 14th century pilgrims, as college curtains.

All the examples described above have been used in a degree course. That shouldn't suggest that these are methods appropriate only for students of 18+. The stages described may well be helpful in introducing younger students to the task of the role-play. They are also particularly appropriate for introducing new periods or problems of explanation, for none of the above activities called on students to have a detailed knowledge of events. They uncovered new material and developed their existing ideas as the role-plays developed. Thus these were not end products, dependent on students possessing a lot of information, but starting points for exploring new topics.

Finally, there is one thing above all that I hope role-play can achieve and it was indeed reflected regularly in questionnaires completed after our last sixth-form conference. Time after time, sixth-formers who had joined in role-plays commented: 'enjoyable BUT useful'. It would be good to think that now fewer students equate value with tedium and entertainment with irrelevance.