Structured Role-Plays and Simulations

Helping students think more deeply

Let me take you back a few years to a classroom on the outskirts of Leeds. My class are in the midst of a structured role-play. The room is set out like a tableau consisting of three groups of people. Over on the left, wearing tabards which show the names of the people they're representing, are Edward IV and a group of leading Yorkist nobles. On the other side of the room – in France – are the exiled Lancastrian king Henry VI, his queen Margaret of Anjou and their son Prince Edward. Alongside them is the King of France. In another part of the room is the Duke of Burgundy, enemy of France and potential ally of the Yorkist Edward IV.

In the middle of the room/tableau is Matthew who represents the earl of Warwick – the so-called kingmaker. Matthew faces the biggest decision of Warwick's life. He has just rebelled against Edward IV for the second time and is now on the run from the king's forces. What should he do? Throw himself on the mercy of a king he's betrayed twice? Flee to France where his other enemies, the Lancastrians, are now influential – and they too see Warwick as a traitor, the man most responsible for them losing the English crown? Or could he go to Burgundy – where King Edward's sister is the Duke's wife?

At this point, Matthew, a very bright student, commented:

> 'None of these options are good ones. I don't want to do any of them – I'll be in danger whichever I choose.'

It was a really important moment for all the students, realising that people in the past often had to choose a risky option, the 'least-worst' option, rather than having an obvious good option staring them in the face.

From my teacher's perspective the important question was 'could students have understood this as well if I'd explained it to them in a different way, by telling them the story of Warwick's career or by asking them to read about it in a book?' I'm very clear that the answer is that they understood and remembered the issues and events far, far better because we used the structured role-play – it provided a physical and visual dimension because the different groups were spaced out around the room which clarified Matthew's choices in role as Warwick. We also had the opportunity to discuss

the options as a group – in such role-plays we often paused the action to talk over options – before I explained which option Warwick too. We always stayed with the real historical narrative even if we had floated counterfactual possibilities. And even if Matthew hadn't voiced his thoughts on the unsuitability of each option I would have introduced that point in my role as teacher and ring master of events – in my plan for the session I'd noted that if 'Warwick' made a clear, rapid choice I would interrogate him as to why and what he saw as the advantages and disadvantages of that choice. I could also bring in other students to comment too.

By way of concluding this introduction I'll add this example is from my teaching of a final year undergraduate class – not perhaps the normal context for this kind of teaching. However my experience had shown me that the university students benefitted hugely from this kind of structured role-play. But it's just as true that students at KS2 and KS3 benefit in the same ways – the same techniques are just as effective with all ages as my activity Je suis le roi demonstrated, another activity I devised for undergraduates but is widely used with Year 7 students. These kinds of activity are, in my view, an essential tool in any teacher's kitbag – the rest of this article explains more about how they can be structured and why they are so valuable.

What do we call them? Defining Structured Role-plays and Simulations

What do we call the type of activity I've described above?

From one perspective it doesn't greatly matter what we call them so long as teachers have a clear picture of what is involved in these activities and why they help students learn effectively. However, new teachers may find the different kinds of terminology puzzling and wonder if differences in terms conceal highly significant differences in method so what follows is my pragmatic attempt to explain why I use the terms 'structured role play', 'simulation' and 'physical demonstrations'. They are, in essence, very similar and belong on the same continuum of activity but ask more or less of students in terms of decision-making and oral contributions.

I use the term structured role-play to describe activities, such as the one about the earl of Warwick described above, which are built round students taking decisions as if they are inside a given historical situation – 'thinking from the inside' is another useful phrase to explain the nature of the activity. These decisions often also lead to students moving around the room, either between factions and allies or around the room set out as a map.

Another key word in this kind of activity is 'structured' because it's very important to stress that role-plays, such as the one involving the earl of Warwick described above, are very highly-structured and controlled and so very different from what teachers may expect when they hear the words "role-play". Any movement by students is directed by the teacher rather than left to students. I call them 'role-plays' because students are thinking in role, from the perspective of an individual being studied. This is important to emphasise because trainees and new teachers can feel uneasy with the idea of role-play, assuming it to be a free-form invitation to anarchy. At the risk of repeating myself, the only movement around the room is under your direction.

How does this structured role-play compare with simulations? In my mind, simulations involve the teacher acting as narrator with students acting out parts or involved in other ways, moving as directed by the teacher but not being faced by such a series of options and making choices that I use in a structured role-play. Ian Luff uses the term 'practical demonstrations' for what I'm here calling simulations – and that also seems a helpful description.

That said, in practice many activities that can be called structured role-plays or simulations lie somewhere between the two styles of activity I've described. Later in this article I'll describe a short series of activities in order to illustrate this continuum and to explain how they work and why they've been created.

(Note: scripted dramas differ from structured role-plays in that scripted dramas provide students with a script to use whereas in structured role plays there is no script – students have to think about the historical situation they are part of and respond to questions accordingly.)

What can students learn from these activities?

By 'students' I mean students of all ages because these activities work at all levels, up to and including undergraduate level, and can be adapted to accommodate a wide variety of demands and levels of detail. The major benefits are:

1. They provide a very effective introduction to people, names, a sequence of events and places and to motives and explanation. For older students they really do help them read more confidently and therefore more effectively because the activity has given them an initial familiarity with the topic.

2. They make the complexity of historical situations and events much more accessible because the taking part heightens concentration and students are thinking harder than if they were simply listening. The 3-D element, the visual nature and physicality of the activity also help clarify the situations students are studying – a story is unfolding in front of them

3. They help to diagnose students' misunderstandings. You can unpack why students' decisions may be different from those taken by people at the time, a process that helps diagnose students' misunderstandings and misconceptions about the period and people they're studying.

4. They help students build respect for the people of the past because they realise that the decisions taken by people in the past were often complex and difficult.

5. They enable you to target particular difficulties students have with topics or with understanding the process of studying history. For example:

> a) they develop students' understanding of the motives and attitudes of people in the past
> b) they can bring out clearly why sources might have gaps or be subjective and why interpretations differ

Three final points – firstly, much of this is about building students confidence in their understanding of a topic. If they feel they're in command of detail and issues they're more confident in reading more. Secondly, these activities require a lot more concentration from students than standard lessons and, thirdly, they prompt more students to contribute, to answer questions in role when they might be reluctant to offer suggestions and ideas in a normal classroom setting.

Examples of activities on the structure role-play to simulation continuum

This section briefly describes three activities which demonstrate the continuum of activities from simulations (or practical demonstrations) through to more complex structured role-plays.

I hope these summaries also demonstrate the potential of these activities for deepening learning. Many other examples can be found on ThinkingHistory and full descriptions of these three activities are in the Classroom Resources section.

You can also watch examples of these types of activity on YouTube via the link at the end of this article.

Example 1:

I'll start with a simple <u>simulation</u> designed to help students understand William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood and feel confident using the language of anatomical details, such as veins, arteries and capillaries. When I began teaching the history of medicine I soon discovered that many students struggled with what Harvey discovered – and what he didn't – so I developed this simple physical representation to help the anatomically challenged – and that included me!

The core idea is to use students to represent the heart, veins etc and show how the blood circulates. So bring out students as follows:

> a) a strong student to play the heart
> b) two students to play the lungs
> c) a handful of students to be veins
> d) an equal handful to be arteries – to distinguish between arteries and veins have arteries represented by girls and veins by boys.
> e) two students to be capillaries linking arteries to veins– but they have to be sitting down or have their heads covered by a sheet to represent them being invisible to Harvey.

And finally you need something red to represent blood – I used a tin of tomatoes.

Now arrange your students as a diagram explaining the circulation of the blood but with capillaries sitting/covered and the rest standing to distinguish between what Harvey could see and what he couldn't. Make sure your arteries face away from the heart and the veins towards the heart.

Give your tin of tomatoes – the blood – to the heart. Throughout what follows – and it doesn't take long – make sure the 'heart' keeps pumping his/her arms up and down because if the heart stops pumping then the blood flow stops. Now do a commentary over the movement of the 'blood' round the body:

> a) the heart pumps (passes) the blood to the lungs
> b) the lungs returns the 'blood' to the heart – who hands it onto the first artery – and then the blood passes along the line of arteries until

c) it reaches the capillaries who hand it onto the veins – but Harvey couldn't see the capillaries so he didn't know what was happening so all he knew was that

d) the blood passed onto the veins and so back to the heart – and the whole cycle started again.

And that's it. Repeat as required to check understanding. It's simple, quick and memorable, clearly distinguishing between what Harvey discovered and what he didn't – the presence of capillaries.

There are many similar simple simulations on the site, some of which I've listed at the end of this article. These simple demonstrations also have a lot in common with the activities described elsewhere in the Teaching Techniques section under the heading Physical Diagrams: Maps and Family Trees.

Example 2:

Now for a more complex activity, further along the continuum from simulation towards structured role-play. I place it further along the continuum because it introduces a degree of question-and-answer activity with students during the activity but there's more teacher narration and direction of students to move without then being involved in decision-making. This example is called Je suis le roi and it's about the impact of the Norman Conquest. I won't describe it in full as you can find the full details on the site together with film of the activity taking place. However I will summarise the reasons why I created this activity and why it has such a powerful impact on understanding.

Firstly – why did I create this activity? It began with the diagnosis of a learning problem. Once past Hastings, many students think of William as an English king so it's hard for them to envisage the fears and hostility or see England as an occupied country where the English were deeply fearful of the new rulers who spoke a different language and how that language may have added to fear. Students also assume that William immediately gave all the English land to his knights rather than it being a gradual process.

The activity is therefore designed to help students challenge these ideas. In brief, the classroom becomes a map of England. Two thirds of the class are distributed around the room as English landowners, the other third being Norman knights. At the beginning, as teacher you ask the Normans what they're hoping for now they've won at Hastings and also what they're fearful of. Then you ask the same questions of the English before going into role as William the Conqueror who initially intends to allow many of the English to keep their lands to avoid provoking rebellion.

From this point, however, students aren't being asked questions but are being moved around by you as teacher in role as William. As rebellions multiply, William replaces the English with Normans until all have been replaced. Throughout these events you speak only in French as William – with a translator so students do know what's happening. As the final stage you order the destruction of the north – partly as cold-blooded punishment, partly because you're so angry that the rebellions continue.

Debriefing then focusses on the impact of language, on why the English rebelled, why William gradually replaced English landowners with his knights, how attitudes hardened, why William 'harried' the north etc etc. It's very powerful and memorable and develops much deeper understanding than attitudes than I've ever managed by explaining these events in a normal manner.

Example 3:

This is a full-blown structured role play, akin to the example at the beginning of this article. This deals with the events that led to the beginning of the Wars of the Roses in 1455. The major problem students have at A level is understanding the pattern of events between 1452 and 1455 – in 1452 the duke of York was politically isolated and humiliated but three years later had enough support to challenge Henry VI and win the battle of St Albans. How did this happen and who are all the people whose names students have to try to take in and remember without any images or descriptions to differentiate one from another?

You begin by setting up students in a tableau aimed at showing York's political isolation in 1452. On one side of the room sit students representing King Henry, Queen Margaret and a group of nobles – Somerset, Salisbury and Warwick (the Nevilles), Buckingham and Exeter.

Across the room is the duke of York – sitting very separately! In between is the earl of Northumberland who has enemies in the royal group.

That physically sets up the problem – how does York build enough support and power to fight the king in three years' time? Your role as teacher is now to tell the story of events, asking the students to respond to events you introduce and offering them choices which changes the pattern of the groups you set up to begin with and so reveals changes in political power and alliances. This makes students think about alternative courses of action, possible motives – but as they haven't studied this yet (it's an introduction) this isn't about them knowing the right answers but about getting them to think about each situation.

By 1455 it's clear that York now has powerful allies – the Nevilles, not Northumberland as usually predicted – and students have a first layer of knowledge and understanding of the events. This gives them the confidence to read their textbooks more effectively. Some students 'bounce off' reading that abounds in new names and events and so struggle to develop that first layer of understanding that's vital for moving on to deeper understanding. The activity resolves that problem and, having used this kind of activity many times, I have no doubt that it is well-worth the time required because it accelerates the learning of all students, leads to deeper understanding and more secure knowledge of events and particularly enables weaker students to find their way onto those first rungs of understanding that might otherwise defeat them.

You can find a full script for this activity and see it taking place on You Tube at the link provided.

How do you develop your own structured role-plays?

Some years ago I set out the process of creating a structured role-play in the diagram below. I include it overleaf in case it helps you devise your own activities.

Process Diagram
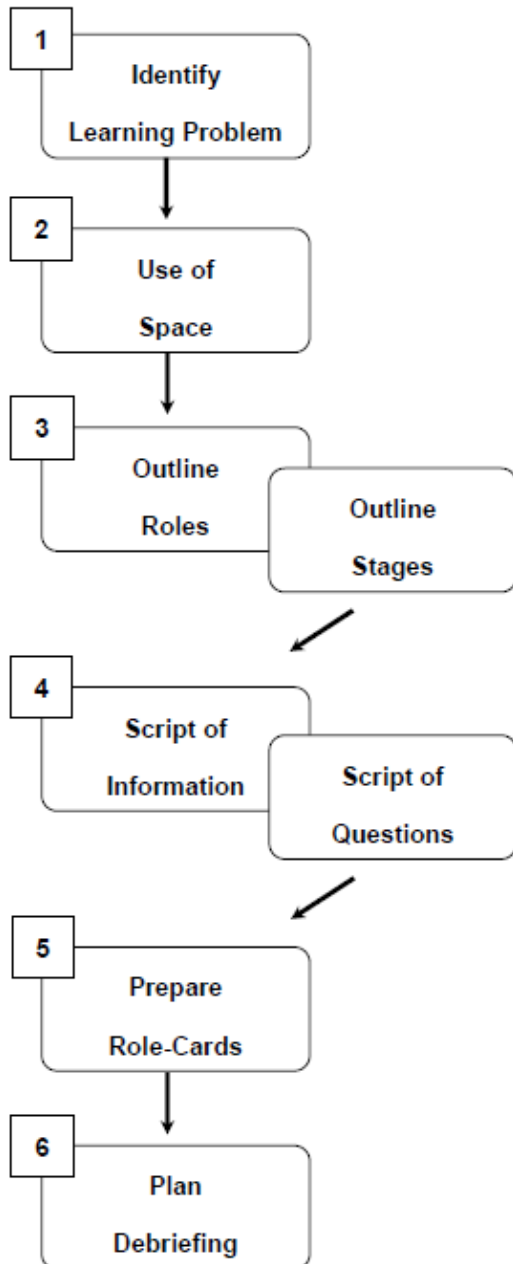
1 Identify Learning Problem	**Stage 1** Identify learning problem/s with the topic and so establish what you're trying to achieve
2 Use of Space	**Stage 2** How can the use of movement and space help?
3 Outline Roles / Outline Stages	**Stage 3** Prepare an outline of: ☐ Roles ☐ Stages of activity and movement (with arrowed diagrams)
4 Script of Information / Script of Questions	**Stage 4** Write the script which includes: ☐ Information you need to provide ☐ Questions and likely answers and students' movements
5 Prepare Role-Cards	**Stage 5** Prepare role cards – keeping them as direct as possible
6 Plan Debriefing	**Stage 6** Plan the debriefing What have students learned from this?

Looking back by way of conclusion

What I most remember from 30 years of devising these kinds of activities is the immense satisfaction and pleasure I've had from, first, the creative process and then using the activities, both with students and also with teachers on CPD courses. Structured role-plays have a particular place in the development of this website too – it was my use of them that played a big part in winning a national teaching award for university teaching in 2003 and the funding that came with that award paid for the initial website to be set up and then developed. I do hope that other teachers try these ideas and devise their own because of the sense of achievement they can give you and the very positive impact they have on students' learning and love of history.

Some examples of structured role-plays and simulations on ThinkingHistory

Boudicca's rebellion

Re-enacting the Sutton Hoo burial

The battle of Hastings – decisions on the spur of the moment

Je suis le roi – what happened after 1066?

The beginnings of the Wars of the Roses 1452-1455

Holy Box and the altar table – 16th century religious changes

Arteries, veins and capillaries – what William Harvey couldn't see

Lister's antiseptic spray

The failure of the Schlieffen plan 1914

…. and many more!

Note: You can see all the activities mentioned in this document HERE ...

And you can also watch examples of these types of activity on YouTube HERE ...