This Teaching Cycle of the PGCTHE portfolio has been submitted to CADAIR with the permission of the author detailed above. It is to be used as a resource for future PGCTHE candidates and other staff as part of their professional development at Aberystwyth University. If you wish to cite this work then please contact the author. Contact details can be found at http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/directory/.
2.3 The challenge of technology: the Internet, history teaching and role play

As you may have gathered from what has been said already, a good deal of my teaching utilizes the Internet. It is a marvelous innovation – but it needs to be managed and optimised in the educational environment. The Internet – as with so much else – has revolutionised the study of history and we must therefore address ourselves to its challenges and opportunities. I decided to wed its use here to an innovative from of teaching, role-play – an essential part of my approach to student-centred learning. Far from abrogating his/ her role, however, this mode of teaching can place severe demands upon the educator. A good deal of work has been done on innovative teaching that places the responsibility for the learning method on the student. Klora Bolander, of the University of Glasgow, gives us a working definition from the year 2000.

49 Only non-assessed element of the four categories (see above).
Courses - or course units - which are designed interactively by teachers and students so that the students are active and self-directed participants in learning. A focus on deep learning is embedded in the approach, as well as a clear linkage between the learning and the assessment. This often implies less emphasis on didactic teaching and more on (self-) directed study, group work and problem-based learning. Student centred learning is an approach to teaching and learning which recognises the student as an individual and his/her personal development as important. The teacher - student relationship is characterised by collaboration, consultation and negotiation where students are seen as a learning resource and participants in a transparent process. The interaction quality between student and teacher is essential so that framework and objectives are agreed upon.52

This approach was wedded to the group activity (within the forum of the seminar) known as role-play. Role playing, a derivative of a *sociodrama*, is a method for exploring the issues involved in complex social situations. It may be used for the training of professionals or in a classroom for the understanding of literature, history, and even science. Many education professionals have taken this on board:

- The primary purpose of role-playing exercises is to get students to look at the material they are learning in a new light. The instructor is persuading them to alter their mental maps of the world instead of just filling them in.53
- Role-playing exercises show the world as a complex place with complicated problems, which can only rarely be solved by a simple answer that the student has previously memorised.54
- Adding a sympathetic, generally human element to the study of history is often encouraging to students with anxieties over the interpretation of highly complex events. Lessons can use role-playing to emphasize the value of feelings and of creativity as well as of knowledge.55

52 'The only way we can teach students to become like ourselves, is to become like students' Report by Klara Bolander, Teaching and Learning Service, February 2000. URL:http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/tls/ProjectReports/whole/index.html
Additionally, the students learn that skills they learn separately (such as quantitative and communications skills) are often used together in order to accomplish many real-world tasks.56

The courses on which I operated these two interpedently innovative teaching variables were as follows:

- ‘The CIA and America in War and Peace’ (URL:http://users.aber.ac.uk/rbh/cia)
- ‘The Cuban Missile Crisis’ (URL:http://users.aber.ac.uk/rbh/cuba)

The Cuban Missile Crisis is of particular utility as scenario for the use of the Internet and role-play as I shall explain below. Below, reproduced from the Internet is the general instruction to the student body regarding the aims and objectives of the course entitled ‘The Cuban Missile Crisis’.

**Aims and Objectives**

**a. Aims**

In October 1962 Cold War came close to nuclear war. Ever since scholars, political leaders and military officials have pondered and debated how close we were to Armageddon. The causes, courses and consequences of the crisis continue to generate debate and disagreement among academics and surviving participants on all sides. The aim of the course is to explore these various debates, and examine how historians, political scientists and students of crisis management analyse the events of 1962. A second aim is show how the study of the crisis illuminates various aspects of scholarship. What, for example, can recent historiography tell us about the opportunities and challenges for historical method, especially now that the Cold War is over? Third, the possible lessons of the crisis for diplomacy and crisis management are studied not just in the Cold War context, but also in the age of weapons of mass destruction, which we still inhabit.

**b. Objectives**

By the end of the module the student should be able to:

- Evaluate debates about the origins, dynamics and conclusion of the crisis
- Adjudicate upon how close the world came to nuclear war in 1962
- Understand the implications of recent scholarship for the interpretations of historians, political scientists and students of crisis management
- Analyse the possible lessons of the crisis for the conduct of international affairs

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Below is a similar reproduction (from the web page) of a typical seminar assignment.

Seminar 1 Origins: Soviet: Role-playing exercise

It is April 1962. You are a group of Soviet officials tasked by Nikita Khrushchev to evaluate Soviet-American relations and the American threat to Cuba, and to consider whether deployment of Soviet nuclear weapons there will enhance Cuban security and serve Soviet interests.

Central questions to consider are therefore:

• Do the Americans intend to invade Cuba? Will the deployment of nuclear weapons deter them?
• What kind of nuclear weapons could be deployed (e.g. bombers, short range missiles, etc)
• How should the weapons be deployed – openly, in secret, by deceiving the Americans?
• How will President Kennedy respond? What are the implications for Soviet-American relations?

You will have 10 minutes to present your evaluation to Premier Khrushchev. Incidentally, you should know that the Premier is now personally committed to deploying nuclear weapons in Cuba, but is always looking for officials with minds of their own and able to run power stations in the more attractive parts of Eastern Siberia.


The use of the web here has clear advantages. The students can design the web pages and send them to the seminar leader (myself) between sessions. This gave the students effective control of the content of seminars – whilst allowing myself the ability to impose (gently) a rigorous learning agenda. This is a necessary constituent in role-play as it is their perspectives and input that will fundamentally affect the course of discussion in a class. As noted above, role-play is particularly useful as it allows students to establish a degree of empathy with the past. I do wish to draw universally-applicable lessons here but, first of all, I shall discuss why role-play is so very useful in the particular historical
scenario that is under consideration here: namely, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

The first issue is what I might call the ‘empathy thing’. Students have a great deal of difficulty of thinking in the abstract and it must be remembered that to students of the age 18-21 (the bulk of the class involved here) the Cold War, let alone the Cuban Missile Crisis is as distant as the conquest of Gaul by Caesar. Thus, subliminally, the student will draw little distinction between the fifty-something professor discussing, for instance, the international reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 as he/she might to the said professor discussing the trail and execution of Charles I in 1649. This is important as the student will often disregard the fact that the professor well remembers the invasion of 1979 on the personal level. Thus, the scholarly interaction of the professor will inevitably be coloured to an extent that the professorial memory of the earlier event will not be. Now, that is not to say that this personal memory is the only distorting factor (or bias) in the worldview of scholars. Our perspectives on the past are influenced by many social, political and other factors. When the student recognises the bias inherent in the supposedly ‘objective’ judgments of others, then he/she may begin to address their own perspectives on matters (even if they don’t recognise their own bias they might at least recognise that they have one).

With regard to the Cuban Missile Crisis it is no use, therefore, in simply role-playing in the manner of the rational, disinterested outsider. That is, if assigned the role of President John F. Kennedy the student should not simply state, ‘I would impose a blockade as that is what Kennedy did and there was no nuclear war.’ No, what needs to be done is that the student is forced (there have to be constraints) to adopt the mind-set of the protagonists involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis. That is to be shown the impossibility of certain avenues of choice. To an extent, role-play is like a game in that it has rules. The students will thereby be introduced to the entire literature on ‘game theory’ that was prevalent in the Cold War. (The ultimate exponent of this was Thomas Schelling).57 This envisaged the application of mathematical modeling to the problem of nuclear

weapons with the regard of the threat and use of force in international relations. This was what Herman Kahn termed ‘Thinking about the Unthinkable’.\(^58\) Now, the paradox in all of this was that Kahn et al believed it was necessary to think, to envisage, indeed to plan for the ‘unthinkable’ in order to prevent it happening. This actually meant advocating ways to win a nuclear/thermonuclear war\(^59\). It was, perhaps, the ultimate expression of Flavius Vegetius Renatus’ exhortation that ‘Let him who desires peace prepare for war’ (from his De Rei Militari). Of course, such thinking is easily attacked by means of ethical arguments. And, in the real world, it was. However, I want the students to engage with such questions coming from the framework and mind-set of the decision makers of the time. A major advantage in doing this is the widespread availability of contemporary published and on-line material and students are given this and told explicitly what the given policy makers/general or whatever did not know at the time. An example is the famous CIA report of 19 September 1962:

> We believe that there would probably be a difference between Soviet reaction to all-out invasion and Soviet reaction to more limited US use of force against selective objectives in Cuba. We believe that the Soviets would be somewhat less likely to retaliate with military force in areas outside of Cuba in response to speedy, effective invasion than in response to more limited forms of military action against Cuba. We recognize that such an estimate cannot be made with very great assurance and do not rule out the possibility of Soviet retaliation outside of Cuba in case of invasion. But we believe that a rapid occupation of Cuba would be more likely to make the Soviets pause in opening new theaters of conflict than limited action or action which drags out.\(^60\)

Further, in choosing any course of action the students are asked to provide rationales for their choice. Further, they are pre-disposed to defend such choices against the interrogations of their peers. The choice made, it is stressed, is neither right nor wrong. This is not a video game and they do not ‘lose’ if nuclear war becomes inevitable. What this will show them is that even very powerful figures, the most powerful people on earth, have limited choice on occasion. It must be recognised that events sometimes overwhelm people and that the difference between the outbreak of World War One and

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\(^58\) Herman Kahn, *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (1962).


the Cuban Missile Crisis was not so much the willingness of figures to go to war to kill millions in 1914 had given way to an unwillingness to destroy the planet in 1962. No, the lesson to be drawn is that in so many ways, the world was lucky in 1962 as it had not been in 1914. Certainly the policy makers recognised this and took measures to ensure that such scenarios did not arise again (e.g. the establishment of the ‘hot line’ between the US President and the Soviet General Secretary). Thus, the student is forced to see that people sometimes have to make ‘least-worst choice’ decisions. There are very many examples of this and an obvious one concerns the question ‘To what extent was the bombing of innocent civilians in World War Two justified in order to destroy the murderous regime of Hitler and to end the Holocaust.’ Such questions are extreme but, with regard to Cuba in 1962, the students can begin to move beyond mere decision-making and try to identify the ethical and moral frameworks within which those decision makers operated.

Assessing the results

Such exercises are more difficult to manage. The simple invocation of, for instance, a rise in makers would be insufficient evidence in, and of, itself, to be an indicator of direct success. However, we can always turn to the feedback that we receive from the students – both directly and by virtue of anonymous end-of-semester questionnaires. And, while we can measure anything as crude as the influence of role-play on essay or exam results, we can measure student satisfaction. It is an incontrovertible fact that if students are happy with the learning method – and you are satisfied as a teacher with the learning outcome – the learning process is enhanced. The feedback for this activity was more widespread and more opinionated than any other feedback that I have ever received on any course and was generally very favourable. Of course, there could be an element of saying what is necessary top please the lecturer when students are asked directly for their reactions but this is not the case where anonymous questionnaires are used. Indeed, the opposite is often the case. For the purposes of the results below only anonymous questionnaires were used.
The clear enthusiasm apparent for role-play here flies in the face of the maxim that students will always embrace the minimum amount effort in their studies. What is clear is that even when students who complain of excessive workloads per seminar admit that they would be more amenable to role-play IF they could see clear and tangible benefits. I then sent out a group e-mail asking of they would like future seminars run in traditional manner, role-play or a combination of both.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of seminar</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-play</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of both</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response/ no opinion</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph 5: Student seminar preferences after encountering role-play

Thus, it would be entirely feasible to have a course with a mixture of both or, even, certain groups allocated to the style of learning that they like. It will be stressed, however that both types of seminar will involve their having to study. Further, they will be provided with adequate information as to what both will entail. To my mind, what is therefore required is the institutionalisation of the student-led seminar within the assessment criteria of universities. The Department of History and Welsh History has been running trials on oral assessment for some four years now (under the tutelage of Dr. Martyn Powell)\(^1\) and I have seen some impressive results from his teaching.\(^2\) To my mind, this is the way forward and I should very much like to see student skills broadened by being tested on oral presentational skills. In a very real way this would at least drastically reduce the phenomenon whereby the students assigned to present at a given seminar simply do not turn up! We know that non-assessed essays elicit a very high rate of non-submission – so why should this be any different for presentations in seminars. In Italian universities, for instance, every student is tested orally in public (*discussione della* ...

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\(^1\) Originally for part two skills courses. This has now been expanded to include final year special subjects. My thanks to Dr. Powell for his sharing of his considerable expertise on this matter with myself over the past four years and for suggesting means by which role-play and oral assessment might be intermeshed.

\(^2\) For Dr. Powell’s fascinating findings in this area please see appendix five.
tesi di laurea) to attain their degree. That we should neglect such a vital skill as even a component of assessment is, to my mind, not the ideal situation. In the meantime, role-play can still form an important constituent part of the learning process. We insist that student teachers practice before qualifying for our schools. Why do we think it unnecessary that transferable skills are ever put to the test for the remainder of our arts and social science graduates? Based on my experiences to date, I certainly intend to expand role-play for students in my future teaching.

Conclusion

Upon the completion of the initial three cycles of my professional development, it is clear to me that ‘reflective practice’ forms an essential part of teaching in higher education. Some of the literature on teaching in general, and on teaching history in particular, has been surveyed, and several examples have been given of how Cowan’s reflective cycle can be use to describe my teaching and its development over three years. What my participation in this project has done is to transform my essentially subliminal practice of reflecting upon my own teaching into an on-going process. I initially stored date of the type utilized above as a requirement for my own PGCtHE – I now do it as a matter of routine because it helps this, and me indirectly, helps the students. This is what I am employed for - as a corollary - it makes me feel good about my role with the university system of the United Kingdom. It is, of course, a truism, that teaching and research should reinforce each other. However, the demands of the RAE mean that all too often lecturers come to regard teaching as a detrimental drag on their time. I hope that I shall never come to regard this as being the case. This portfolio has attempted to show how its application has influenced and benefited my own teaching. It has become clear that ‘reflective practice’ is an ongoing process, and I have indicated the areas of my teaching that, even at this stage, will benefit from a process of revision and reflection.

63 For the attainment of all undergraduate and masters degrees, the candidate (the student that is) is given a Viva Voce with approximately eleven professors in attendance. This will include the candidate’s supervisor and the degree scheme coordinator. The general public is also invited (an excellent way of promoting town-and-gown relations) although they are not permitted to ask questions.
The above reflections contained - within the three cycles - focused on three aspects of my experiment to create a critically reflective learning environment (within the environ of discussion within teacher-student interfaces that are both cognitive and meta-cognitive). It has highlighted some of the techniques and conceptual shifts I have attempted to adopt to improve the quality of seminars and in particular the critical and reflective qualities of these discussions. I analysed the effect of techniques adopted on the quality of student discussion and knowledge, within the bounds of the available evidence, and found that all techniques discussed appear to have had at least some of the desired impact. To re-cap, I looked at the areas of:

- The shift from history to historiography
- The challenge of using primary sources
- The challenge of technology: the Internet, history teaching and role-play

As will be plain to the reader, the Internet plays major part in all three of these areas. However, the Internet is harnessed to serve specific learning outcomes (and some of its use is entirely basic - e.g. the highlighting of key texts in hard copy or electronic format). Having learned how to write web pages some year ago, I have found that there are considerable advantages to creating a specific learning environment for specific student bodies. That is to say, if you would care to inspect any of my course web pages, you will see that the students are assigned their own cyber ‘learning space’. This, subliminally if nothing else, gives the students a responsibility to fill that space. The PGcHE scheme has played a vital part in this process. It provided the framework within which to describe the process could establish the contacts across departments that facilitated the exchange of ideas, which is an integral part of the practice of reflective teaching, and it introduced some of the terminology. The former, in particular, has been helpful in improving and in thinking about my own teaching. There is sometimes a tendency to stick too firmly to the teaching conventions of a particular discipline, and the ability to compare and contrast how teaching was delivered, for instance, in Law or Accounting has been beneficial. Not all the methods thus encountered can easily be transferred to teaching history.
Nonetheless, in particular the degree to which my colleagues in other departments have drawn on electronic resources has been an eye-opener.

In my own course, ‘Foreign Policy, War and Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century’, for instance, students choose (in groups) their own presentations and their subsequent PowerPoints are placed on the web by myself. What I stress, and what they come to realize is true, is that these presentations are for the benefit of the rest of the class – and not me. This is to turn peer review into ‘peer pride’. That is, to place the onus for the failure of the rest of the class to receive educational aids on the student and move away from the tiresome attitude of some students that to fail to complete a piece of work is, at best, to annoy the tutor and, at worst, only let down the student him/herself. This assigns a measure of responsibility for others into the students that, outside of university life, will serve them well in future years. This would also reinforce what I have said above with regard to the unfortunate tendency towards absenteeism amongst those presenting at a given seminar. In my ‘The USA, Britain and the Cold War, 1955-1963’ I inform the group that all of their class work, whilst non-assessed, is to be submitted and distributed for the benefit of the understanding of all. Thus, non-submission does not lead to punitive measures on my part (which are limited in any case) but rather to an awareness that they alone are letting down the rest of the class. Without wishing to stretch the analogy too far, academic research has made it clear that soldiers fight in wars primarily out of a sense of loyalty to their comrades, rather than a duty to obey their officers. However, without good officers you never have a good army. I am not in any way advocating militarism – or a militaristic approach - here, simply pointing for good organisational practice. Good practices of listening are universal for optimum outcomes (and here I could refer to hetah care, commercial activity or pressure groups like Greenpeace). Good officers listen to their soldiers and RESPECT their opinions. What goes for soldiers and officers also, in my experience, goes for students and teachers.

64 URL: http://users.aber.ac.uk/rbh/hy34420
65 URL: http://users.aber.ac.uk/rbh/cold-war
66 A point made by almost all of the contributions to Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), Time to Kill. The Soldier’s Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945 (London: Pimlico Books, 1997).
And, just as there are bad officers, there are bad teachers and I hope that I hope that I make a good officer by virtue of my reflective practices.

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