

Role play activities in the Humanities

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The Humanities provide us with a multitude of opportunities to become other people, for example:

- ◆ **Geography** Experts in their fields (geologists, town planners etc.) or members of the public who belong to particular social groups or are affected by natural phenomena or man-made planned or unplanned activities.
- ◆ **History** Famous historical figures and, equally, a whole host of non-famous people such as shopkeepers, servants, regular soldiers, schoolchildren, doctors or architects.
- ◆ **Politics** Politicians, civil servants and representatives of different groups with (or without) a vote.
- ◆ **Psychology** Members of groups in social psychology, individuals with a given psychological condition, experts in the field (psychologists, psychiatrists etc.)
- ◆ **Religious Education** Religious figures (Jesus, Buddha, Vishnu etc.), named religious leaders (Gandhi, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Ayatollah Khomeini), unnamed religious leaders (a priest, a Rabbi, an imam), religious followers (possibly belonging to specific sects or denominations)
- ◆ **Sociology** Members of particular social groups at a variety of levels and perspectives (leaders, followers, opponents), major theorists (e.g. Marx, Weber, Durkheim).

Key principles for role play in the Humanities

- ◆ The **teacher should lead the way** in preparing to model role play; even if you are not the most expert actor, your role as subject specialist means you have a key leadership role to play and example to set. Even the shyest student will feel encouraged to 'have a go' if the teacher makes it clear that they find role play fun and useful in unlocking subject knowledge.
- ◆ Keep it **varied**:
 - don't just get stuck on major figures; insights from everyday people are just as important.
 - individual hotseating is important, but so are interactions in (and between) groups.
 - role play can be both scripted and unscripted (improvised). Both require research and some preparation.
- ◆ Keep it **interesting**:
 - costume, props and (even) small pieces of set make everything much more fun, and memorable.
 - be prepared to rearrange the classroom, or work outside of it, where appropriate.
- ◆ **Planning remains vital**: although the exact content of unscripted role play can't be anticipated, this isn't an excuse to slack off! You actually need to plan and research more not less; you should have extra knowledge and resources ready to respond to likely forks in the improvisatory road.

Who are you?

Before becoming other people, it pays to reflect on who you are yourself:

- ◆ if you were a person other than a teacher, who would you be?
- ◆ what are your strengths? what are your weaknesses?

If you weren't a teacher, who would you see yourself as?



Lawyer?



Golf commentator?



Crooner?



Communist agitator?



Psychiatrist?

How do these people speak (speed, volume, tone, language use)? What is their body language? Do we like them?

Strengths

Here are some strengths which other teachers have identified in the way they represent themselves to students:

- ◆ Energy
- ◆ Speaking clearly
- ◆ Dramatic
- ◆ Humour
- ◆ Confidence
- ◆ Appropriate pitch, volume, tone
- ◆ Enthusiasm
- ◆ Clarity of explanation
- ◆ Eye contact
- ◆ Simplifying / breaking subject into chunks
- ◆ Showing that they're interested

Weaknesses

Here are some of the weaknesses other teachers have identified in the way they represent themselves to students:

- ◆ Talking too fast
- ◆ Speaking too loudly
- ◆ Too much content too quickly
- ◆ Too complicated at times
- ◆ Getting sidetracked
- ◆ Not seeming interested enough
- ◆ Talking too much
- ◆ Getting tongue-tied
- ◆ Listening well enough / allowing enough questions
- ◆ Not varied enough
- ◆ Too tied to whiteboard

Why not ask some of your colleagues if you can go and observe their class to see their strengths in action?

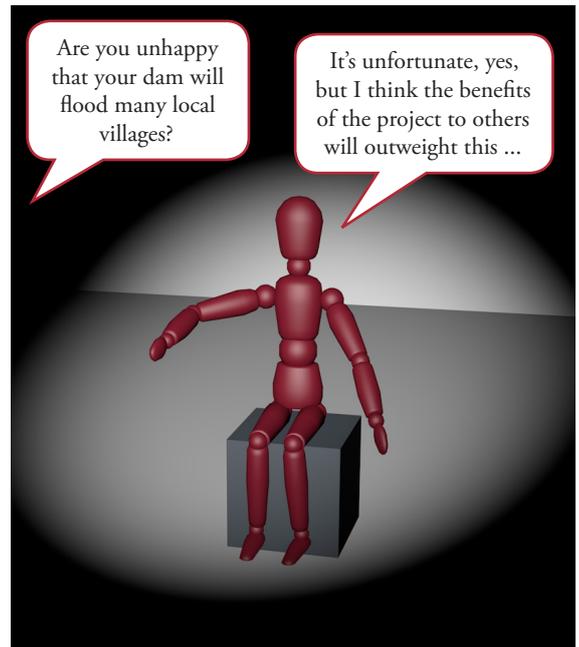
Hot-seating

Hot-seating's pretty simple; all you need is a chair, someone to be questioned (you, or a pupil) and some people to ask the questions (the rest of the class, and possibly a teaching assistant).

The basic premise is that the person in the hot-seat represents someone other than themselves; they may be famous, or someone entirely 'ordinary', but they must answer every question from the point-of-view of their character.

If you're using hot-seating at the start of a Scheme of Work either you, as the teacher, or someone else knowledgeable (possibly an A-level student?) will need to answer the questions. As students obtain more subject knowledge, they can answer more and more questions, with some of the differing levels of difficulty suggested below proving useful for differentiation.

You'll also need to consider the level of questions which you are likely to get from a given groups of students. Would an unprepared group of students questioning you as the Dalai Lama be likely to ask probing questions? If they are more likely to ask "what do you like to watch on TV?" than "what is your stance on the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and what aspects of your personal history lead you to say this?", then consider helping them prepare useful questions before you go into role.



Where, when and who?

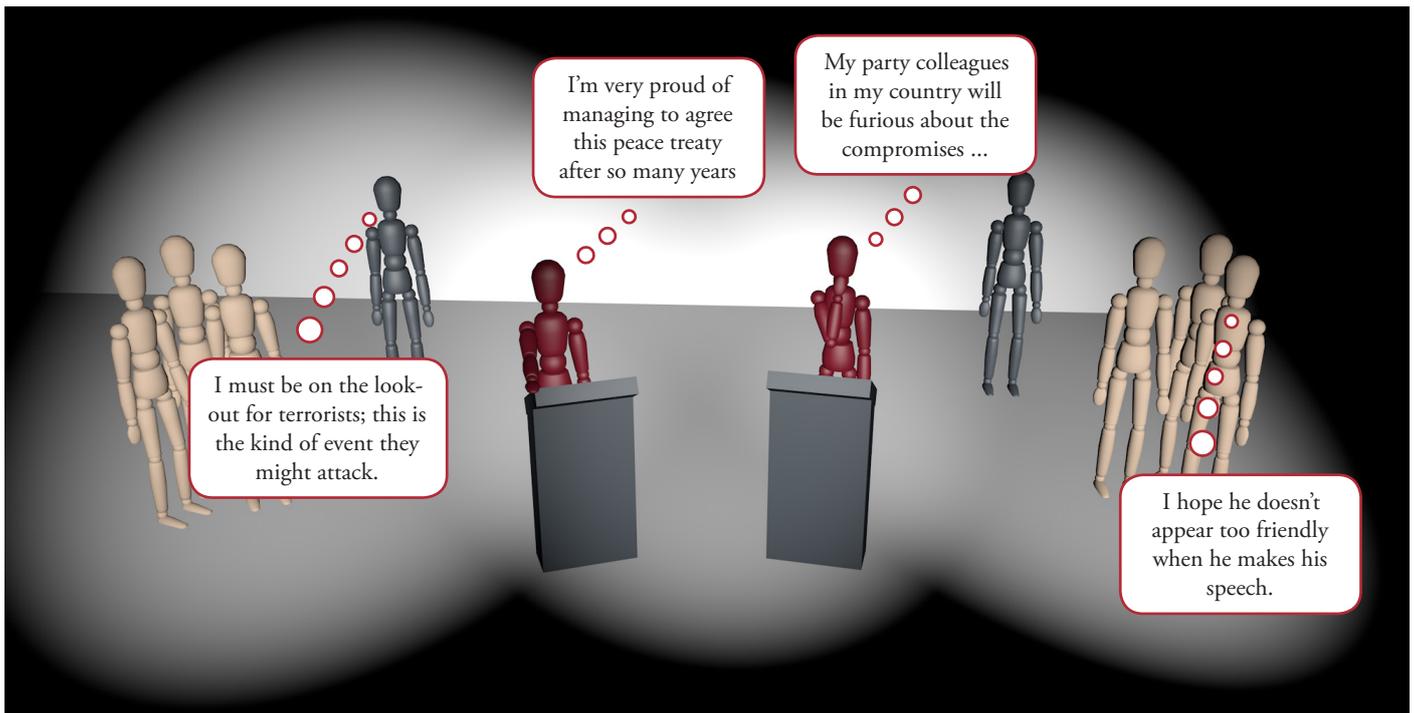
- ◆ **It's important to plan where and when the questioning takes place.** If the character being hot-seated comes from a different time or place, is the questioning happening then? For example, if you are questioning Charles I, has he just been in a Time Machine which brings him into your school, today, and allows you to question him from a position of safety and omniscience? Or are you a group of courtiers in his court in London in the 1630s, who must use deferent forms of address, possibly be in the dark about some areas of current affairs, and avoid asking questions which would lead to them being punished? The latter activity is more difficult.
- ◆ **Questions of where, when and who will also change the content of the answers.** Imagine you are hot-seating a Jewish concentration camp escapee in wartime France. Would she give the same responses to hot-seat questions from a panel of French Resistance members in the backroom of a café as she would to a panel of SS interrogators in the dungeon of a château? How would the questions differ? How would the tone, volume and pace of the questions differ? Perhaps you could run both sessions and compare them afterwards.
- ◆ **Some people may know more than others:** if you are hot-seating the chief engineer of a major dam building project, he should know pretty much everything about it (albeit from a possibly partial viewpoint). But if you were asking an indigenous villager about the dam, they might have a much more limited knowledge, possibly even erroneous due to lack of information, 'Chinese whispers' within their community or through exaggeration resulting from fear.

Extra fun ...

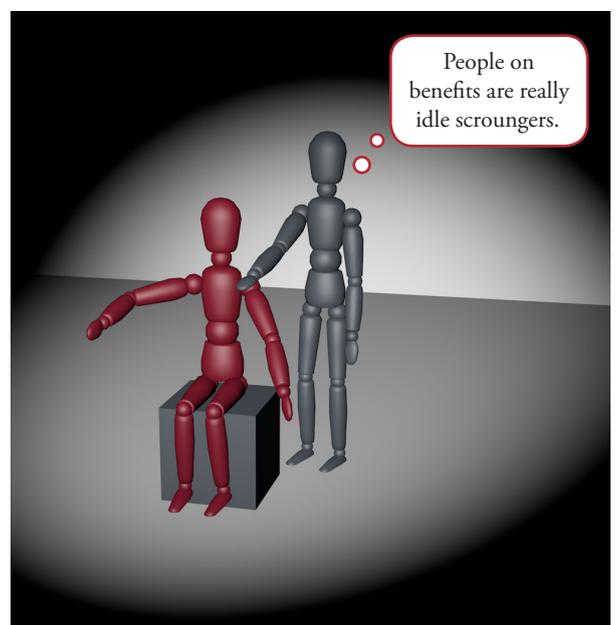
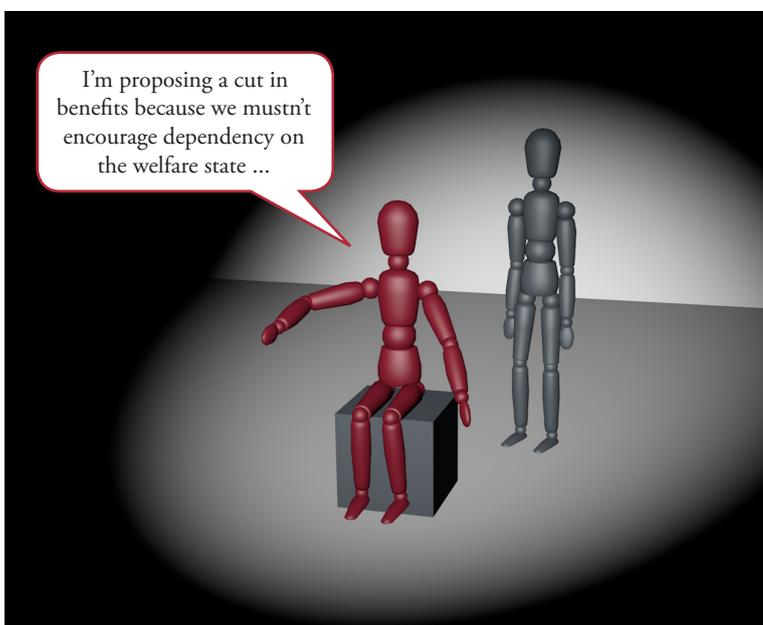
- ◆ Can you get your hands on (or make, ... or get your students to make) some appropriate hats, costumes or props? Use a suitable picture displayed on the IWB to act as 'set' for the hot-seating.
- ◆ Can you think ahead (or do some research) on how the person might have sat (imperiously? nervously?), moved (elegantly? suffering from a physical disability?) or spoken (like Hitler? like Gandhi?)

Thought-tracking

Thought-tracking is a drama technique where characters voice their thoughts, rather than (or as well as) what they actually say. It's often used by drama classes to voice the thoughts of people in a 'freeze-frame' or tableau. For example, the picture below represents a tableau of two countries announcing a peace treaty: thoughts are voiced by (left to right) a soldier, the two heads of state involved and one of the second head of state's advisors.



Thought-tracking can also be used as an accompaniment to hot-seating. In the illustration below the seated politician is saying what his character would say in the given situation. His 'real thoughts' stand behind him; when the seated person says something which doesn't actually represent what he really thinks, the representative of the 'real thoughts' touches the speaker on their shoulder. The speaker pauses until the 'real thoughts' have been voiced.



Abstract role plays

Hot-seating and thought-tracking are most often used with 'real' or fictional people, but it can be fun to give inanimate objects the human power of speech.

- ◆ **A glacier in Geography:** "How ... [pause] ... very ... [pause] ... very ... slow- ... ly ... I ... am ... mo- ... ving ... But ... I ... must ... move ... on ... al- ... ways ... head- ... ing ... to- ... wards ... the ... sea".
- ◆ **A cathedral in Religious Education:** "Here I stand; for years I towered above the tiny wooden-framed houses all around me. But now I am eclipsed by the skyscrapers of Mammon towering above me. In times of old my painted pillars and soaring arches were cloaked in clouds of incense; but then came Protestants who scrubbed me bare and took away my statues. Where once I heard daily the chanting of monks singing Plainsong, now I must listen to banal 'worship songs' with crashing drums and blaring guitars."

Note how differently these objects speak; character is also applicable to inanimate objects. Actions can also be used:

- ◆ **Glaciation in Geography:** Use the hall (and possibly more than one class). A group of students act as the glacier, pushing aside people and furniture to form valleys. The group representing the glacier should speak with one voice. Trees, rivers, mountain tops and other geographical features can all have a voice. The glacier could leave behind small, lonely moraines.
- ◆ **A cathedral in Religious Education:** A cathedral can be laid out in the hall. Pairs of students can form arches. A group of students might represent the altar or a rood screen. A student lying on her back with hands clasped in prayer might represent the top of an old-fashioned tomb.

Scripted and semi-scripted playlets

Most of the activities described above will normally be conducted in an improvisatory manner (even if subject knowledge has been acquired and research has taken place beforehand). However, scripted and semi-scripted playlets can be a useful aid in role-play, particularly where it might be difficult for students to accurately improvise a scene: this might be because the aim of the scene is to represent a specific historical event, or type of event, as accurately as possible or because, as in this Psychology example, the interplay between four characters (Therapist, Therapist's thoughts, Client and Client's thoughts) is too complicated to improvise, especially if aiming to be reasonably faithful to a real professional approach.

CLIENT enters room, followed by the CLIENT'S THOUGHTS and sits down, slumping, on chair.

Therapist: Hello, good to see you, how are you today?

Client: I'm OK.

CLIENT'S THOUGHTS touches CLIENT on the shoulder (see previous page).

Client's thoughts: I feel awful; wish I'd never been born.

THERAPIST'S THOUGHTS touches THERAPIST on the shoulder.

Therapist's thoughts: She doesn't look well. But I must

be careful about her paranoid attitude towards me; I don't want to contradict her outright, so I'll ask her about something else to start off with.

Therapist: I'm glad to hear that you're OK. Perhaps we're making some progress towards our goals? How did you get on with the homework that I set you last week?

Client's thoughts: Stupid homework. She's only asking this to try and catch me out.

Client: I didn't do it.

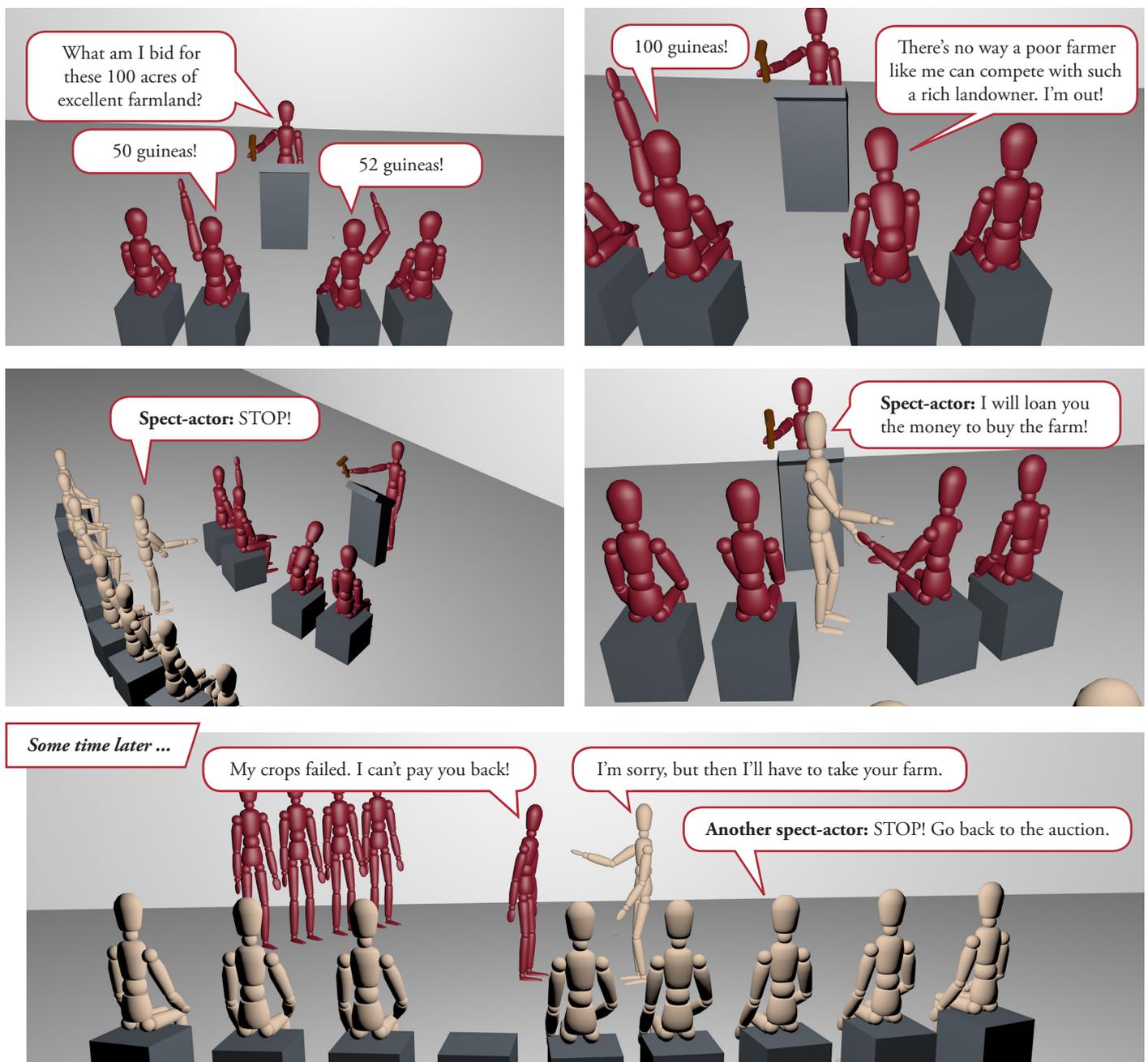
Therapist: Oh, that's a shame. Was there any particular reason why you weren't able to do it? ... [etc.]

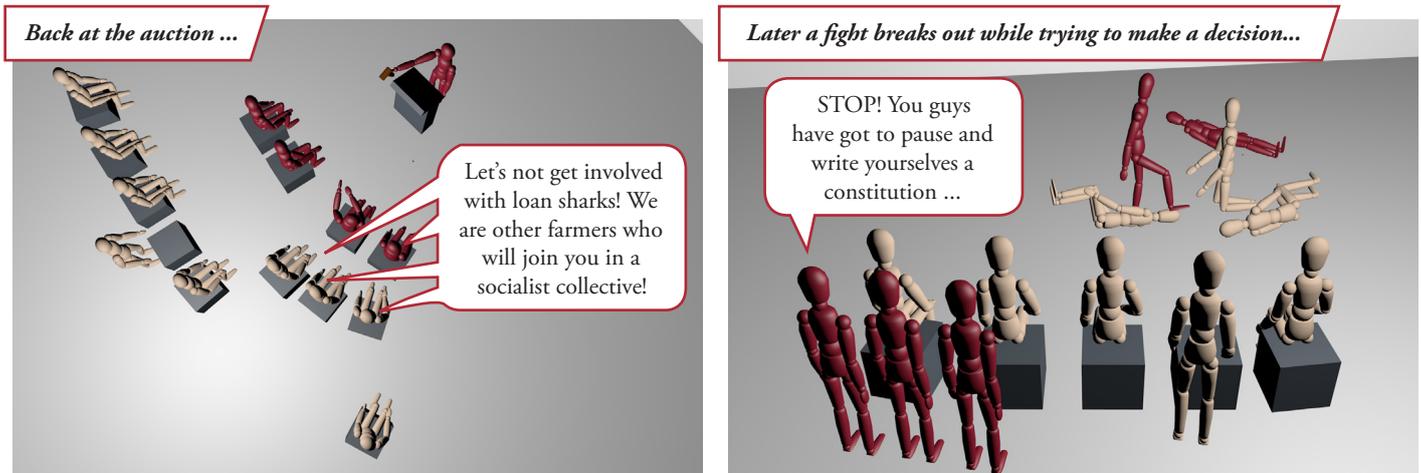
Forum theatre

Forum theatre is a technique developed by the hugely influential Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. It is explored in his wonderful book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, which I can thoroughly recommend to all teachers; ask your drama department for a copy. It forms part of his techniques for 'Theatre of the Oppressed', developed to empower oppressed individuals in societies around the world.

His basic premise is that, rather than being a passive audience, those watching a drama should be encouraged to become 'spect-actors' who take an active role in the drama. A key way in which this is done is by allowing the audience to call out "STOP!" at any point and give direction to, or step in to replace, any of the characters in the scene. Plays in Theatre of the Oppressed can therefore run on and on, exploring many different avenues and opportunities.

In the following example from a Sociology lesson, five actors are in a scene where an auction is taking place for some farmland:





As this illustration shows, Forum Theatre can be used to test many different approaches to a topic or question, with the teacher actively involved as an actor or spect-actor, but with your views and actions existing on an equal plane with those of your empowered students. In the Humanities, pieces of Forum Theatre can run on over several lessons; as new subject knowledge is obtained, students will become aware of new ways of intervening to improve the situation. It is a hugely versatile learning tool which is stimulating, fun, memorable and informative all at the same time.

Mantle of the expert

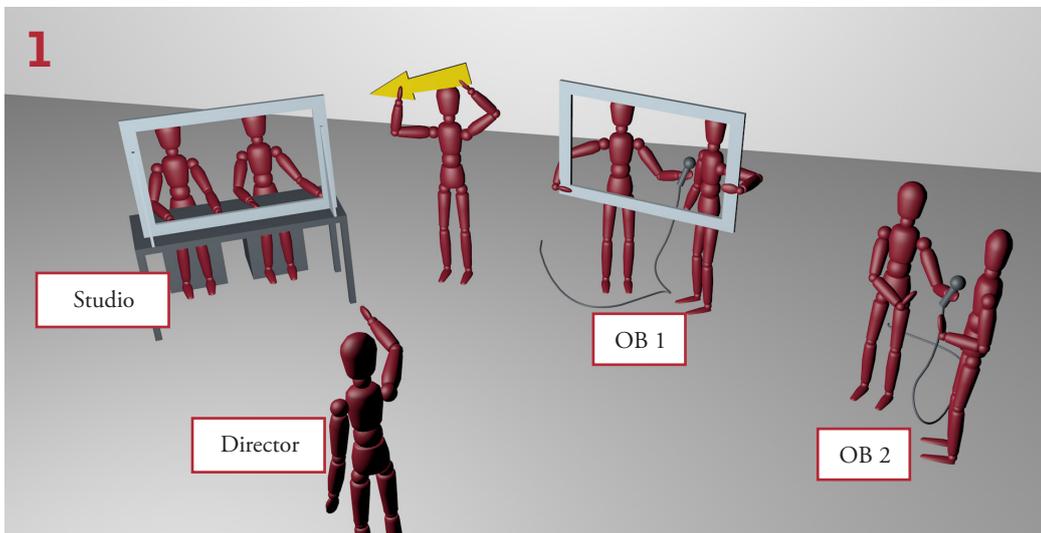
The 'Mantle of the Expert' is a drama education technique developed by Dorothy Heathcote during the 1980s. Heathcote developed it into a highly specific set of practices, which haven't been widely adopted in secondary school drama but which (partly due to their eminently cross-curricular nature) are starting to receive wide uptake in primary schools. I believe that the model is also perfect for extended Schemes of Work in the Humanities right through secondary school.

The basic concept is that the students and the teacher immerse themselves in an imagined context where they see themselves as geologists, archaeologists, sociologists, doctors, librarians, evangelists or other 'experts': key to the approach is that the types of expert and their exact roles are chosen in a way that unlocks the doors to curricular exploration:

- ◆ An **enterprise**: The class act together as a group of some kind; in Heathcote's writings, they are most commonly in the present, even when their enterprise relates to the past. For example, they might be a group of archaeologists excavating a Roman villa, or a company setting up a Roman theme park. However, the enterprise can also be contemporary to the events being studied; for example, an enterprise run by French Resistance members might help a client group of Jewish refugees.
- ◆ A **client**: Just as often occurs in real life, the students respond to a request from a client for assistance. This often comes in the form of a letter, giving some kind of project brief. To succeed, the enterprise needs to serve the needs of the client.
- ◆ **Actions and processes**: Once again, as in real life, running an enterprise will involve lots of activities such as holding meetings, planning strategies, designing buildings or keeping track of budgets. Writing, Reading, Speaking & Listening and artistic work are all easily accessible via Mantle of the Expert.
- ◆ **Preparation**: A Mantle of the Expert programme requires the preparation of a huge amount of resources, but this can be immensely rewarding. An insight into the amount of preparation required can be seen from 3 hours of video recorded by Heathcote as a lecture for a group of educators in Australia: <http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/news/dorothy-heathcote-explains-moe/> ... don't let it put you off, but do be encouraged to be really ambitious!

An excellent resource on Mantle of the Expert can be found at www.mantleoftheexpert.com.

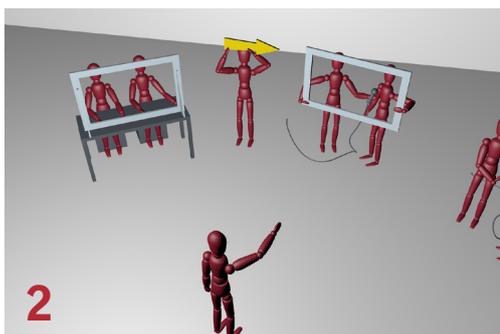
News broadcasts



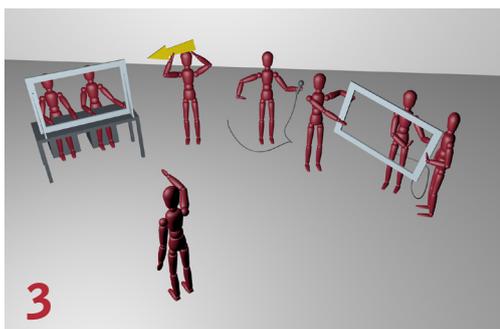
You can do a news broadcast with just the following:

- ◆ Anchor-people at a desk representing the studio
- ◆ One or more reporters broadcasting 'live' from relevant locations
- ◆ Possibly some interviewees (experts or eyewitnesses) at those locations for the reporter to talk to.

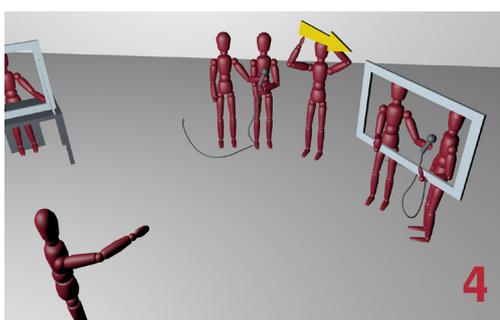
However, news is more fun and memorable when some extra equipment is deployed.



If you are technically able, you can connect one or more cameras directly up to your interactive whiteboard and 'live mix' a broadcast. A lower tech version is shown on this page and involves two 'TV frames' made from 0.5mm foamboard (preferably A0) size, which is available from artists' suppliers. Leave 10cm margin all the way round each frame, and cut the middles out. Use the middle of one of them to make a stand for it so it will stand upright on a desk. Use the middle of the other, covered with bright paper, to make a large arrow.



- ◆ In Picture 1, above, the Director could cue the news broadcast by asking someone to cue a news jingle on the classroom's speakers. They then point to the anchors in the studio, who introduce the main news story of the day. For example "This is the news for April 1, 1979. Iran has voted to become an Islamic Republic ...".



- ◆ At some point, the anchors should hand over to the first outside broadcast (OB1). The Director should call out "Cut to Camera 2!" and the person holding the coloured arrow turns it to point at the people holding the first picture frame (as shown in Picture 2; this helps the rest of the class – the audience – to know where to look). The roving reporter can present a short report, or interview someone (e.g. a jubilant resident of Tehran or the UK Foreign Secretary in London). At the end of the report, the Director announces the change of focus by calling "Cut back to Camera 1!".

- ◆ While the anchors are reading the next headline or announcing the next outside broadcast, the moveable frame should be passed to the next group of outside reporters (Picture 3), ready for the next change of shot (Picture 4). Some OBs could take place in front of a suitable photo on the IWB. You could even have a Peter Snow type figure explain a complex concept (e.g. 'How an earthquake occurs') in front of a PowerPoint on the IWB.

This is a hugely versatile tool, providing opportunities for using wide-ranging subject knowledge. Interviewees should act in character, while journalists use 'serious' and 'light-hearted' voices as appropriate. You can use a news broadcast for any period in history but do remind younger students that, in a broadcast from Ancient Rome, this is using major artistic licence!