

Hot-Seating

What is hot-seating?

I'd been doing this for years before I discovered that playing the part of a historical character and being questioned by students was called hot-seating. Hot-seating can take all kinds of forms. The teacher can play the role of a named individual (e.g. King John, Oliver Cromwell), of someone anonymous (e.g. a 1381 rebel or a survivor of Peterloo). Students can also take the hot seat but, to begin with at least, this often works better if two or three students play a group of people (e.g. Levellers or opponents of these new fangled anaesthetics).

What can be achieved?

Hot-seating can be used to achieve many different purposes, such as:

- a) Understanding different interpretations – role-play Elizabeth I to draw out her strengths and weaknesses as queen
- b) Discussing significance – ask Napoleon to explain why he was so important
- c) Analysing motivations and attitudes – quiz Wellington on his attitudes to political reform
- d) Developing a sense of period – ask Lady Agnes Luttrell about life in the 1300s
- e) Understanding evidence – grill William of Poitiers about the value of his chronicle for the events of the Norman Conquest

In addition, the activity is good for group dynamics and student confidence. It also shows that the teacher is prepared to take risks to provide a stimulating lesson, something that students do respond well to. And, of course, it can engage students' emotions, creating better motivation and thus the likelihood that they will learn more.

All levels - KS1 to undergraduates

Hot-seating works at all levels, from KS1 to undergraduate level. I first put King John in the hot-seat with second year undergraduates but, with a bit of tweaking, the same structure works well for Year 7. It's always worth re-iterating that students of all ages require the same variety of teaching methods. Just because the older ones have opted for history doesn't mean they don't still need to be enthused, challenged and motivated.

Who do you put in the hot-seat?

The choice is often between a character who the students naturally identify with and support or someone whom they naturally oppose and even dislike. I have generally taken the latter approach, creating a tension and argument between the character and the students. For example, students at A level often take a dislike to Lord Liverpool and his ministers, having difficulty understanding that their opposition to political reform was for a range of reasons, many of which were not simply selfish. Therefore your challenge in playing the part of Liverpool is to convince them that you genuinely regard political reform as a risk to stability. Of course, you could ask the students to play the part of the Cabinet while you quiz them as that requires them to see the attitudes of the Cabinet "from the inside" – everything depends on the nature of the students themselves and how experienced they are in this type of activity. Ideally try using hot-seating about three times a year with a class so they develop familiarity and confidence and to vary the structure, ultimately, putting small groups of students or even a whole class in the hot-seat with you as their interrogator.

What about props, dressing up etc?

Period music helps to create a sense of difference and using a different room can help too. I dressed up the first time I played King John in order to boost my confidence but discovered it adds to the fun and that sense of creating a special session that students remember – always valuable at option time! A simple crown or gown is generally enough however.

The key to the suspension of disbelief lies in your own confidence in being someone else – always look individual students straight in the eye and hold their gaze for a few seconds so they can see that you really see yourself as the king. Ignore giggles and whispers, just play the role. It's amazing how your own sense of conviction – that you are that person - transmits itself to your audience. If you're playing a royal role, make sure you walk more upright, more regally. If you're a 1381 rebel, be grumpy, resentful; remember you've probably got advanced osteo-arthritis from toiling in the fields.

Debriefing

At least as important as the hot-seating activity itself are the setting up and debriefing sessions. The setting up will take at least as long as the event because you need to ensure that students are armed with the questions and evidence to engage you in argument. First find out whether, for example, the class sympathises with Charles I or Cromwell. If they're for Cromwell, then hot-seat Charles. Set up very specifically – if Charles I walked into this room, what questions would you ask him? What would you say to him about the way he governed the country? What evidence could you use to show he was a failure as king? If he says x, then what would you say in reply?

Debriefing is equally important because you need to show that this has been about doing some challenging history, it's not just been fun. Start with recapping – what did x say? what evidence did he use? Then move onto other kinds of questions e.g. Was he convincing when he said ...? Was he consistent? How do you feel about him now? Would you trust him? How would you check to see if this interpretation of him is an accurate one? Can you see any reasons why historians might disagree about him?

(For 'him' above, of course read 'him or her' – hot-seating is a good way of getting more women into the history curriculum through playing the women who took part in key events or can tell the stories of their daily lives. For male teachers this just requires wearing a shawl instead of a gown – and believing!)

Do you remember when ...?

Finally, hot-seating makes a great contribution to the 'do you remember when ...?' questions. You're investigating Peterloo, the Chartists or the Suffragettes with Y8 and

want to link this event back to past protests e.g. 1381 or the Pilgrimage of Grace so pupils see a continuing story of the fight for human rights rather than a series of individual events done and dusted in Y7 that they never have to return to. This linking back across periods and time is much more likely to happen if pupils' experiences of those earlier rebels are memorable – 'do you remember when I dressed up as a villein in 1381 and you accused me of treason?' or 'do you remember when I was Henry VIII and you rebelled against me when I closed the monasteries?' – this gives you a much higher chance of re-using what pupils learned then and making comparisons across time – about why protests took place, how violent they were and how they were dealt with. This all helps your KS3 lessons to become a course, not a series of one-off events, so plan hot-seating across each course, at KS3, GCSE and A level, don't just drop it in at random.