THE CLASSES THEY REMEMBER

Using Role-Plays to Bring Social Studies and English to Life

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An **Eye On Education** Book

ROUTLEDGE

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Introduction

Playing with Our Minds

> Role-playing is a great way to learn how to experience history. It gives us a new perspective on what a person at the time might've been thinking/feeling. I feel like role-playing might be one of the most effective ways to learn and understand history.
>
> (Jade, 11th grader)

> The experience of role-playing as a way of learning literature is one that will not be forgotten. Role-playing combined with literature has allowed myself as a student to open myself to new ways of learning. Role-playing has been one of the best techniques I have encountered so far . . . the students still read, but they are also able to put themselves in the characters' shoes, and make decisions that the character would make. Students are also able to understand from the character's perspective.
>
> (Keliza, 11th grader)

These are the classes they remember. In one, a group of students stands atop desks that cross the room. In their mind, it is a bridge taking them out of the city of Tenochtitlan. Other students, sliding on chairs, approach them imagining that they are on canoes gliding across a lake. The room is dark. It is just after midnight. We roll dice, envisioning arrows flying. Some students on the desk are hit and pretend to fall into the cool water below. Those on canoes scoop the prisoners up to bring them back to a temple to offer their hearts in sacrifice.

A second scene: two teenage girls sit on chairs facing each other. In their minds, one is the mother and the other is the daughter. The rest of the class observes. The mother has made a heart-wrenching decision: she will send her child away, on a train transport, to keep her safe from the Nazis. She knows she will likely never see her daughter again. She tries to explain the reason to her daughter. Tears form in their eyes — and in mine. "But don't make me

leave you," the daughter cries. "Don't you love me?" "I do," the moth
"And that is why you need to go even if you don't understand."

Four students stand in the middle of the room. Two of them are playing Juana and Kino, the native Mexican protagonists in a Steinbeck novel who had discovered "the greatest pearl in the world." The other two are buyers who had conspired to low-ball their price. Juana and Kino look desperate. Their future depends on getting the right deal, the one that could guarantee education to their child. Unaware of the pearl's value, they still know that the seller's first offer was a cheat. Kino and Juana's shoulders begin to slump. They argue, their marital unity falling apart in the face of this conflict. And then one seller picks up on the condescending code words of the oppressor: "Just take this deal and go live your little happy lives" he says. We now had our entrance point to talk about race and class in *The Pearl*.

These scenes have something in common. They are all role-plays, in which students became the characters and took ownership of the story before they had learned or read about the outcome. Using prior knowledge and perspective, they took decisions based on the identities and motivations of their characters.

This book is about developing these types of role-plays that bring learning to life. Its roots dig about two decades into the past, well before I had ever contemplated becoming a teacher. I'm going to confess a little something that for years I tried to keep secret. Much of my success as a educator can be traced to that memorable summer of 1992, the one I spent with a bunch of pals sitting on the floor of a friend's living room, mesmerized by the fantastical worlds and adventures created by Mike, his older brother. Mike was in college and we were in middle school so we idolized him. He could not have been any cooler. Little did we know that his immersive world, the universe of Dungeons & Dragons, usually did not exist in the same galaxy as the word "cool." For us, the stories of elves, goblins, and wizards became consuming. The magnetic combination of strategy and luck grabbed us, the sense that we had greater powers but also faced great dangers, that our choices affected our destinies and that we were in it together.

We talked about this alternative reality constantly and not just while we were playing. We argued whether the strongest character was my ranger or another's mage and we craved the next adventure.

I started doing unit-long historical role-plays, first by adapting the strategies of Dungeons & Dragons, about seven years ago, while I was teaching in a high-needs urban school. I was teaching great stories from the past, but the narratives did not consume the students. The classroom seemed to magically transform when I turned it into a D&D laboratory. I read the Dungeon Master

guide and broke down the technique to the bare bones, simplifying it to man with a larger group.

Over the years, my role-play trial strategies developed far beyond the original skeletal structures. After other teachers from my school came to observe the role-playing (and asked "How do I do that in my room?"), I strove to extend the method to other disciplines. My collaboration with English teachers led to a modified technique for role-playing literature. Novels and plays provide at least (if not more) opportunities for such interactive learning, which I have seen from using texts as diverse as *Death of a Salesman, Fences, The Pearl, Of Mice and Men, A Raisin in the Sun,* and *A View from the Bridge.*

This book is a guide for how to create and pull off inspirational role-plays. So many of us, if we truly think back to a memorable educational experience, point to some type of immersion role-play. For me, it was my freshman year in college when I took a class called African Military Conflict and my professor organized a riveting conference simulation about the independence movement in Rhodesia. My hope is that this book will bring this type of powerful experience into your classroom to help deepen your students' understanding and engagement in the class.

Why Should We Do Role-Plays?

Role-playing is interactive education that brings learning to life. Students move around and they feel an emotional tie to the story. It immerses students into history and literature through alternative means beyond the text. Students hear, see, and act the story, increasing their comprehension.

Role-plays cultivate perspective and empathy. Students strive to understand the experiences of others, even if they do not agree with them. Students imagine the narrative, put a text in three dimensions, create alternative scenarios, and see the impact of their choices. One of my students, Julia, explained: "role-playing is helpful in learning history because it puts the students in the shoes of the time period. You can get a much better sense of what the event was like through role-play than you would just from reading about it."

Role-plays help us to make sense of ideas like power, identity, choices and what it means to be human. We look at relationships of power in which stronger groups attempt to exert their power over the "other" for a variety of motives.

This type of learning supports communication and problem solving, whether a group of Aztecs cooperates in responding to the Spanish arrival, Jewish characters secretly plan how to "hide" from the Nazis, or Juana and Kino figure

out what to do with the pearl. Role-playing helps students cooperate ar reflect upon the conflict, the stakes, the choices, and the consequences.

I have incorporated role-playing with diverse groups of students. I began them at Facing History School, a public high school in New York City that serves a high-needs population of students. I taught mainly 9th grade and developed these role-plays to support students who were behind grade level.

About three years ago I became one of the founding teachers of Harvest Collegiate, also in Manhattan. Despite its name, Harvest is a regular non-selective public school that takes students from all over the city. Harvest is much more diverse: we have students from low-income and high-needs backgrounds (including about 70 percent free lunch) but we also have a significant cohort of kids from middle- and upper-middle-class families who enter at or above grade level and could easily fit in at prestigious New York City schools. The role-plays serve both of these groups, providing intellectual support and opportunities for extension and inquiry.

Last year, my work as an instructional coach and the chance to teach a Humanities class finally provided the avenue to use role-play for literature. Role-play and most literature coexist naturally: they are both about stories, characters, and conflict. Moreover, the strategy supports literacy as a pre-reading tool. One 11th grader, Zarriah, reflected, "It helps me understand what's happening in the book better . . . It keeps me interested because when we do a role-play I never know if that's going to actually happen in the book. Then I get excited to find out what really happened. It keeps me anxious and in suspense, which is fun to me. Therefore, role-playing is helpful in both learning ways and joyful ways."

By acting out the text first, students gain a deeper understanding of what they will read and a deeper investment in it. Another 11th grader, Mamadou, explained: "In the beginning of the story when we were assigned to read the first couple pages I didn't read at all, then we did the role-play and I really liked it so I decide to actually read, and I enjoyed it . . . I looked forward to the role-play the next day because I knew it would help me understand." Role-playing increases student interest in the story, which has a number of positive consequences. Students are more likely to read, more likely to care about the discussion, and more likely to work on the assessments that build writing skills.

A quiet and shy student named Alberto recognized this dynamic also. He wrote:

> This had help me more understanding what is going on the book and a better thinker and role-playing is much fun when it comes to doing

> writing and acting the part in the book and putting ourselves in the character place and deciding what will they do if they was that character. I also noticed that I had participated a lot more than other books discussions because I can finally understand much better and be afraid more less of getting a wrong answer and having more confident the best class I ever took in my life.

The strategy expands on something many English teachers already do: the read-aloud. In plenty of literature classrooms, teachers support struggling readers by choosing a text with considerable dialogue and rich characters and conflict, selecting students to be the characters, and then having those students read the text aloud. Sometimes they go a step further and "act" out what they are reading. This works particularly well for plays like *Fences* or *Death of a Salesman* since they are mostly dialogue. Teachers may stop periodically for comprehension checks. The goal becomes to use the read-aloud for comprehension before moving on to discuss literary devices and literary analysis. Sometimes the teacher may ask students to make predictions of what happens.

The role-play version does this and more. Students become the characters. When we reach a choice moment we stop reading. We are not only the characters but also the authors. We create the story and the dialogue, based on what we know from the previous text. The effect is that students gain more insight into what the book is really about—its meaning and why it matters.

A strategic use of role-play, along with other resources like film, can have a tremendous impact in supporting literacy. When teaching a difficult text like Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, for example, I intertwine the film, role-play, and the book to increase student engagement and comprehension. We begin with the film so that students will grasp the characters and plot, at key moments of tension and conflict we stop the movie to role-play our imagined resolution to the problem, and *then* we read the corresponding section of the book (that we had watched and role-played). Through the book, we discover how the author sets up the conflict and how the characters respond to it. We read past the point that we had watched and role-played to find out the resolution. Only then do we continue with the movie until we reach the following conflict – and the following role-play. The understanding students gain from the movie and role-play makes them want to read the book and it helps them be able to do it effectively.

In both disciplines, immersion expands learners' imagination, empathy, and creativity. One of my students, Nolan, remarked: "I learned that perspectives are important in history. Perspectives affect actions . . . the description of the character's backstories really shape the role-play. Those first scenes really

taught me how to analyze 'character' better. Getting into my charact very interesting for me."

The literature role-play functions particularly to get the learners deeply into four key aspects of reading: understanding characters, understanding conflict, evaluating characters' choices, and assessing authorial choices. Charmaine, for example, reflected that:

> Experiencing role-play as a way of learning literature is best for me . . . When we do role-play it help me to better understand the text. Role-playing help you get into the character so you can know and understand what they may be thinking in the next scene or their actions . . . When I read I start to imagine a role-play in my head.

This holds true in Social Studies as well. Most of my historical role-plays are matched with primary sources that tell the same story. Depending on the time period, those sources may use archaic and difficult language. By first acting out the story, students have a greater sense of the overall narrative that they will encounter in the reading and they have more interest in actually reading it. Will the story mesh with the choices they made or tell a different version?

We should not underestimate the importance of the amount of fun and joy that happens in a classroom while role-playing and the subsequent increase in engagement. We laugh and scream in surprise. I remember when one student, playing Louis XVI, attempted to get rid of a document, a few pages long, that would cast suspicion on him as a traitor to the revolution. As I described the mob approaching, he began shoving the paper in his mouth one by one, chewing and swallowing them all to hide the evidence. Nothing I could say would stop him and the room was filled with uproarious laughter at the spectacle.

Role-plays allow all types of students to shine. Those who struggle most in typical settings often become assets in role-plays. The quiet student who carefully takes notes and then provides advice can add something to the scene. The rambunctious child who leaps from his or her seat and can't resist talking (or calling out) can become the star. I have seen students love role-plays who run the gamut from the toughest kids who spend their time in the streets or in the projects to the reclusive gamers who normally don't engage in class but now feel that discussing a "16 in dexterity" speaks to them. Role-plays are a great equalizer against normal socioeconomic and academic inequalities.

This year, for example, two student-created webs of conspiracy ran through my Weimar and Nazi Germany unit. In one, a student named Carlos played a German police officer, a character called Arnold. "Arnold" chose to fire one

of his police officers (named "Dirk"). The reason, "Arnold" told me, was beca before class he had offered to promote another officer, as a bribe, so that he would hide a Jewish store-owner named "Michael" who had previously helped him out. I agreed, and revealed to the class that neighbors had uncovered Jewish ancestry in Dirk's family and he had been fired. Meanwhile, another student named Darren was playing a German journalist named Julius. He had already decided to use his forgery skill to make false papers to get himself out of Germany. He began to covertly offer his "skill" to Jewish characters and after "Dirk" lost his job "Julius" rolled the dice to forge counterfeit papers showing that Dirk's grandmother was really Aryan.

Darren and Carlos, both 10th graders, were doing extra work and extra thinking to bring the role-play to life. They could not be more different students and outside this class would rarely talk to each other. Darren comes from an upper middle-class family and has a wide-ranging knowledge of history that he often shares in class. He role-plays for fun and carries his own dice with him. He has some organizational and fine-motor difficulties so he does all his schoolwork on a MacBook, which he uses during class. His grades are generally high. Carlos was born in the Dominican Republic. He is charismatic, sharp, and a star when he is on his game, but he rarely was in his first year at the school. He spent considerable time in the dean's office for behavioral and academic problems. He had already failed one of my classes before because he had not handed in any of the work. Now, during the role-play, he had submitted 100 percent of the homework assignments.

With *The Classes They Remember*, I believe that role-plays can become hefty arrows in our pedagogical quivers. I don't always role-play. In a normal semester, I try to have the class engage in one role-play out of the 3–4 main units. There is, of course, so much that we want to accomplish in the classroom that falls outside of what role-plays can do. Most importantly, I want to dedicate time for reading primary and secondary sources, for writing, for research, and for presentations. I hope that this book will help you add a significant new approach to your teaching that can increase student engagement and learning and can complement the other essential work that you do.

After I began writing this book, I discovered an additional reason to celebrate role-playing in middle and high school classrooms: it turns out that a version of historical role-playing called Reacting to the Past (RTTP) is taking college history classrooms by storm. Professor Mark C. Carnes of Barnard College outlines the story behind RTTP and its impact in *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Carnes, 2014).[1]

Carnes begins with the simple idea that "Games are play" and that "people enjoy playing." He moves on to explore the ways that role-immersion helps

students outperform their peers who are in regular thematic seminars, i indicator. Role-immersion games, he explains, tap into unused founts of motivation and allow students to take control of the learning, to compete, and to take on roles that challenge their selves and their conception of the world. He also identifies how role-immersion allows students to overcome their own silence, to learn by failing, and to develop a greater sense of empathy and morality. Additionally, research shows that students grow academically because they are more engaged with the textual study that accompanies the role-play.

Now over 350 colleges include RTTP courses based on materials produced by the Reacting Consortium. RTTP, geared toward a more advanced student level, is appropriate for higher education and not for most middle or high schools. Still, the fact that college professors nationwide now choose role-playing to teach history provides yet another layer of support for this pedagogy. And if professors at the college level, who are working with students who are more academically engaged and more mature, are discovering the value of role-playing, imagine what it does for younger learners who need to move around, who need an emotional connection to the content, and who need to feel the experience in order to understand it.

The Structure of this Book

The Classes They Remember: Using Role-Plays and Mock Trials to Bring Social Studies and English to Life places teachers in the process of creating role-play units. It is a recipe for creating role-plays that also has ready-to-go versions that middle school or high school teachers can take and immediately incorporate into their curriculum.

The first chapter explores some common questions that might emerge for teachers before attempting role-plays or after having tried them a few times. My methodologies for role-playing are constantly evolving—each year I try something new that adds an exciting element to the mix. In this section, I discuss issues of structure, student choice, and engagement.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the template for creating and enacting role-plays together with key scaffolding worksheets. I flesh out the important steps in this process and I include sample scripts of how this would look and sound in reality.

The following section includes ready-to-go units and lessons. My dream is for teachers to take the products of my years of experimentation and implement the units successfully. With this, you can see how something that has been tested and tweaked year after year works in the classroom. You can get the

feel of role-play and how to manage it without having to worry about crea one as well.

The first ready-to-go role-play unit evaluates Hernán Cortés, a brilliant but ruthless conquistador who epitomizes the Age of Exploration and Colonization. The role-play transforms students into Spanish, Tlaxcalan, or Aztec individuals in the year 1519. The drama traces the story from the time Cortés and his men receive their mission in Cuba to the downfall of Tenochtitlan. Students make difficult choices, understand the complexity of the encounter, learn why the Spanish conquistadors were able to conquer the Aztec Empire, and determine the most important effects of the conquest.

The next chapter is my Weimar and Nazi Germany role-play, which brings students directly into the question of why the Holocaust happened. Using a veiled allegory of the state of "Nergmay" students delve into the emotions and hardships of Germany after World War I. From there, they make choices while navigating the shifting political landscape in the Weimar Republic and the early years of Nazi Germany. Using an allegorical reality allows students to openly make difficult decisions and to assess them. Students decide who to protect and what matters to them. By the end, they better understand some of the reasons why genocide happens, the roles regular people played, and the impact of their choices on others.

We move into literature role-plays in chapter 6, where we explore the multiple avenues for such learning through texts like *The Pearl*, *Fences*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Of Mice and Men*, *A View from the Bridge* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. I explain why role-plays are valuable for an English classroom to explore themes and devices like conflict, characterization, and choice. The chapter identifies key choice moments in a number of common novels and plays used in middle and high school classrooms.

The conclusion explores other avenues for role-playing in economics, math, and advisory classes, such as the creation of markets or companies, simulations of hyper-inflation, and economic ideas like factory mass-production, capitalism, and Communism.

Note

1 Carnes, M.C. (2014). *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CHAPTER 1

Common Questions about Role-Playing

> I think role-playing really helps you understand why people made the decisions they made. It puts you in the shoes of important people in history and gives you a deeper understanding of complicated eras in history.
>
> (Carlos, 10th grader)

How Do I Keep the Whole Class Engaged and Learning in a Role-Play?

Not every student can act in the role-play at each moment. To keep observers focused on the action and dialogue, and learning from the scenes, I created observer worksheets. Students take an observational role, such as artist, life coach, photographer, or therapist. They watch the role-play using that lens and fill out the corresponding sheet. These sheets actually bring observers indirectly into the action; during pauses we hear from them as they provide insight and advice for the actors. You can find one template on p. 46 and others online.

How Should I Structure the Class and the Classroom?

I utilize three different role-playing structures depending on the needs of a particular scene.

Option 1: The Full-Class Role-Play

The full-class approach works well when every character can be involved, especially during a battle scene. This means orchestrating the action of 20–30 kids shooting arrows, exchanging gifts, or enjoying a banquet. The benefit is that so many students are directly experiencing the action. The drawback can be the logistics of engaging this many students at one time.

Option 2: The Fishbowl Version

In the fishbowl, about 2–10 students role-play in the center of the room and the other students are in a circle around them, actively observing the action and filling out the previously mentioned observer sheets or a rubric for a particular character. During pauses the observers provide advice and do most of the follow-up debrief and reflection.

Option 3: The Small Group Role-Plays

The small-group format works particularly well for English literature role-plays and for historical scenes in which there is a very limited cast of characters. In this structure, you break the class into groups of about 4–5 students. One of them becomes the "master" who gets the script and directs the action. The others take on a character or an observer role. You have 2–5 different groups role-playing the same scene and choice moment at once and you can rotate to observe. Afterwards, as a class you come back to debrief the various ways this played out. In historical scenes, it is particularly interesting when you have many characters making the same type of decision. For example, you can have multiple groups of Jewish families trying to explain to their children what is happening around them.

Can Students Lead Role-Plays?

Yes! Just as in almost any area of teaching, student-led activities add layers of richness to the experience. I particularly enjoy student-led role-plays for literature because the book provides most of the context (instead of the Role-Play Master) so the work is a bit easier. This functions best assuming a few factors: (1) the class has role-played before; (2) we set out the context, conflict, and choices as a larger group; (3) we have a lesson template, observer sheets, and rubrics ready-to-use. The Role-Play Masters must choose moments to pause

Figure 1.1 A Student-Led Scene in Small-Group Format

for reflection and advice, and some suggested questions are available on the template. Once the role-playing process is clear and the context, conflict, and choices of a particular scene are evident, students may also enjoy directing the action. While doing a literature role-play of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*, one of my students, DJ, took charge by casting the characters, directing the action, leading a debrief, and redoing scenes when needed. At the end, he kicked up his feet and declared, "I need a latte!"

What Do I Do if the Students Want to Change the Story?

Students at times want to do something that is not on the script, but is clearly historically accurate and plausible. For example, I have a scene in which Nazi officers command three teachers to expel their Jewish students. In my script, I assume that the teachers agree to do so under that compulsion and the next scene involves them telling the students. I can't imagine, though, every possible response to the choice. This is, to me, perhaps the most fascinating part of role-play. I can do it every year with students and each time it is legitimately different

"Sherrin animates history and English by having students stitch together textual evidenc understand the human-ness of people in the past and characters in our literature. By pla students in the center of complex choices, Sherrin is able to tease out the larger question the Humanities, including 'Why do people do what they do?' Readers will glean important how-to advice on using role-play to build curiosity spaces in the classroom—an important step in practicing perspective-taking and civic agency!"
—**Kathy Swan**, Professor, University of Kentucky and lead writer of the *C3 Framework for Social Studies*

"Living history is the best way to remember it. Re-enacting powerful novels and epoch-making events wherein you must play roles as actors on the stage of history is next best. This is what David Sherrin does with his classes, helping students dig deeply into the consequences of human motivation in literature and life. These history makers will, truly, remember his masterly direction of their role-plays for a lifetime."
—**John Barell**, Professor Emeritus of Curriculum and Teaching at Montclair State University, and author of *Moving from* What *to* What If: *Teaching Critical Thinking with Authentic Inquiry and Assessments*

Learn how to use role-plays to bring history and literature to life! When students take on the roles of historical or literary figures, they develop a greater understanding of characters' identities and motivations, and are able to explore and reflect more deeply upon key issues and themes. In this new book from award-winning teacher David Sherrin, you'll find out how this lively instructional format will make teaching a more immersive, interactive, and memorable experience for your middle school and high school students. The book includes:

- a clear how-to guide to get the most out of role-playing in your class;
- ready-made units and lessons to get you started right away, complete with sample scripts, scaffolding worksheets, and assessment rubrics;
- templates and step-by-step instructions to help you design your own role-plays.

The pre-made units, which Sherrin spent years refining in his classroom, cover historical topics such as the rise of Nazi Germany and the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. You'll also find fun and interactive role-plays based on literary works like *The Pearl* and *Fences*. These lessons will help students at all ability levels to become better communicators, problem-solvers, and creative thinkers.

David Sherrin is an English and Social Studies teacher at Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City, where he is also the Social Studies Department Chair and the Master Teacher. At the 2014 NCSS Annual Conference, he was the recipient of the 2014 Robert H. Jackson Center National Award for Teaching Justice. He is also the author of *Judging for Themselves: Using Mock Trials to Bring Social Studies and English to Life.*

EDUCATION

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