Role-Playing in Class: animates discussion and enhances active learning
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As a social-economic historian by training I always respected and admired the work of the French **Annales School** and especially the way in which such historians as Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, among others, in fact brought life into historical research and accounts and practically presented vivid almost visual representations of life in epochs long past. They, dared to step into the bedroom, the kitchen, the salon and in fact into the *mentalités* of historical actors. In so doing these historians present historical events through the *mentalitiés* of those that lived them, but without fetishising the otherness of such historical actors. Role-playing asks students to also see the past, or for that matter the present, as did those who lived and acted during these events. By focusing on the details of human relationships students are able to grasp the "humanity" of historical actors and thus comprehend in a dynamic manner the structures, parameters and limitations within which such actors acted out their respective roles. In this respect active and critical learning is enhanced as students are able to see that history and historical acts are not inevitable or predefined, but a result of the way in which chaos, disorder and turbulence articulate and produce actual happenings. It is this critical skill of moving beyond the sense of historical inevitability that is invariably communicated in scholarly texts, that students gain from role-playing and which cannot be "taught" via the medium of a traditional lecture or seminar. Let me elaborate.

Role-playing forces students to search behind the events themselves and consider how and why certain actors presented and defended particular perspectives or positions, the multiplicity of different perspectives that were in fact presented in such events, and of course what enabled some perspectives to gain influence and privilege over others and thus shape the course of history. In some respect this is in fact a form of *"enactive representation"* or a form of *"involved advocacy"* rather than role-playing per se, but what it actually achieves is critical thinking on the part of the student. (Tumblety & Skinner, 2004) In fact Tumblety and Skinner argue that

"…educational researchers have argued that role-play sharpens students' analytical and presentational skills, builds confidence, encourages a shift from 'fact to factors' in their investigation of historical problems, and allows students to think beyond the accepted versions of historical developments as they imagine the available choices and mental frameworks which restricted the actions of historical agents."
(Tumblety and Skinner, 2004: 2)

Of course there are additional benefits to be drawn from the use of role-playing as a strategy to enhance critical learning. For one it contributes significantly to active and animated class discussion in which practically all the students do participate. Furthermore, it encourages *task-based learning* in that students are encouraged to consider the "facts' and then construct for themselves the way in which actors or agents of history would have responded and why they did respond in particular ways. This also encourages group work and collaborative learning as students are divided in to small groups and given the tasks to prepare and then present. Finally, it enhances presentation skills as students are encouraged to present their "positions" in the manner in which they feel will gain for them the maximum support from their peers.

Role-playing has been used more extensively by historians, but is by no means confined to this discipline. Practically, any of the humanities and social science disciplines is able to make use of such a teaching/learning strategy. In economics, for example virtual reality stock exchanges derive from such a methodology and virtual or mock UNs or Arab Leagues are no more than an evolved form of such a strategy. They are in fact formats which have also resolved to some extent one of the key issues in using role-playing in class: the problem minimizing the *performative dimension* and the *theatrical division*

between those acting out the role-playing and the audience. (Tumblety and Skinner, 2004)   These are critical issues and those embarking on the use of role-playing need to ensure that the seminar or class is transformed into a theatre stage.

In this respect it is important to highlight another important issue related to the use of role-playing in class. Most educational research suggests that role-playing is a teaching/learning technique which enhances student understanding of events and moments in history, but not necessarily the way in which such *events were resolved*. The resolution of historical events is already known through the texts students read and thus allows minimal flexibility for creativity or critical thinking on the part of the student-actors. The texts highlight the *process* by which events are resolved and students need to read and grasp this by a variety of other learning strategies. To *understand the events themselves* and the *positions adopted by various agents* requires a different learning strategy and here role-playing can contribute. In fact, Tumblety and Skinner note that

Pedagogically, these two approaches are quite different: in the former [resolution], students learn about processes (of government, of custom and ritual, of sociability) in order to understand the possible scope of a historical protagonist's action in a given set of circumstances, while in the latter [understanding] they learn about positions actually taken by historical protagonists (in a debate or trial, in times of war, in politics) in order to understand the reasons for those positions. (Tumblety and Skinner, 2004: 11)

The above is a key issue in the use of role-playing as a strategy for classroom teaching and needs further elaboration. What in fact is being highlighted is that role-playing is not a substitute for reading texts or gaining knowledge of events. In fact Tumblety and Skinner who conducted a four-year experiment in the use of role-playing concluded categorically that it did not help students gain higher marks or better overall academic performance. On the other hand, they note that

…role-play is a highly effective means to increase the quantity and quality of student participation in discussion and to increase students close engagement with primary source material. It may also, in some contexts but not in others, lead to an increased student interest in a topic. (Tumblety and Skinner, 2004: 3)

Thus, we can conclude that role-playing contributes to a better understanding of events or in other words to critical thinking and of course learning about how and why agents of history in fact took particular positions which thus lead to particular resolutions of historical events. In this respect it is clear that role-playing can and does enhance active learning, but only within a particular teaching/learning strategy which seeks to ensure that students can practically "visualize" the constraints and structures within which agents acted. In other words, it is an ideal methodology for enhancing a critical awareness of the historical process and that history is not inevitable. This, of course, sharpens student's critical skills and active learning.

Role-playing in class is an exciting teaching/learning strategy that research has shown to enhance active student participation and to enable active learning to take place without necessarily implying a significant improvement of academic performance as such. Nevertheless, its benefits outweigh its limitations and thus worthy of a trial. As such it might be appropriate to conclude with the four golden rules of role-playing sessions:

that the students have background knowledge of the topic, however superficial, but preferably through reading sources; that the role-play is based on an 'adversarial relationship'; that it is based around a 'focal point for debate' and that the tutor intervenes only minimally in order to ensure flexibility for the students. (McDaniel, 2000: 359)

Sources:

- Tumblety, Joan and Skinner, Trish (2004), *Evaluating Role-play in History Teaching*, found at http://www.hca.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/TDG/reports/tumlety.php
- McDaniel, Kathryn (2000) "Four elements of successful historical role-playing in the classroom", The History Teacher, Vol.33, No 3.

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