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## Is this the past? The place of role-play exercises in undergraduate history teaching

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# Is this the past? The place of role-play exercises in undergraduate history teaching\*

Cedric Beidatsch and Susan Broomhall

## Abstract

Increasingly, academic teachers are exploring the learning opportunities offered by student-centred participatory classroom and web-supported exercises. Role-play and gaming activities have been highlighted as fora which provide development of a range of personal and social skill sets in students, as well as understanding of subject content. This paper reports on research exploring how such exercises in an undergraduate history unit can be used to deliver core historical content and generic skills, and to develop students' knowledge of the professional historian's craft and historiographical practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Role-play, history, historiography

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## **Background**

Tertiary history teaching has traditionally comprised weekly lectures and tutorials, sometimes implemented as longer 90-minute seminars (Bertola & Murphy 1994: 5). Customarily, lectures are used to articulate theoretical concepts, detail historical content, and explore scholarly debates. Tutorials focus on the in-depth discussion of particular historical items of importance or problems in the field, as well as developing generic skills including the analysis of primary sources, inductive reasoning from sources, empirical verification of argument, and assessment of rival interpretations from the sources. These skills have value in training students in critical literacy and general research and analysis applicable in a wide range of professions. Yet increasingly tertiary teachers are exploring a range of strategies to articulate aspects of the historian's practice, to develop a range of collaborative and co-operative skills that can be learned through study of history, or simply in response to institutional demands to create (seemingly) more efficient ways of teaching.

Many of the new activities developed by teachers are used in the tertiary classroom as part of a range of strategies that seek to promote a student-centred approach to learning. In student-centred learning, as Barraket has argued:

The principal implication of constructivist understandings for the way in which knowledge is produced is that students are the key initiators and architects of their own learning and knowledge-making, rather than passive 'vessels' who receive the transmission of knowledge from 'expert' teachers (2005: 65).

Scholars have argued that participatory activities which focus on student intellectual, as well as sometimes emotional and physical, engagement in a range of tasks also encourage development of generic social skills such as debating, negotiation, and brainstorming. (Bonwell & Eison 1991; Meyers & Jones 1993) Such techniques are seen to assist in keeping students engaged and motivated in the classroom, factors which generally lead them to perform more successfully. (Hativa 2000: 121-22) Moreover, teamwork, collaborative, and especially co-operative learning can be developed by arranging the activities of the workshops in small groups in which the students depend on each other for exploration of key concepts.

Role-play and other simulation exercises number among these techniques. Although by no means new in the tertiary teaching repertoire, they have received renewed interest by scholars interested in active, student-centred content delivery and skills development. Manorom and Pollock suggest:



The role play creates a stimulating environment that simulates reality enabling students to intensify their understanding of the situation or event being re-enacted. Students gain a deeper insight into key concepts by enacting issues discussed in the classroom. They also develop practical skills for professional practice (2006:3).

Thus, in recent literature, scholars have proposed clearly articulated rationales and teaching methods have been explored. Many of these role-play developments have been designed to harness new information technology which has been heralded as offering many advantages to simulation, gaming and role-plays developed to enhance student learning (Shorridge & Sabo 2005; De Freitas 2006; Levy 2006; Druckman & Ebner 2008; Risinger 2008 and Martin & Wineburg et al., 2008). However, information technology has also posed a different challenge, by isolating students and decreasing “live” interaction. In an environment that increasingly employs web-supported delivery of tertiary teaching, our project sought to retain the element of physical and verbal interactivity, to support development of students’ verbal presentation skills and ability to think and act in real-time.

Within history curricula, role-play techniques have been lauded specifically, not only for the qualities above but also for their ability to enable students to understand the complexity of human motivations in past events. Many role-plays detailed in scholarly practice focus on re-enactment of key events and scenarios and their associated debriefing and reflective components emphasise understanding of historic actions, and social, cultural and political dynamics (Gorvine 1970; Keller 1975; McDaniel 2000; McCarthy & Anderson 2000; Maypole & Davies 2001; Levy 2007). While we wanted to retain some of these learning objectives, we were concerned to de-bunk the notion that role-play in history somehow meant that students were “re-enacting” the past or might learn to understand historical events by “being closer to them” through role-play. The purpose of role-play activities designed and used in our research was not to suggest that students would gain some form of proximity to the past, but rather to use the activities in part to reflect on the *differences* in their experience of an historical event or dynamic (conceptual, social and so on). We wished to challenge the simple assumption that human beings and human social interaction are unchanging, or facile and shallow conclusions about past experience. We wanted the experience of the workshops to convey both the strangeness of the past and also a sense of empathy for the decisions taken and choices exercised by people in the past.

How then could the role-play environment be used in these ways, to help students reflect on the role of the historian in imagining events, and in using empathy (instinctively or deliberately) to understand human motivations? The notion of empathy is a critical one in historical discourse and has been the subject of recent historical teaching literature (Lowenthal 2000; Davis et al.

2001). The authors of a 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council discipline-based project investigating historical thinking explored historical empathy as a key component of historical thinking, and understood it to require “an awareness of one’s own historical cultural context and an ability to look beyond it” (Hughes-Warrington et al. 2009:9). Studies to date have explored the developmental stages in students’ historical learning that lead to empathy (Davis et al. 2001). This research suggests that a range of skills and practices are required, including understanding of historical methods, contextual knowledge, primary sources analysis and the critique of prior interpretations (VanSledright cited in Hughes-Warrington et al. 2009:9). The optimal delivery environments for such skills and practices have received little attention however.

In the context of tertiary history teaching, there is as yet little critical literature that assesses what role-plays do – either for retention of key historical concepts or for development of historiographical processes and thought in students (i.e. what the historian does and how do we can ‘know’ the past). Although it was not the focus of his analysis, Gorvine concluded his paper, noting:

In short, these role-playing experiments may enable students not only to understand something of the historical process but also to combine two seemingly contradictory frames of mind - past mindedness and present mindedness. To make role playing meaningful they will have to work at understanding the past on its own terms. At the same time they will be helped to see how their personal perceptions of the present influence their views of the past, and how the past simultaneously influences their views of the present (1970: 20).

How then might historians use role-play to reflect explicitly on the role of the historian in imagining events and to aid student understanding of elements of the historian’s practice? Such an approach would seem to echo many of the main features of ‘authentic learning’ which, Lombardi (2007: 2) has argued, should “match as nearly as possible the real-world tasks of professionals in the field” and “be complex, ambiguous, and multifaceted in nature, requiring sustained investigation” and into which “[r]eflection, self-assessment, and performance review are fully integrated”. In practice, however, many of the documented investigations of authentic learning have focused on applications in Web 2.0 and delivery techniques supported by IT innovations, rather than in classroom-based student activities (Herrington & Oliver 2000; Herrington & Kervin 2007; Lombardi 2007). Moreover, a key distinction that must be made clear is that our role-play activities adopt authentic learning principles in the sense of encouraging students to consider the practice of historians in understanding the past, and not in terms of allowing them some kind of

authentic experience of the past itself (something we consider an impossibility).

## **Aims**

Our research thus explored one way in which the role-play environment might be used to support both historical content and to promote broader historiographical reflections among students. We wanted to know what kinds of learning were promoted in role-play exercises and to examine its strengths and weaknesses as a delivery technique, specifically in the domain of tertiary history teaching. Our project sought to explore whether role-playing and gaming exercises could be used to support students' learning of both the complexities of human motivations in past events as well as the historian's practice.

## **Unit design**

A modular approach to the overall unit design was adopted, with the unit material divided into fortnightly blocks. Each fortnight was dedicated to teaching and learning on one broad theme, and contained three lectures, one tutorial and one workshop. In the first week of each module, students attended two lectures and participated in one tutorial. In the second week, students attended one lecture and participated in one student-centred, classroom-based workshop.

Students prepared for each role-play activity with a short list of readings to outline the historical background to the topic being explored. The exercise commenced with a brief outline of the activity by the facilitator, and then the groups had around 15 minutes to complete the activity. Subsequently, 15 minutes was given over to each group summarising and reporting on their solutions, outcomes or experiences, and the final ten minutes were reserved for general discussion, questions and a facilitator summary. In addition to the collective verbal debrief, time was allocated in two role-play sessions for the completion of the individual written reflective exercise.

Each workshop exposed the students to a different role-play or game activity which generally involved both intellectual discussion among student groups and physical movement in the classroom space. In Module 1, "Tulipomania and the Exotic in Europe" involved a game which explored some of the dynamics of the emerging market and consumer society in the seventeenth century Netherlands. In the Module 2 workshop, students recreated the 1649 Putney Debates within the parliamentary army. The Module 3 workshop "Religion and the ordering of space" involved a case study in which each group took on sequentially a different identity (Catholic, Protestant, or Absolutist Ruler) and designed the town plan for rebuilding a destroyed city.

In the workshop for Module 4, students acted out the process of paupers applying for relief from a board of Poor Law Governors in the early seventeenth century. In the final workshop, students were asked to pose for a family group portrait, and to use their acquired understanding of iconography as well as familial, gender and status relationships to position themselves according to the assigned characters and roles.

## **Methodology**

In order to determine what was learned in the sessions, how students and staff felt about these approaches, and to gauge students' reflective processes, we employed a number of data sets, analysed in different ways. We wanted to have both student and staff perceptions of the success of role-plays for student learning, as well as more precisely what kinds of concepts (historical and/or historiographical) each felt they were learning in these sessions.

To that end, a series of data was collected across the unit. These datasets were derived from a variety of teaching and learning viewpoints (student, staff and researcher), and at different stages of distance from the various classroom activities. This included the teaching staff's free-flowing observation of student learning. The staff were not asked to keep critical reflection logs as the exercises were set in the unit and did not change in response to teacher observations. The logs were analysed qualitatively, using content analysis to assess which kinds of concepts staff identified students learning in the role-plays and their broader perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of the format.

After two of the role-play exercises, students completed short 5-question reflective exercises. This was designed both as a teaching tool, encouraging students to consider the kinds of learning that they had undertaken in the classroom, as well as a source of data for us to analyse. Nineteen students completed the first exercise, and 8 the second. The varied numbers make quantitative assessment across the different modules difficult. Instead we have analysed this aspect to compare the way in which students wrote about their perceived learning in tutorials and workshops, focussing particularly on their ability to distinguish learning goals between the two formats. The questions were designed to have students consider, and be able to distinguish between, different aspects of their learning – specifically historical content and source material types (Questions 1, 3, and 4), historiographical process and the historian's practice (Question 1 and 5), and their personal skill development (Question 2). Analysis of phrasing in answers and comments provided a qualitative insight into student thought processes and responses, indicating how students were thinking about their learning and about what they were learning in the various unit components.

In addition to the perceptions of the kind of learning students noted that they had experienced and the skills that they had practised, the two exercises were completed mid-way in the unit and in the final role-play (approximately one month later). This provided us some measure of the students' development of reflective learning capacity, as analysed by the quality, detail and consideration of their responses. The exercise was limited to two sessions because we felt that testing more than two would lead to 'questionnaire fatigue' and could result in flippant and shorter answers as students become impatient with 'over-testing'. Student Perceptions of Teaching (SPOT) assessments were completed in the final week of the unit, after completion of all the role-play activities. These provide some sense of 44 students' global reflections on this aspect of the unit. At the end of the semester, 51 students completed a further in-class test asking them to draw on unit work as examples. This enabled us to assess the effect of the various delivery styles in terms of where students drew examples (lectures, tutorials, workshop exercises, individual reading), and how they recalled and discussed it in their answers.

The research thus drew upon a wide range of data for assessment of the workshops, including facilitator and unit co-ordinator observation logs, students' reflective statements, students' unit-end in-class tests, informal feedback by students and SPOT analysis. The project explored its overarching questions about role-play functions for student content and concept learning through conducting qualitative analysis of, generally, subjective data sets that revealed both perceptions as well as evidence of role-plays as learning environments.

**Table 1: Data sets collected and analysed**

	<b>Data description</b>	<b>When conducted</b>	<b>Data focus</b>	<b>Type of analysis</b>
1	Staff observation logs	Week 2-11	Perceptions	Qualitative, content analysis
2	Reflective exercises 1	Unit week 5	Perceptions and Actual	Qualitative, content analysis
3	Reflective exercise 2	Unit week 9	Perceptions and Actual	Qualitative, content analysis
4	SPOT assessment	Unit Week 13	Perceptions	Qualitative, content analysis
5	End-of-unit test	Unit Week 13	Actual	Qualitative and quantitative

In the analysis to follow, we examine first perceptions and realities of learning and skills development through role-play, and then look more closely at the



precise content and concept understandings that are perceived to be developed in these activities.

## **Perceptions and realities of learning in workshops**

How did staff and students respond to delivery of historical learning outcomes through role-play exercises? In this section, we analyse the varied evidence for their participation and perceptions of this environment. Did they consider it a useful learning tool and is this borne out by assessment of their end-of-unit test answers?

Globally, students appear to be ambivalent about role-play delivery in the process of their history learning. In the context of history teaching at this university, it is a non-conventional format. In the SPOT form we asked: “In which context (tutorial or workshop) did you learn most?” Nine students opted for the role-play and simulation-based workshops, while 22 students selected the tutorial – although seven of these added further comments indicating that they also got a lot out of the workshops. A further 13 replied both equally. In terms of suggested changes to the unit asked in the SPOT form, four requested more or longer workshops, but another four argued for no workshops at all.

This split in the student cohort was also reflected in free-text statements students added to the form. These comments suggest mixed views about workshops from students including positive:

It was interesting to role play certain situations. Many sources just give you a ‘skim read’ of the overall situation, but the workshops allow you to examine a range of different perspectives and get a more detailed view

but also:

Neither test nor workshops were in the unit description! Wouldn’t have enrolled if I knew.

While their answers show some preference for the standard history teaching environment that students encounter at the university, they were quite evenly split in their perceptions of their most productive learning environment.

The staff logs allowed us to track differences in the perceptions of individual role-play and gaming sessions. The analysis of this data suggests that the sessions which involved movement in the room, and individual student performance were perceived to be more lively and positive by the teaching staff. Acting as individual tulip traders, the workshop facilitator observed that:

Students had a lot of fun playing this, and the trading was very lively. A great deal of second guessing regarding the tulip process went on as well

... Based on participation and comments as students were leaving I felt this workshop went down very well. (Workshop 1)

Likewise, a subsequent module used a role-play situation that challenged students to react quickly to arguments and to articulate coherent responses, a situation that many students seemed to enjoy. The workshop facilitator noted:

The debate quickly became heated and aggressive. We stopped them after 10 minutes, and debriefed ... Students clearly enjoyed the experience and comments were expressed to that effect afterwards. (Workshop 2)

Moreover, the tension produced by the debate could be channelled into discussion of historical political positions. The facilitator recorded:

This workshop went extremely well, and this showed in the debrief afterwards and the many comments as students left the room. (Workshop 4)

The Unit Co-ordinator noted here:

Maybe some of the committee of overseers needed a little more time to assimilate their characters but they seemed to get into their roles pretty quickly! (Workshop 4)

Those role-plays that required an individual performance, as opposed to those that involved group tasks, appeared to generate generally very positive comments from students to the observing teaching staff.

By contrast, group activities still appeared to enable productive learning but students were perceived by the staff to be less excited and engaged. For the small group work redesigning a German town under different administrative structures, the workshop facilitator observed that:

While students worked well in this workshop, my feeling was that a relatively large proportion were disengaged. The level of excitement was not there and no one singled the experience out for comment. (Workshop 3)

Similarly, in Module 5, in which students positioned themselves for a family portrait in a small group activity, the workshop facilitator noted that "Being the last workshop of the course, discussion was limited and slower". These activities required more co-operative learning between students but did not contain the same sense of immediacy in reacting to circumstances through their actions or discussions. These observations by the teaching staff seem to

suggest some distinctions in student reception and performance across the workshop activities. In particular, those that required student to perform a task or role individually, as opposed to as a team, generally required more comprehensive student engagement and appear to have met with more favourable comments at the end of the session.

Further to students' own assessments of their learning in these workshop environments, students' final test responses were analysed as indicators of their most successful or favoured learning contexts (where 'successful' was interpreted as the ability to reproduce accurately and insightfully information or concepts presented in that learning format). Fifty-one students submitted end-of-unit test papers. The paper required them to respond to broad questions about the seventeenth century, referencing two learning modules from the five in the unit program. Students could use their learning from lectures, tutorials, workshops and reading.

**Table 2. Analysis of end-of-unit test responses**

	<b>Number of students (total 51)</b>
Lectures	40 (78%)
Role-play workshops	30 (59%)
Tutorials	16 (31%)
Essay	15 (29%)

Students' own perception of their learning in the SPOT assessment had favoured tutorials over workshops. However this was not borne out by the evidence of their recall and use of unit information in the end-of-unit test. Fifty-nine per cent used information presented in the workshop in their test responses, suggesting that the workshops were memorable and significant in terms of learning experiences. When workshop referencing is compared to other components, we found that tutorials were referenced less often, by significantly fewer students. It seems that tutorials were in general not as memorable or successful a learning context for most students. Forty students referenced lectures and one could conclude that students rely most heavily on lectures for their information and learning. Surprisingly, only 15 students used their essay as a learning experience in thinking and reprising the course as a whole. Finally, a further 15 students seemed to have used external information, since it did not match any of the unit information covered. It is pleasing to discover that one-fifth pursued some additional reading for their own interest.

By analysing which workshops were most commonly cited by students, it is clear that when in the unit workshops were held did not influence their recall and usage. The most highly referenced workshop involved role-play.

Workshop 1 dealt with consumerism in which the students played a game; workshop 2 involved a restaging of the Putney Debates and workshop 4 involved students role-playing a poor law panel. Even workshop 3 which dealt with urban design required the students to adopt a collective persona as a committee of notables responsible for rebuilding a city after wartime destruction, and thus had elements of role-play.

- Workshop for Module 1: 10 / 102 (Tulipomania)
- Workshop for Module 2: 14 / 102 (Putney Debates)
- Workshop for Module 3: 11 / 102 (Religion and the ordering of space)
- Workshop for Module 4: 11 / 102 (Administering poor relief)
- Workshop for Module 5: 7 / 102 (Reconstructing the family)

While the fifth workshop involved active participation, it was a small group co-operative exercise rather than an activity that required performance of a specific situation under some pressure. In it, students posed for a family and household portrait to illustrate gender and social roles. In the notes from the facilitator and the observer, modules 1, 2 and 4 came across as particularly lively with students enthusiastically engaged. We conclude therefore that simulation and role-play workshops work well when they challenge the students through *individual* intellectual, physical and emotional engagement.

Finally, in the reflective exercises completed by students in workshops 2 and 4, we asked: “What skills have you practised in this class?” Students were successfully able to identify a range of generic skill sets being developed in these sessions, such as teamwork and collaboration, imagination, brainstorming, debating, and thinking on their feet. Most commonly, and pleasingly, students noted development of more than one skill set in each of these sessions. A small number of students articulated empathy as a skill from these sessions and considered the imaginative aspects of understanding other perspectives:

- Ability to view a situation from different povs (Workshop 2).
- Interpreting sources, forming an argument, putting myself in the shoes of past people (Workshop 2).
- Try to think like and understand the motives of past people (Workshop 2).
- Interpreting sources, extrapolating info to consider how people may have felt (Workshop 4).
- Thinking on the spot. Learning to project self into past views. (Workshop 4).

Our analysis of this aspect of the project suggests that individual action forces students to think on their feet, which made a powerful learning experience for them. It seems that such role-plays can be important in developing students’ generic social and personal skills. However, what can we discover about their engagement with historical content and concepts more concretely?

## **Learning about the past through role-play**

In this section, we examine in more detail what historical content teachers and students identified learning through role-play workshops. Of course, learning content was never the major purpose of workshop teaching, as the free form nature of simulations and role-play would enable students to diverge from the script of the past. Indeed, there was an unstated assumption that students would assimilate that script in prior reading and preparation. For some workshops, the staff indicated that key content about social dynamics of the period had been understood by the students, their learning demonstrated by their responses to the activities. For the workshop in module 5 in which students posed as a household group for a portrait, the workshop facilitator observed the students’:

very fine grasp of gender and social hierarchy (for example the parish apprentice was often included working at a task and some distance from the family and the servants – in one case he was placed outside an open window) in the exercises. (Workshop 5)

Of course, this workshop came in the final session of the course, by which time students had been exposed to wide range of material about seventeenth century life and was preceded in the previous week by a tutorial which involved an in-depth discussion of the iconography of Dutch domestic genre painting in the period, as well as a lectures on social and family structures. The “fine grasp” displayed then is not especially surprising, but does illustrate the capacity of students to transfer content learning across formats and assimilate it into simulation. In role-playing the administration of poor relief, the Unit Co-ordinator noted:

I thought the students got a pretty good idea of just how arbitrary and unfair life could be for the poor and a strong sense that they had no intrinsic value or worth or entitlement to respect as individuals – quite the opposite, the negative stereotypes came out very clearly! The other interesting point was how quickly the overseers started using flexible and creative solutions to request for relief to save money and keep the poor in order. (Workshop 4)

This workshop was preceded by two lectures on the social structure of early modern society, especially in England and the problem of vagrancy and also had an extensive preliminary reading list.

In some cases, discussion of historical experiences emerged organically from the workshop participation. As the workshop facilitator observed for the Tulipomania exercise:

A number admitted to being a little confused and frustrated, and this was used to show that many contemporaries felt similarly about what was a new and disturbing phenomena. Many were able to relate the tulip craze and other fashion trends of the past to contemporary fads too. (Workshop 1)

The Unit Co-ordinator noted, however, that:

It was interesting how the students automatically equated money with wealth, but I think by the end of the game some of them had begun to see goods as wealth too. Telling them at the end that they all started out 'equal' in value was a bit of a revelation – a useful one! ... I wondered how it might be possible to infuse a sense of the non-economic value of things into the game. (Workshop 1)

While the activity was undertaken with enthusiasm by the students, it suggests that the structuring of this activity may not have articulated some of the more subtle understandings of period perceptions and motivations that the Unit Co-ordinator hoped to convey in this module.

For two role-plays, it is possible to compare these staff observations directly with students' reflections on their learning. In the second workshop on the Putney Debates, the workshop facilitator observed that:

One of the key insights gained by the exercise was that the Generals felt they had to talk with the rankers, when by both tradition and contemporary standards they need not have. This insight was I think the most valuable part of the workshop. (Workshop 2)

When students were asked the key concept that they learnt in this session, a range of answers were elicited, including some which simply reproduced the title of the session. Typically, however, students highlighted either historical or historiographical information as the key concept of the session. Only 4 of the 17 responses to this question for Workshop 2, a role-play that required students to debate using the arguments of the protagonists at the Putney Debates, elicited answers that concerned historical information, such as:

- Putney, differences of view
- Clash of fundamentally different views at Putney
- Sometimes there is no middle ground and no one in prepared to move
- What happened at Putney

In the week immediately preceding the Putney debates, students had experienced a tutorial discussion which dealt with the radical politics of social levelling during the English Civil War, in addition to reading the actual debates themselves, and thus came to the Putney simulation with a firm grasp of the historical content and significance of the event.

For workshop 4, the workshop facilitator noted that students had generated questions about the social dynamics that underpinned the administration of the English Poor Law:

Interestingly, some of the panel members wondered how much the social pressures also impacted on the wealthy and powerful. Were they at time also compelled by social standards to go against their own natures and inclinations?

Yet, of the 8 responses to this, all related to social and political dynamics about the period under study:

- Charity more a social duty than a Christian responsibility
- Poor relief depended on personal characteristics rather than people in need
- Difficulty in administering the poor laws

We are cautious to place too much emphasis on such a small questionnaire return but it does suggest that role-play activities varied in their delivery of content learning. The variation can be accounted for primarily we believe, by where and how the workshop was placed within the overall stream of the course. The first workshop on Tulipomania elicited a strong student response by its design and interactivity and ‘game’ aspects, but little direct content precisely because it was very early in the course and students had still not acquired a great deal of content from other components and more importantly had not yet developed a mental ‘map’ into which they could place the content. Workshops later in the program came when such a ‘map’ had been developed, although prior exposure to relevant and related content through other learning fora cannot be discounted. What the workshops illustrate, we suggest, is the ability of students to assimilate, integrate and shape content from a wide range of sources within an environment that suggests an emotional relationship to past experience, to articulate a perspective on the lived reality of past lives.

### **Understanding the historian’s task through role-play**

In addition to the presentation of historical information about the early modern period, the role-play activities in this unit were also designed to communicate ideas about the role of imagination and empathy in creating scholarly presentations of the past. Although both of teaching staff observed facets of students’ apprehension of historical content and themes through the various exercises, they rarely explicitly recorded that students had derived particular historiographical insights from the tasks. Occasionally a point of dissonance with contemporary culture was noted, such as the workshop facilitator’s observation that students discussed the matter of:



The difficulty for modern people to express a sympathetic view with the hierarchical and undemocratic leadership of the time and how this effects our interpretation. (Workshop 2)

As mentioned above, Workshop 3, a role-play focussed on the Putney Debates during the English Civil War, seems to have aided students to think more about historical process with answers more commonly emphasising their conceptualisation of how historical practice operated. In general, the Module 3 workshop elicited historiographical answers. Of the 17 answers, 12 spoke to the challenges of search for appropriate evidence: “Story has been pieced together from limited evidence”; the need for the use of imagination: “Reconstruct with documents, but to translate past needs imagination”, “Successful historian must use imagination to fill the gaps in the record”, the use of empathy – “Empathy with hist characters”; and the challenge of objectivity: “Difficult to assess history objectively”, “Cannot be objective about history. Facts and sources not enough. Need to use imagination and thought”. These responses suggest that role-play could indeed successfully convey historiographical content to students.

Moreover, we considered whether the reflective aspect itself assisted students to consider their own historical processes. To do so, we analysed distinctions between the answers they offered to the question: “How has this session helped you to understand the historian’s task better?” We wanted to know if their reflections were denser or richer on the second iteration. While students were required to submit this questionnaire to the staff, it was not an assessed component of the unit work. Therefore their answers could not be judged a ‘learned’ response to direct positive lecturer feedback. In general, students appeared to have gained a strong sense of insight into historians’ practice through the workshop activities and discussions. Their responses provided generally the longest answers of any of their questions, despite being the last question completed at the end of the session:

- Imagination and creativity are needed to construct history from sources and be aware of personal bias and prejudice. (Workshop 2)
- Historians choose to emphasise outcomes based on uncertain sources. Historians cast a light upon history. (Workshop 2)
- The burden of the historian, to rifle through all the bull in the sources and then try to interpret what actually happened and why. (Workshop 2)
- Historians must be mindful that the records and texts of the time were written by the ruling classes and be mindful of the attitudes conveyed through the records. Also how current attitudes to the poor affect our interpretation of past attitudes. (Workshop 4)
- Letting go of preconceptions and dealing with the evidence in the sources. (Workshop 4)



- Historians need to think about their evidence in terms of a past mind set. (Workshop 4)
- Not everything I want or need to know is given to me. There is a lot of evidence but ciphering through it lead to encountering the gaps or valuable missing links. (Workshop 4)

There is a discernable change in the nature of these representative responses shown above. For Workshop 2, answers focused on considerations of objectivity in relation to varied sources and scholars' own position, whereas the responses to Workshop 4 appear to articulate distinctions in past and present *mentalités*. However, it would be hard to determine whether this was a result of students' progressive reflective on historical practice, or simply the different nature of the activities in those weeks.

For some, unexpectedly, this newfound appreciation of the work of the historian was interpreted more negatively:

- It made me realise that sources are very important, more so than I gave them credit for, and the interpretation is best left to skilled, impartial professionals which historians are not. The way people write can tell you more about their time than the subject. (Workshop 2)
- In trying to be a farmer from ca 1600 I realised how alien the assumptions and cultural norms guiding his thinking were to me. It seems a complex, almost futile effort to try and discover these and attach the right amount of weight to each. Why would anyone want to be an historian? (Workshop 4)

The reflective questionnaire appears to demonstrate that students identified a range of core historical themes and some historiographical content learned as well as skills developed from the various workshop exercises. What is less clear is whether students discerned these from the workshop tasks and post-activity discussion, or from completion of the reflective statement itself. It is conceivable that the questionnaire itself may have been instrumental in enabling students to conceptualise these outcomes from the learning environment, and may serve as an important support tool to clarify for students the learning objectives of such sessions.

## **Historical role-play and authenticity**

The reflective questionnaire also produced other responses which require further investigation. In answering the question "*How have you encountered the past in this session?*" the main answer was 'through role play'. Some students though were able to articulate more fully how this operated for them. Interestingly, a number spoke about the role-play experiences as forms of "re-enactments", a term we had tried to eschew in explicating the distance of our

*mentalités* from those of the historical protagonists we were studying. A series of answers returned such statements as:

- Reconstructing a past event.
- Stepping into past shoes.
- Session made everyone part of the past community where everyone adapted to the views and attitudes of the past.
- Role play very close to 17c circumstance and adjusting mindset accordingly.

These answers emphasised the attempt to understand past mindsets but not the corollary of the impossibility of doing so. With such short responses, it is impossible to discern for certain whether these students understood the main objective of the exercise as re-creating the past, or took for granted the more substantial point we were seeking to highlight, of our distance and difference from them through these formats. It must be noted that the question implied encounter with the past was possible, even though we hoped students would respond critically to it. Only rarely did a student respond in a way that explicitly acknowledged this issue: “Just how difficult it is to unearth the past”.

A second question also probed similar issues about how students understood the role-play activity itself. Asking “*Has this session helped you better understand the seventeenth century, and why?*”, this question produced mixed and often quite general responses, such as “Understand the seventeenth century market - gave meaning to contemporary accounts”. Many felt that the role-plays had helped them to perceive the complexity of perspectives on an historical issue:

- Understand both sides of the story.
- Better understanding of the dynamics.

A number again talked about being closer to historical subjects by role-playing their activities:

- You can’t get a real feel for historical events and what happened just be reading ... enacting events you can really feel and understand what happened.
- Greater personal sympathy and thus understanding.

These answers speak to students’ awareness of the use of empathy in their historical understanding. However, was this faculty critically applied? The proximity felt towards protagonists was encapsulated in one statement that read: “Individual experiences don’t change much over time”.

Such responses suggest that some students understood the role-play as a way of ‘going back to the past’ where the aim was to collapse distinctions between

the past and present. This was not universal however. Some students felt able to discern a particular feel for the period, such as in the workshop on the Civil War debates:

The way people believe matters. If a debate can get that heated when people are simply pretending, what else could be done by those who really believe?

And for the workshop on poverty: “Significance of class and station, something I skimmed over as coming from a more egalitarian society”. These comments suggest that workshops had been successful in encouraging some, if clearly not all, students to apply critical assessment of empathy as a factor or tool in historical process. However, the experiment clearly allowed a number of students to think of present and past as being essentially identical. This suggests that workshop design and debriefing components need to be structured with a view to encouraging students to think more critically about the actual experience, in particular to what extent their emotions might actually reflect past experience. For example, students after the poor law workshop clearly felt uncomfortable – if not outraged – with the experience of being disadvantaged in a hierarchical society. While this is a valuable insight, they also need to realise that such was the normality of the time and people experiencing it may not have felt outraged at all. It is necessary therefore to communicate not just that the experience of the past will be alien to us, but also people’s reactions to that experience. Pedagogically, this is a highly challenging task, but it does constitute the next level in the development of experiential learning workshops into a teaching and learning tool.

## **Conclusions**

The conclusions of our study suggest that role-play activities are a valuable addition to the tertiary history teaching repertoire, but their strengths and weaknesses must be clearly understood by practitioners. This environment can work well to support student understanding of historical process, the role of imagination and empathy in historians’ practice, as well as in developing knowledge of historical social and cultural dynamics. It appears that the impact of content learnt in simulated, student-centred formats is powerful in terms of student memory and recall. This appears particularly the case in sessions that require students to be personally responsible for performing roles or tasks within a broader team context.

However, it seems that workshop activities alone do not necessarily have equal success in managing the sophistication and control of the concepts that student learn in this context, nor perhaps in pushing them to think through the intellectual implications of the activities they are performing. The experiences garnered when debriefs after individual workshops were conducted would

suggest that such meta-learning can arise if students are given a structured environment for reflection. Learning objectives can and should, therefore, be supported and addressed by carefully structured preparatory and reflective exercises that support the given activity. Our project suggests that repeated collective discussion and individual reflections are critical. The written reflective exercises conducted as part of the workshop evaluation process suggest that the more formal incorporation of reviewed student reflection, through for example reflective journals or on-line discussion, would go some way towards achieving this. Indeed, our experience suggests strongly that allocating further time to the reflective and debriefing components, including the use of written reflection for review by the instructor, of these activities are vital to gaining full impact and learning from these exercises for the widest pool of students.

We believe that the key conclusion from our project is not just that workshops provide a teaching and learning forum for the development of historical empathy, especially when expanded by collective discussion and individual reviewed reflection as discussed above, but that it is the entire ensemble of teaching and learning fora, properly linked and articulated within a course structure, that provides such an optimal delivery environment. Lectures, tutorials, workshops, written project work and reading, all supported with structures and encouragement that enable students to reflect upon what they have learned both in terms of content and methodology, will enable the development of a wide range of historical thinking and analytical skills, including historical empathy. Designing and implementing such unit though require a strong individual and institutional commitment to teaching and adequate time and resources.

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