



Experiences with Role-Playing in Class at AUC

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I would like to add some remarks following the March 13th, 2007, issue of *New Chalk Talk* about "Role-Playing in Class" by Dr. Pandeli Glavanis, Associate Director of CLT. As an instructor in the English Language Institute, I have been used to using many classroom role-play activities, as this is a commonly used technique in foreign language teaching. However, as these are usually fairly superficial and the roles are not very 'meaty', they do not engage students very fully, despite allowing for a more student-centered approach to the classroom. They are not as invigorating for the faculty facilitator either.

During the past two years I have become familiar with a more in-depth approach to role-playing through the "Reacting to the Past" series developed under the auspices of Barnard College, Columbia University, New York City. I have adapted and used with my IEP advanced intensive classes two of the six of these 'games' published so far, "The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 BC," and "Galileo and the New Cosmology," and I have also met with other AUC faculty to discuss adapting this approach to 'games' of their own devising, which they have done successfully. I am currently developing my own 'game' related to cultural heritage issues, entitled "Royal Mummies."

To the benefits of role-playing identified by Dr. Glavanis, I would add that students enter a 'liminal' space in which they can argue positions that may in fact be quite inimical to their personal beliefs through the mouth of the persona they inhabit in the role-play game (see Carnes, 2004). This is quite useful when students have many culturally ingrained preconceptions and sensitivities, as is often the case with AUC students. Students' emotional engagement with their roles 'forces' their participation in the classroom debates (see Carnes, 2005; Houle, 2006), and faculty can often match students with roles that suit their personalities and give shy students time to work up to active participation by giving them a little more time until they are expected to appear 'on stage'. In short, I can attest that role-playing works at AUC.

Dr. Glavanis pointed out four 'golden rules' of role playing: (1) students should have background knowledge of the topic; (2) the role play should be based on an 'adversarial relationship'; (3) the role play should have a focal point for debate; and (4) there is minimal intervention from the instructor. As the result of my experiences with the "Reacting to the Past" series and experimenting with them in my classes at AUC, I would like to add six additional 'rules' to this list:

1. students should have a substantial part of their grade based on the 'Game', otherwise they will not take it seriously;
2. students need guidelines for their roles and strategies, but should research information to develop them more fully, as a role that is too well defined will lead to rote repetition rather than engagement in developing the 'character' of the role;

3. there should be specific 'victory objectives' for the multiple 'factions' and individuals during the adversarial playing of the 'game';
4. the instructor-facilitator should provide guidance into the source materials (preferably available online) students will research for the game, and read and discuss some key texts in class before playing the 'game';
5. even though the instructor-facilitator should be away from the action in class, it is helpful to pass notes to the students to briefly suggest strategies they may employ or opponents to respond to during the heat of the 'game';
6. Students should be required to write out, in various formats, material that will support their positions, and be encouraged to share these with other players in the game to deepen the argumentation and persuasion that occur in the classroom.

The "Reacting to the Past" series has an active online faculty forum, which I found a very helpful for peer support and discussion. For me, working with students playing these games has been an exhilarating intellectual and teaching experience, and I would highly recommend it as a means of refreshing oneself in the classroom.

References:

- Carnes, M. C. (2004, October 8). "Being There: The Liminal Classroom", The Chronicle Review. Available online at <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/commentary.htm>
- Carnes, M. C. (2005). "Inciting Speech", *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*. 37.2, 6-11. Available online at <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/commentary.htm>
- Houle, A., "Reacting to 'Reacting'," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*. 38.4 (2006): 52. Available online at <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/commentary.htm>
- "Reacting to the Past" website: <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting>

Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to alloy@aucegypt.edu , pandeli@aucegypt.edu