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# **R**ole-Play and Character Building in the Teaching of History

Sher Banu A. L. Khan

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## INTRODUCTION

'Creativity', 'innovations', 'thinking skills' are words we often hear in schools nowadays. Teachers are exhorted to incorporate these in their classes in order to prepare students to meet the new challenges of globalization and revolution in information technology. These changes are making such inroads into our lives that we ignore them at our own peril. However, it will be most unfortunate, if not tragic, that in our haste to equip our charges with the necessary skills to survive in a constantly changing world that we forget to inculcate in them a moral aptitude that not only will be a bedrock of stability but, more importantly, will serve as a guide in an increasingly complex if not confusing world.

Those who lament the loss of traditional values and view relentless change with fear and resistance will only be drowned in their lamentations. Those who feel the need to swim along with the tide of change and feel that traditional values will merely hold them back will also be lost in the uncontrollable current. Educators must not be either. Educators are entrusted with the tasks of ensuring that their young charges can swim well in the strong current but at the same time enabling them to anchor themselves when the waves are too strong lest they be lost. While we concern ourselves with transforming our charges to become intelligent global citizens who are technologically savvy we must also ensure that they have the moral fortitude to be conscientious and responsible adults.

History offers educators a unique opportunity to achieve both the cognitive and affective development of their charges. History is a study about humans, about real individuals and societies that provide rich insights to one's awareness and understanding of human nature. History is replete with lessons in how a human could rise to heights of nobility and sink to the depths of squalor. However, history is more than just a study about humans, above all history crucially seeks to humanize.

The following strategy seeks to demonstrate how through the use of role-play in History teaching, teachers could emphasize and

hopefully internalize some humanitarian values in their students to enhance their affective development. This strategy will concentrate on how teachers can develop the value of empathy through role-play. This strategy will be demonstrated in the following steps.

1. The constructive use of role-play in History teaching
2. How to elicit empathy through role-playing
3. Evaluation of role-play as a teaching strategy

### **1. The Constructive Use of Role-Play in History Teaching**

Role-play is the enactment of a situation in which the players assume certain roles. In history, role-play can engage pupils to re-enact a known historical event or a historical persona. It requires them to imagine they were known historical figures and act as those characters might have done or it can involve students to interpret how certain types of historical figures might have acted and felt in a particular frame of reference (Towill, 1997). To make role-play more interesting, even challenging, pupils participating in role-play can be confronted with a problem involving a moral or value dilemma. In this instance, the nature of the role-play is problem-oriented and requires pupils to make decisions. In arriving at a certain decision, students would have to analyse the problem, appreciate the complexities and dilemmas confronting the characters, engage their conscience and explore and reflect others' moral standings. At the end of the role-play exercise, students should be made aware of some moral lessons to be learnt and to examine to what extent these are applicable to their own lives.

The use of role-play as a teaching strategy in history has enormous potential. Role-play nurtures both the cognitive and affective domains of students. It incorporates the four major stimuli in the development of creative thinking: challenge, curiosity, active participation and interaction. By means of the active participation of students through role-play, it could open doors to the acquisition of both intellectual and social skills (May & Williams, 1987). Role-play encourages students to analyse events and characters, interpret evidences and reconstruct historical events and characters in their own creative and unique way. In this regard, role-play helps history students not only to understand and explain events, it also has the power to enable students to be more humane in their approach since students are given the opportunity to capture the intensity of the hopes, fears and aspirations of people in the past (Shand, May & Linnell, 1990). The use of role-play further extends students' historical knowledge and understanding as students gain insight into how and why historical personas acted the way they

did. Role-play can also be an effective means to help students comprehend abstract concepts such as democracy and revolution.

In this article, my focus is to demonstrate how the value of empathy can be inculcated in our students through the use of role-play. This activity has been conducted in some schools in Singapore and has proven to be successful as elucidated further in the conclusion of this article.

## 2. How to elicit empathy through role-play

### *What is empathy?*

The role of empathy in history has not been given prominence by historians and educators. Yet empathy could be placed at the heart of certain kinds of historical understanding: an imaginative insight, not merely knowledge of facts but the power to understand and enter into the minds and feelings of another. The concept of empathy belongs primarily to psychological studies and could be traced back to 1897 when Theodore Lipps, a German, used the word *Einführung* to mean a person losing his own self-awareness as he confronts a painting and is absorbed by the object attracting his attention. Edward B. Tikhener of Cornell University was the first to use the word 'empathy' to translate *Einführung* in 1903 (Cairns, 1989).

Generally, **empathy** could be defined as the voluntary, forceful, experience of another's emotional state. However, empathy, more specifically, is a complex emotional experience that does not merely involve experiencing another person's feelings, but also the person's thoughts, wishes and perceptions that can further relate to our own experiences (Hoffman, 1976). It depends greatly on the level of cognitive development too since after putting ourselves in others' shoes, we must have the ability to differentiate between ourselves and others (Cairns, 1989). Empathy therefore, requires *both* thought and reflection for it to be of any value. When empathy is deliberately employed, it takes on the quality of understanding. When empathy becomes an object in a role-play in a history lesson, students try to comprehend goals and intentions of historical personas. They try to make an empathetic judgement by entering into some informed appreciation of the predicaments and points of view of other people in the past. They try to look at the *inside* of events. Empathetic understanding involves a technique that engages both the cognitive and affective realms of students. Students are invited to absorb themselves in the intensity of emotions while in character in a role-play (affective realm). However, students must detach themselves when out of character after the role-

play to allow them to balance intense emotional experiences with the analysis of historical facts. Finally, students are encouraged to arrive at an acceptably reasoned, albeit empathetic judgement.

Roots of morality are to be found in empathy since there is a link between empathy and altruism. A person with a capacity for emphatic affect will be the one to follow certain moral principles (Goleman, 1995). By empathizing with the victims of history, the underclass and the underprivileged, students will not only be able to understand issues from perspectives other than their own but will be moved to take this a step further. Students will be encouraged to be proactive in their own lives by seeking answers and solutions, even ways to prevent such incidences from happening in their own societies. Researchers like Goleman (1995) have shown that by late childhood, the most advanced level of empathy emerges. Children at this stage of their lives could feel for the plight of others. Taken outside the classroom, this understanding in adolescence may assist them to empathize with and alleviate the misfortune and injustice they witness around them.

### *How to elicit empathy in role-play*

There are three stages in conducting a role-play:

- i. Pre- role-play preparation
- ii. Organizing the role-play
- iii. Post role-play evaluation

#### I. Pre- Role-Play preparation

Pre- role-play preparations involve the necessity to first identify a suitable topic, aims and objectives of the role-play. For example:

Topic: A day in the life of rickshaw pullers in Singapore in the 1920's

Aims: Students to empathize with a group of the underprivileged class of society – the rickshaw pullers.

Objectives:

- Students to acquire an intimate knowledge of the pullers (some as young as themselves)
- Students to experience vicariously the lives of the impoverished pullers- what they ate, where they stayed, experiences with their families (for those who were married), experiences at work and leisure activities
- Students to study the different pressures/problems facing them in their struggle to eke out a living

- Students to appreciate the pullers' days of hunger, desperation and fear, their days of courage, hope and joy, in other words, to discover their philosophy of life
- Students to learn and appreciate the values of perseverance, resourcefulness and courage

The next step is to immerse students in a variety of primary and secondary sources in order to achieve an insider's view to the historical characters. From a reading of the oral testimonies of the pullers, students are invited to discover their intimate details, the ingredients of life itself — their pain, their joy, tears and sweat that will provide some insights into the make-up of these rickshaw pullers. In their journey to understand these rickshaw pullers, the students might hear echoes of these people's experiences in their own lives that could be real life lessons for them. History here becomes more personal, passionate and humane. A more personal approach to history might engender more empathy to understanding these characters compared to an impersonal account found in text books that tend to reduce these real and unique groups of interesting individuals to a mere list of statistics of economic and demographic change. This is not to say that statistics are boring in themselves. Statistics examined in a more meaningful manner could reveal very interesting pieces of information. For example, a careful analysis of colonial coroners' records of causes of deaths of rickshaw pullers will enable students not only to pinpoint the most common causes of deaths but to infer and deduce the kinds of adversaries and dangers faced by the pullers. Students will discover, to their surprise, that a seemingly harmless element such as rain is one of the foremost enemies of the pullers. Not only is business slow during wet weather, the roads become slippery and slipping on the road can bring about more than just broken bones. It sometimes spells death due to accidents as a result of being hit by trams or cars. Other sources such as photos are excellent in providing the visual perspective for students to see how foreign the world of the past is compared to the present.

Examples of primary sources for students to study are:

- i Archival tapes of oral testimonies of the lives and experiences of these pullers;
- ii Published colonial records and accounts;
- iii Coroner's Records
- iv Photographs

Secondary sources are important to complement the information gleaned from primary sources, though undeniably interesting, should be approached with caution. The sometimes biased accounts of primary

sources should be read in tandem with a more neutral/objective account by historians. This is also necessary to provide students with the bigger perspectives of historical contexts where the more personal elements as found in primary sources are interplayed. It is also useful to provide students with other perspectives other than those from the historical characters and historians. Novels and poems of the period are excellent literary forms that can provide much insight into how other players in society view the same events. A comparison of these accounts will provide the students with a much fuller appreciation of the historical period in question.

Examples of secondary sources are:

- i Historical texts
- ii Literary forms such as novels, poems and social descriptions of the lives of the pullers

A mere immersion into these sources may not be effective if students are not trained to use and engage these sources. These rich details discovered by students will only become more meaningful for them if they are encouraged and trained to mobilize, reorganize, reformulate and reconstruct the data gathered (Bailyn, 1994). The re-enactment of a historical event or personas in a role-play allows students to do just that. The teacher can guide students in asking more real and pertinent questions regarding the topic that allows them to rethink, reorganize, interpret and reconstruct characters and interpret events from fresh perspectives. Teachers should however remind students that their reconstruction of events must be placed in their proper frames of reference — the larger institutions, processes and interactions at play during the historical period in question.

In the pre-role-play preparation stage, it is ideal if both students and teachers share the role of identifying the topic and aims of role-play. Similarly, the teacher need not be the only resource person, students should be encouraged to undertake library or internet searches to collect primary and secondary sources. Teachers will have to carry a bigger role in both aspects if students they are working with are weaker.

## **II. Organising the Role-Play**

### *Phase 1 : Setting the stage*

- i. Students to be divided into four groups of ten (numbers could vary depending on class size)

- ii. In their groups students are to prepare a 5–10 minute play depicting a day in the lives of a group of rickshaw pullers
- iii. Students could either write a scripted or a non-scripted play
- iv. Students to allocate their own characters/roles
- v. Set the line of action and rehearse before the actual play

At this stage, teacher guidance and intervention should preferably be kept to the minimum to allow students to be creative and claim ownership and responsibility of their own work.

### *Phase 2 : Enactment of Role-Play*

#### Teacher's role

- i. Ensure that the physical arrangement of the class is suitable for the enactment of the role-play
- ii. Begin the play
- iii. Maintain and direct ( though teacher should intervene minimally)
- iv. End the play

#### Students' role

Enact the role-play

### **III. Post – Role-Play**

#### De-Brief

Teacher to lead the discussion:

- i. Teacher must emphasize that students are now out of character and are no longer expressing the feelings of their character in role. This allows them to detach themselves and be less intense and more objective whilst assessing their character in role. Students are then encouraged to discuss and evaluate the role-play. Students should be allowed to share their feelings about the characters they enacted in the role-play. Discuss how *real* these feelings are and whether they are moved to a better understanding and appreciation of these characters while playing them.
- ii. Relate the role-play to the aims and objectives to be achieved — what insights they have gained into the lives of these pullers.
- iii. Examine what values/lessons they have learnt and whether these are applicable to their daily lives.



### Using Role-Play Successfully

There are various points to bear in mind when conducting a role-play:

- the lay-out of the room must be planned beforehand; creating the right environment with music as background and costumes (optional) could determine the success of the play
- it is vital for the teacher to have full control of the class
- to make rules and expectations clear
- to make the role-play accessible to all abilities of students
- staff enthusiasm and willingness to experiment
- suspension of disbelief

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### CONCLUSION

The use of role-play as a teaching strategy has been a tried and tested method. Moreover, it has been proven not only to be effective but learning has been made more meaningful and enjoyable for the students. Unfortunately, whilst role-play is a popular teaching strategy in subjects like English Language and Literature, it has yet to make its mark in the teaching of history in Singapore. Yet, as demonstrated above, History holds enormous scope and potential for the use of role-play because it is replete with human dramas some more rich and dramatic than any author could ever conjure. More importantly, they are *real* and the actions of these historical personas have made an impact in our lives either directly or indirectly. As such, the study of these personas through role-play could serve as valuable lessons for students. They can serve as exemplary behaviour for students to emulate or they can serve as examples of revulsion for students to avoid.

Role-play as a teaching strategy in History has been conducted and experimented with in some schools in Singapore. Even though it is in a relatively beginner's phase, the results have been very encouraging. I would like to end with students' evaluation of their enactment of a few historical role-plays and a sharing of some of our students' feelings and experiences. I have tabulated them below (see Appendix 1). It is worth noting that students cited both the instructional and nurturant benefits of role-play (see Appendix 2). Students not only identified the effectiveness of role-play in enhancing their understanding and appreciation of historical personas, they cited other advantages too. It

is seen that students appreciate the improvement of their interpersonal and social skills, not to mention the joy and satisfaction they experienced in working co-operatively while preparing for the role-play. In this sense, not only has History come alive and become more meaningful in the classroom but through role-play, teachers could help students internalise some of these positive values, enabling them to be better individuals, adept at interacting with others in a more empathetic manner. In this way, history educators would not only teach History but would more importantly, fulfil their responsibility to humanize their charges.

#### Note to educators:

1. The author has obtained both primary and secondary sources from the references appended below:
  - Please refer to Warren (1986) for an illuminating account of the lives of the rickshaw pullers.
  - Photographs of rickshaw coolies and oral interviews could be obtained from the National Archives, Singapore.
  - Interesting novels that could be used as source materials are, *Rickshaw* by Lao She, *The Lights of Singapore* by Roland Braddel, and a travelogue, *Malay Land* by Richard Sydney.
2. The use of role-play in History teaching has made a head start and achieved significant success with students in the West. For example, in the U.K., in a Curtain Theatre TIME (Theatre in Museum Education), an experiment on the effectiveness of the use of role-play revealed very encouraging results. When compared to other teaching methods like the narrative technique, students exposed to role-play scored 92% for factual recall whilst the one taught using the narrative technique scored 83%. In terms of students understanding of topic and the quality of responses given to questions asked, the role-play group chalked up 67% whilst the narrative group achieved 50%. Please refer to Shand, May & Linnell, 'History as Ethnography'.

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## APPENDIX 1

These two tables provide feedback on role-play by students from Bedok North Secondary School and Bedok Town Secondary School in experiments carried out in 1998. Table 1 offers some comments from the students on the instructional benefits of role-play in the learning of History. Table 2 provides comments on how role-play provides the nurturant effects, enhancing social and inter-personal skills.

**Table 1**

Students	Comments
Sec. 4E, Bedok North Sec. Sch. (Omar, Sahib, Hedra, Xueling)	"to know the "real" life of our S'porean ancestors"
Sec. 3C, Bedok Town Sec. Sch. (Jeremy)	"has feelings of emotions in my soul because of the acting and the dialogue"
Most students from both schools (Elma, Marlinah, Nuraisha, Robin, Alvin, Nurhayati, Nurazlin)	"understand the topic better, could explain events better"
Most students from both schools (Nuraisha, Martini, Siti, Irnaini, Elma, Jeremy, Shahana)	"appreciate and admire historical personas and remember the values they stood for"

**Table 2**

Students	Comments
Sec. 4E, Bedok North Sec. Sch. (Omar, Sahib, Hedra, Xueling)	"enjoy sharing ideas and co-operating with each other to create something meaningful"
Sec. 4E, Bedok North Sec Sch. (Nuraisha, Martini, Siti, Irnaini)	"improve their communication skills and discover hidden talent"
Sec. 3C, Bedok Town Sec. Sch. (Jeremy)	"gain confidence to speak up in class"

## APPENDIX 2

### Instructional and Nurturant Effects of Role-Play (Joyce and Weil, 1986)

