

THE 6th Journal

**Full reports of
Action Research
Projects**



Foreword:

The 2005/6 academic year was a highly successful one for practitioner research in the college. Five member of staff carried out projects in diverse areas, and each of these have sparked interest and curiosity among other colleagues about strategies which can be used to improve learner's motivation and to engage them in the learning process. These projects have been written up in a format which seeks to ground the ideas in some background theory but also in a personalised way which hopefully other teachers will find accessible and will be able to relate to their own practice. If, having read the reports, you are inspired to find out more, I am sure that the relevant members of staff would be happy to speak about their projects. Alternatively, you may have an idea for a project yourself, which you can talk to me about.

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Asking the Audience: Using remote voting role play to enhance participation in the history classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Aims

The aims of this project were twofold:

- (1) to identify the factors which hindered student participation in AS Tudor History lessons
- (2) to explore how extended role play could be used to improve student engagement in lessons by overcoming those barriers.

Setting the Scene

For AS Tudor students the transition from GCSE to AS is tough, and, as they face an exam worth 40% of the course in January, it needs to be swift. They arrive in September with little factual knowledge of the 15th century and lack a 'sense of period'. Added to this the classes for this course are often unbalanced in terms of ability (with less middle than other classes) and gender (very few boys take up this option).

The project was prompted by concerns about my Tudor classes over the past two years. On the surface, they were high performing and positive, gaining good results and showing enthusiasm in course forums. However, both in 2004 and 2005, there was a small minority who did not share the confidence or commitment of their peers. The project was partly stimulated by reflecting on a conversation with two students attending a support workshop in 2005.

Extract from diary (September 2005):

The AS students last year were an enthusiastic and fairly confident bunch on the whole and responded well to round the class quizzes, talking essays and other kinds of oral work which I employ. I like to use these methods because they ensure active participation from all and I feel satisfied when I know everyone has had to play a part and no-one was able to opt out. But when I'm honest with myself, I know it doesn't work for them all. Last year it was the Sarahs. Two girls who apparently should have got 'D's at AS but it was clear from the start that it would be hard for them to pass. Both lacking confidence. Both rather intimidated by their peers, and let's be honest, a bit by me. Both frightened of being put on the spot and being shown up in front of all these, sure of themselves, outgoing people around them. One of the Sarahs got an E at AS, the other failed. I'm so keen on inclusion but did I really include them? I suppose what I'm coming round to is the recognition that participation is not the same as inclusion.

I did try with the Sarahs. Sarah B came to one or two of the support sessions at lunchtime in the autumn term. I had a little one to one session with both of them in the summer to try to help them with structuring essays. It was obvious that they were still having difficulties, despite the formulas and revision sheets I provided as props. It was also clear that they didn't have much confidence and my cajoling wasn't doing anything to boost it. I remember feeling at that session, despite my upbeat and cheerful note, that we'd given up. The Sarahs didn't really believe they were ever going to get it if they hadn't by a month before their exam. And they sensed that I thought that too. It makes me feel a bit ashamed, but realistically, could I have done more? Should I have intervened earlier? Could I have done anything to get them onside earlier in the year?

As a teacher, I am very committed to the idea that all students should participate in oral work as well as written work. We don't excuse students from homework just because they don't like writing, so why should we allow students to opt out from speaking? However, I was aware that speaking out in front of peers was intimidating for many students. The realisation dawned on me that imposing an expectation that everyone should join in was not improving classroom cohesion or confidence. If my classes were to be genuinely inclusive, the motivation needed to come from them rather than be imposed by me.

Theoretical Background:

This action research project aimed to create a better classroom context for inclusive student talk. Educational research confirms the importance of dialogue and interaction both between teacher and learner and between students themselves in developing confidence and understanding.. Vygotsky (1978) stresses the 'importance of the nature of the interaction between teacher and learner or discussion between learners in developing understanding'

This dialogue is most useful when it is exploratory and reflective, rather than based on a speedy review of knowledge. Kyriacou and Goulding (2004) have shown how many teachers confuse interactive and traditional whole class teaching, focusing on short closed questions rather than open minded enquiry. This resonates with my own experience as, desiring a strong sense of pace, my classroom discussions often do not allow sufficient open ended reflection. This project should facilitate more thoughtful open ended discussion.

Several researchers have demonstrated the role played by choice in motivating students to learn. Gilbert (2002) has explained the relationship between giving choice to students and enabling them to take responsibility. Booth's research has also shown how being overly prescriptive can demotivate pupils (Husbands C, Kitson A and Pendry A 2003). This reading has influenced the way I approached the project. In the first experimental lessons in the autumn term, I allocated roles to students based on their ability. In the extended project in the spring term, I allowed the students the choice to develop their own roles with some direction and support.

More specifically there is strong research evidence that role play can be highly effective at improving engagement and understanding in the learning of history. Phillips (2002) lists the benefits of role play as motivation, insight into historical situations, improved recall and 'empathetic appreciation'. This is confirmed by Luff (2003) who states that : 'AS and A2 pupils are still young and fun loving' and that the assessment objectives in examined history courses can only truly be addressed with creative teaching rather than 'playing it safe' with chalk and talk.

In his research using multiple intelligences in the history classroom, Rhys Davies(2006) found that pupils listed role play as one of their favourite history activities as it was regarded as 'fun, enjoyable and engaging' This is confirmed by college course forums which repeatedly show that role play and decision making activities are very popular with students.

Husbands et al (2003) have shown that motivation, engagement and confidence are the three key factors influencing enjoyment and achievement in history teaching. Clearly the three are closely interlinked and are the primary focus of this project.

METHODS USED

Teaching Strategies Implemented:

The Role Play

In the autumn term, two experimental lessons were taught using role play and remote voting pads. Evaluations of these lessons were used to inform the main project which started in the spring.

The extended role play was initiated by students choosing and researching a character in Tudor England. At the start of the module, students were asked to create a profile including age, gender, region and family circumstances. Some characters were real and some fictional, allowing the chance to explore the roles of key players in Tudor government and society. Students with non- fictional characters used books and the internet to fill in their details. Those with fictional characters researched their roles and were supported in producing realistic profiles. Their profiles were summarised on character cards which were given out at the start of any lesson involving voting.

During the module on the Age of Wolsey, they had to reflect the views of their character on different policies and at different times in the reign. Students voted by responding to four choices in a powerpoint presentation. Each presentation included 5-6 questions with responses from very positive agreement to very negative disagreement. The similarity in questions made voting patterns and changing views over time easier to see.

In the plenary lesson at the end of the module, students worked in groups according to social class and were required to vote as a group rather than as individuals.

Classroom Resources

The role play used the CPS remote voting system. Students were each given a numbered voting pad which they used throughout the module. This system recorded each student's vote so that graphs could be made of their voting patterns at the end of the project. After each vote a bar chart revealed the whole class response to different questions.

Practicalities of the Project

In the autumn term two experimental lessons were taught: one with the Tudor and one with the modern group, with the students using the remote voting pads in character. These lessons confirmed the students' positive responses to remote voting and also highlighted the problems of variable standards of preparation for their roles, especially in the much larger modern class. Reading educational research persuaded me to be less controlling in the final project and to allow students choice in their roles.

Voting in role was generally very successful after a shaky start. The initial powerpoint which focused on hopes and fears at the start of Henry V111's reign had mixed success. Students acting as nobles had not grasped the general dissatisfaction of the aristocracy at the end of Henry V11's reign and recorded votes of dissatisfaction. The failure of a few students to understand their characters' attitudes had the effect of skewing the results for the whole cohort. However, in the following voting sessions the students gained confidence in their role, voting appropriately and justifying their views with vigour. One unexpected and encouraging development was that one student voted 'out of character' but was able to argue convincingly why her individual might not share the same views of other members of his class or region. This led to an open ended and lively discussion which emphasised the complexity of Tudor society.

The plenary discussion was the most successful lesson centred on the project. The requirement to vote as a group led to some impassioned arguments and some determined abstentions from individuals, such as the yeoman of Lollard views who disagreed violently with the religious conformity of his class. Ideally I would have liked to incorporate more group work into the project, for instance, setting up regional focus groups to highlight the different perspectives of localities such as Cornwall and London. The transition from an individual to a group view was an illuminating process and clearly enhanced the understanding of the class. It was frustrating that time constraints enabled this to happen only at the end of the project.

FINDINGS

Recording student perceptions

Students were given an initial questionnaire to complete asking them about the difficulties of Tudor history and what factors affected their participation in lessons.

This was followed by recording of two small group discussions. At the end of the project, students completed another questionnaire and a ten minute whole class discussion was recorded on video.

What factors hindered student participation in lessons?

This project confirmed that many students lack confidence in class discussions and a minority find speaking out in class nerve racking and intimidating. In particular, they do not like targeted questioning when they have had no time to think up their answers. However, classroom participation is greatly affected by interest levels and by the nature of the activity undertaken.

If students felt confident and interested, their inhibitions about classroom participation could be overcome.

The most common reason given for failure to participate was lack of confidence: nerves, shyness and fear of failure being frequently cited. Many students are self-conscious, even amongst class mates they know well, and commented that they disliked the feeling that everyone was staring at them. Six of the sixteen respondents in the original questionnaire stated that they joined in only 'occasionally' or 'rarely'.

In the small group discussions and the plenary discussion students commented that they disliked being put on the spot in whole class discussions:

What puts me off is being put on the spot with questions.... If it's quite a fast pace and I just can't keep up sometimes. (comment in small group discussion)

This was confirmed in the plenary discussion when the students stated strongly that preparation time played a key role in their willingness to become involved.

Alongside confidence the level of interest students felt in the topic or activity also affected participation. Although the questionnaires revealed that most students did not find Tudor history especially difficult, they found it hard to learn parts of the course they perceived to be dull, such as government and administration. Many commented that the learning activity was crucial:

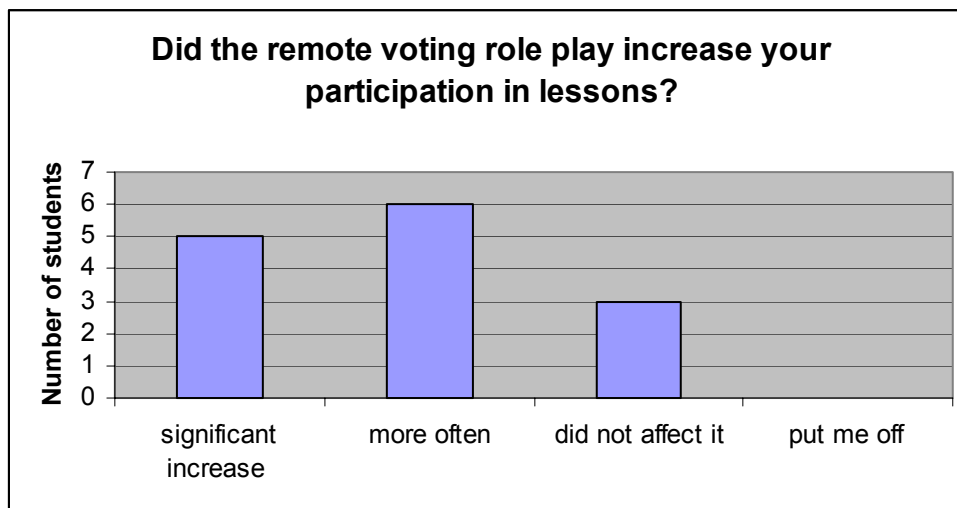
'If the activity is creative and made fun, which would make it easier to understand.' (Questionnaire)

A majority of the students felt they joined in more with active learning activities compared to lessons where they were just 'sitting and listening'. Several stated that role play was very effective at making them join in:

The role play is really good because it makes us all want to join in a bit more and it's a bit more fun. (Questionnaire)

Did the role play improve participation?

Most students stated that the role play had increased their involvement in lessons. However, three students felt it did not affect their involvement.



Questionnaire responses to the role play were very positive with most students commenting that it helped them to understand the views and attitudes of people in Tudor society. Students liked the '*interaction of the class as a whole*'

(Questionnaire). Several stated that role play was very effective at making them join in:

'The role play is really good because it makes us all want to join in a bit more and it's a bit more fun.'

Several commented on the inclusive nature of the activity. One statement on the written questionnaire was:

'I liked the remote voting because you felt involved in the task and having your own character to think about.'

There was an acknowledgement that the role play ensured full class involvement in the activity, Hannah, speaking in the filmed plenary discussion, saying that:

'It makes you think about it because everyone's got to think about what they would do whereas normally if someone's just answering a question then people don't necessarily think what they would say in that answer but if every one's got to vote then obviously ..everyone's got to think..'

The success of the role play varied according to topic and timing. In the initial presentation, some students had not got to grips with their character's outlook and this caused some confusion. However, by the end of the spring term most had become confident in their role and progress was being made.

Diary Extract (Easter 2006):

The benefits so far are that the students are beginning to see patterns in the reactions of different groups within Tudor society. It is already clear, for instance that the lower classes and the church have much more reservations about Henry's aggressive and expensive foreign policy than the nobles. They are also recognising change over time, with dissatisfaction with finance and government growing rapidly in the 1520s.

One problem is that the role play characters are not used frequently enough to provide a regular reference point for review and discussion. It might have been better to get the students to carry the character cards with them at all times, perhaps sticking them onto their folders, so that the whole course is considered 'in role'. Over time, the students seem to be recognising the values and attitudes of their character when they return to them but I feel this could be more deeply embedded and used in discussion. They have retained their enthusiasm for the voting and all still seem keen to take part.

DISCUSSION

What factors influenced the success of this project?

- Student preparation:

The project demonstrated that good student preparation was essential for successful voting and discussion. It did not matter if students voted atypically for their role, if they had sufficient understanding to justify their choices. However, if their 'out of character' voting arose from misunderstanding, this had an adverse impact on the learning of everyone. The experimental lesson with the modern group relied on their research of a character in preparation for the role play voting. Some students did not make the effort and, as a result, could not contribute to the discussion. Clearly, researching a character well does involve some commitment and imagination as you could not type 'immigrant farmer in the Mid West 1920s' and get the same kind of instant information you could find if you typed in 'Roosevelt'. For the Tudor students I provided more support and advice to help with their character research and this was more successful.

Some topic areas needed more guidance and support than others, for instance, the religious quiz revealed the gap between our modern secular society and 16th century attitudes.

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- The use of the technology:
The visual aspect of the remote voting was an unanticipated benefit of the technology. In the plenary discussion one student commented how much having a clear visual focus enhanced her understanding of the issue. Several students liked seeing the results of the class vote on the whiteboard so that '*you can see if your character's opinion is the minority or majority*' (Questionnaire)
Even students who did not like role play, on the grounds they had to act, were happy to vote in role .

Clearly the technology was not essential for the role play to work, as the same results could have been achieved through voting on paper or using mini whiteboards. However, the students commented that the visual feedback and the fun element in voting enhanced their enjoyment of the activity.

- Class dynamics:
This year's Tudor AS class was made up of 17 girls. This led to a very relaxed atmosphere which encouraged participation and enabled me to support students who needed more guidance. The experiment with the mixed modern AS class of 22 students suggests that larger classes may need closer management to ensure all were purposefully involved.
- Different forms of voting:
The project was planned for individual voting in role. This worked very well for inclusion but some students, especially the brighter ones, found it limiting, especially if their character was of low social status rather than at the heart of government. Interestingly, less secure students became more attached to their roles and enjoyed the confidence that came with understanding the views and outlook of one character.:
Gemma in plenary discussion: *I liked to be the same person because then you get to know that role.. you became more confident in character...*

The plenary session required students to vote in social classes or groups rather than as individuals. I was pleased with the level of discussion and with the confidence with which some 'characters' argued with the rest of their group. This seemed to be the most successful activity in terms of engagement and a differentiated understanding of the impact of policies. This made me realise that the transition from individual voting to group voting could add to the challenge and enjoyment of the role play considerably.

Principal Findings:

- Remote voting in roles increased student involvement in lessons. It was more inclusive and less intimidating than other forms of role play or whole class discussion.
- The project confirmed the research evidence that role play enhances enjoyment and empathetic understanding in history. However, for the role play to work well, students need to prepare well and feel confident about their characters. Some aspects of the course may require more guidance than others and large mixed ability groups need careful management.
- The technology gave the role play exercise more clarity and fun but was not essential to make it a success.
- Individual voting in role helped students gain confidence but changing their role or moving to group voting may lead to livelier interaction and discussion.

CONCLUSION

I have always been passionate about active and inclusive learning in history but this project has challenged some of my preconceptions. Oral work in my lessons has too often been teacher controlled and prescriptive, and, for some students, this is off putting. The role play has encouraged me to allow more choice in the classroom and to design tasks which require participation from all without putting any student in the glare of the spot light. The role play provided enough support and structure for all students to take part and made me aware of the importance of prior preparation for good quality class discussion.

The potential for both role play and remote voting as learning tools is enormous and I hope to build on the ideas in this project in the next year. It is too early to know if I have saved another pair of 'Sarahs' from a sense of failure but I hope that all students in this year's Tudor class at least have felt a stronger sense of inclusion.

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Appendix A: Student notes and character card

Thomas Boleyn

Profile:
Born in Norfolk in 1477, of gentry stock. Well educated. A successful court career rewarded him with the title Earl of Wiltshire.

Hopes:

- To be looked on favourably by the king, to be promoted and favoured at court.
- To gain wealth and status for the family.

Fears:

- That the economy or political situation will become unstable.
- That Henry will become miserly at home and cautious abroad like his father.

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Appendix B: Initial Questionnaire

TUDOR HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

Please circle the correct answer.

- 1. On the whole, how difficult has the Henry V11 module been to understand?**

Very difficult difficult ok easy

- 2. Which of the following topics have been most difficult to understand?**

Foreign policy Finance Government Nobles

- 3. Which skill has been the most difficult to grasp?**

Inference source utility source comparison essay

- 4. On the whole, what kind of classroom activity helps your understanding the most?**

Watching video class discussion role play group work

- 5. How well do you feel you understand the Tudor period?**

Very well well quite well not much at all

- 6. On the whole how willing are you to join in class activities?**

I join in most activities with enthusiasm.

I often join in and make regular contributions.

I occasionally join in and make some contributions.

I avoid joining in and make rare contributions.

- 7. Please explain underneath what factors make you more or less willing to join in class activities.**

Appendix C: Final Questionnaire

TUDOR AS REMOTE VOTING ROLE PLAY

Final Questionnaire

1. How has the character role play affected your learning of this module?
2. Are there any ways you think it would work better?
3. Which aspect of the role play worked best in your view?
4. *Tick the statement underneath you agree with most.*
 - 5.(a) The remote voting role play was very helpful in understanding the module.
 - (b)The remote voting role play was quite helpful in understanding the module. © The remote voting role play added little to my understanding of the module.
 - (d) The remote voting role play added nothing to my understanding of the module.
6. (a) The remote voting role play gave me confidence to participate in class learning and significantly increased the amount I joined in.
(b)The remote voting role play encouraged me to participate in class learning and prompted me to join in more often.
© The remote voting role play did not affect my confidence or the amount I joined in in lessons.
(d) The remote voting role play put me off joining in in lessons.
7. (a) The remote voting role play significantly increased my enjoyment of the lessons.
(b)The remote voting role play was quite enjoyable.
© The remote voting role play did not affect my enjoyment of lessons.
(d) The remote voting role play made me enjoy the lessons less.