

Roleplaying Legal Disputes: Teaching Latin American History in the College Classroom

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In the United States, students enrolled in Latin American history courses generally complete short writing assignments based on their reading of translated primary sources. Among the sources available to English-speaking students is “Scandal at the Church: José de Alfaro Accuses Doña Theresa Bravo and Others of Insulting and Beating his Castiza Wife, Josefa Cadena (Mexico, 1782).” This document is a transcript of a criminal court record discovered and translated by historian Sonya Lipsett-Rivera for a collection of primary sources edited by Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling titled, *Colonial Lives: Documents in Latin American History, 1550-1850*.¹ The document contains the intricate details behind the verbal and physical abuse allegedly sustained by a woman deemed racially inferior, according to dominant racial hierarchies in late eighteenth-century Mexico, at the hands of an elite woman outside of church. The document registers the criminal complaint made by José de Alfaro, the abused woman’s husband, who claimed that his family had been publicly dishonored as a result of this incident. He held the elite woman’s husband, a colonial officer, responsible for her actions and demanded justice. The document, however, is incomplete as it does not contain a transcript of the depositions made by the accused nor the final ruling in the case.

When I was a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) at the University of Michigan, I graded four-page analytical papers in which undergraduate students offered their interpretations of this document as part of one of two writing assignments in a Colonial Latin America course. Their papers generally presented interesting perspectives and demonstrated persuasive efforts to connect patterns in the story to the larger issues that shaped colonial Latin American societies: wealth and power differences, blurry cultural boundaries, and racial stratification. But only some papers raised critical questions about the nature of the legal complaint itself and the process of administering justice in colonial times. A few students put themselves in the historian’s shoes and expressed outright frustration to work with a primary source that contained rich detail, but was incomplete. I enjoyed reading these students’ papers, but was often left with the sense that students ignored or left unexplored the versatility and complexities of this source. These papers did not always exhibit the critical thinking that this document has the potential to elicit because, as Polly Piergiovanni states, “it is not sufficient for instructors simply to tell their students to write; writing by itself doesn’t magically improve thinking.”²

As Assistant Professor of History at Western Michigan University, I teach a Colonial Latin America seminar to undergraduate students new to studying this geographical region and who usually major in History, Secondary Education, English, and Business. My main objective has been to increase students’ historical learning and improve their critical thinking skills through dynamic activities that consider the document at its fullest while stimulating student inquiry, reflection, and creativity. Thus, I made two critical changes when I first assigned this primary source to my eclectic group of students. First, I provided students with a copy of the transcript for the week we discussed issues of honor and crime but purposefully blocked out Prof. Lipsett-Rivera’s introduction to the document. I shared some of the contextual information available in the introduction with students in class, but let them process the story without much intervention. Second, I replaced the big writing assignment with a

¹ Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling, eds., *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin American History, 1550-1850*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 217-223.

² Polly Piergiovanni, “Creating a Critical Thinker,” *College Teaching* 62, no. 3 (2014): 87.

number of well-structured, hands-on learning activities (that still included short writing tasks) to be conducted over two lesson periods.

The learning activities involved roleplaying, self-reflection, group discussion, one-minute papers, and a problem-solving task. Through these activities, my students would, as James M. Lang suggests in *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, “spend at least some time doing things in the classroom rather than merely sitting there passively.”³ They would engage in group and individual work in the classroom that required them to think, write, discuss, and make connections. Among the learning objectives for these activities was that students would obtain a greater understanding of historical episodes and themes in colonial Latin America through the close reading and open discussion of translated primary sources. Additionally, students would build and put into practice their critical thinking skills by engaging in informed speculation, an approach used by historians working with fragmentary evidence.⁴ This, I hoped, would result in intellectual conversations on the production of history with an emphasis on the crafting of narratives that center ordinary people’s experiences and stories.

But meeting these learning objectives through the mentioned activities suddenly seemed daunting when the COVID-19 pandemic changed my mode of instruction. Could I replicate effective learning activities I had already tested out in the physical classroom to work in a synchronous virtual context? What initially seemed like a significant pedagogical challenge eventually turned into an opportunity to reimagine engagement, considering that it is “one of the most critical elements both to effective course design and to effective course facilitation in the digital environment.”⁵ This reimagining involved communicating clear instructions to my students ahead of time, outlining virtual discussion rules and expectations, and incorporating at least one online collaboration tool to the activity redesign process.⁶ In this essay, I discuss each of the areas I revised and adapted to offer this learning activity to the eighteen students who took my online class in Fall 2021 and conclude by describing how, in spite of the positive outcomes, there is still room for further improvement.

Roleplaying Scenes of a Late-Colonial Criminal Trial

According to Michael A. Barnhart, “few things drive student engagement with their subjects more than role-playing them.”⁷ And “Scandal at the Church,” as a transcription of a criminal court record, presents a great opportunity for students to reenact the court orders, depositions, and witness and expert testimonies from six different men recorded in the judicial files. Depositions and testimonies open a window into elite and ordinary

³ James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Hoboken, United States: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 85, ProQuest Ebook Central; Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development, 1991); John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011); Linda B. Nilson groups these activities under “experiential learning” and highlights that this method results in “more learning at higher cognitive levels, greater appreciation of the subject matter and its utility, and longer retention of the material than the traditional lecture.” Linda B. Nilson, *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*, 4th edition (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 167.

⁴ Historians Natalie Zemon Davis, Kathleen DuVal, and Tiya Miles have, for example, charted original approaches to reconstruct women’s stories that are informed by fragmentary evidence and the careful reading of relevant archival sources about other subjects. See Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution*, Reprint edition (New York: Random House, 2016); and Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2022).

⁵ Kevin Kelly and Todd D. Zakrajsek, *Advancing Online Teaching: Creating Equity-Based Digital Learning Environments* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2021), 137.

⁶ Chad Hershock and Mika LaVaque-Manty, “Teaching in the Cloud: Leveraging Online Collaboration Tools to Enhance Student Engagement,” *CRLT Occasional Paper*, No. 31 (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan, 2012).

⁷ Michael A. Barnhart, *Can You Beat Churchill: Teaching History through Simulations* (Ithaca, US: Cornell University Press, 2021), 52, ProQuest Ebook Central.

people's lives thanks to the rich details they provide. At the same time, those details do not represent truths and they should be read with skepticism given the potential for fabrication of evidence in lawsuits. In colonial Latin America, these parts of a court case were commonly redacted in the third person by an official scribe. However, in this particular case, the absence of an official scribe meant extra work for the judge, who simultaneously served as the town's mayor and ultimately had to oversee all legal procedures and record all testimonies by hand and in front of witnesses.

Since colonial criminal cases were not commonly deliberated with *all* the parties involved in one courtroom, official scribes would often travel to judges' offices, people's homes, and even to prisons and hospitals to collect statements, request signatures, provide updates, notify orders, or announce sentences. Traveling back and forth usually meant that cases could take years to be resolved. After explaining this to students in my online class, I invited them to consider a different scenario. We would role play a 1782 court trial the same way court proceedings all over the U.S. were being conducted in 2021 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic: over a virtual conferencing platform. In this way, our reenactment on Webex assumed everyone involved in the case was present in the same space at trial, an imaginary courtroom, but students understood this was not a faithful representation of how the process might have taken place in the past. Also, I had learned from previous experience that the role-playing activity would run more smoothly if students volunteered one week in advance to act out each of the six parts of the court record, which included statements by the judge, the plaintiff, two medical expert witnesses, and two eyewitnesses.

Students who volunteered to act out a part from the document had a full week to read and reread their assigned parts on their own. They had to get a better sense of their role in the lawsuit and the main points they made in their statements. In addition, these students also had to complete two related tasks in preparation for the role-playing activity: to re-write each of their assigned parts in the first person and to make slight modifications to the language—without altering the original meaning—if they considered it would improve both their comprehension of the material and the effective delivery of their part in our virtual classroom setting. Completing these tasks would lead students to learn experientially by “saying words, feeling emotions, and performing actions [...] to make a powerful impression and sharpen communication skills.”⁸

As for students who were not acting out a part from the document, I also expected them to read the transcript in full and to come to class prepared with notes that addressed the following questions: “What is this lawsuit about? Who are the people involved?” I instructed them on the day of the role-playing activity to analyze their peers' reenactment of the trial and explain to the class any patterns that “reflected concepts and principles addressed in the course.”⁹ These tasks required *all* students to do a close reading of the primary source document by engaging in its critical examination. These tasks were also meant to foster deep thinking among students by asking them to consider the use of language to advance a position in a legal dispute.

This last point was among the most revealing aspects of the role-playing activity. Students used their creativity to turn legal verbiage into their own by using the first person. Most of the students acting out a part also added emotion to strategic parts of their statements through a careful play of intonation. This made the plain, formulaic words of the statements on the transcript come alive, and they also engaged the rest of the students in exciting ways. Students also revised their parts by exchanging words for more contemporary versions or colloquial expressions that captured the original meaning of statements while making them more accessible to our undergraduate audience. Ultimately, students inserted elements of their own personalities into their assigned roles, humanizing the historical actors who left a trace on the record.

In this way, reenacting a historical episode in the lives of elite and ordinary people who lived in eighteenth-century Mexico turned our virtual classroom setting into an imagined virtual courtroom that opened up a lively space to deliberate on the contents of the criminal case as well as to recognize and enjoy student talent. All of this

⁸ Raymond Fox, *The Use of Self: The Essence of Professional Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155.

⁹ Nilson, *Teaching at Its Best*, 169.

laid the groundwork for the stimulating group discussion that would follow about three main areas: the intricacies of the story, the legal system under Spanish rule, and the fragmentary nature of the historical record.

Student Reflection and Group Discussion

When the last student in the group acted out her part, which was the testimony of an eyewitness, silence took over our virtual classroom. The testimony offered details about the fight between the two women as seen by a man who was allegedly standing blocks away from the church. Clearly, it was not the testimony of the accused nor the judge's ruling on the case. The students fell silent while looking intently at their cameras, waiting for me to explain what came next. I purposefully let the silence stay with us for a few seconds. I wanted to let that moment of awkward silence play a performative role too, one that symbolized what professional historians often experience when coming across this type of archival documentation for their own research projects. Typically, it is a moment of intense mixed feelings for the historian: excitement, disappointment, frustration, acceptance, potential, and hope can all coalesce.

After a few seconds, I broke the silence with two questions: "What happened next? How did this lawsuit end?" A couple of students timidly stated what was obvious to everyone: the record was incomplete, to which I dramatically answered, "exactly, we don't know!" Students commented on how invested they were on the story and how anti-climactic its ending felt to almost everyone. One of those students was Allison Wolf, a senior who added that "it was a fun activity to do but frustrating not to know what the actual outcome [of the lawsuit] was."¹⁰ Other students shared they were secretly hoping I would announce the outcome, which was clearly stated in the introduction to the document but I had intentionally blocked it out on the scanned copies I distributed among students so it was impossible for anyone to know.

At this point, I told students to prepare for a one-minute paper. I asked students who did not act out any roles to summarize what had happened in this lawsuit in order to make sure everyone in class was on the same page. These students drew both on the notes they had taken before class and on the fresh ideas they had gathered after seeing their classmates in action. Following this, I proceeded to do what Linda B. Nilson suggests in *Teaching at its Best*, "ask the players how they felt in their role at crucial junctures and what intentions and interests motivated their actions."¹¹ I asked the group of student volunteers to reflect on the historical characters they had played in the first person by answering this question in a one-minute paper: "What about the passages they had just reenacted stood out to them and why?" The students' reflection mainly focused on highlighting key moments of the story that raised questions about the understandings of morality like finding out that the woman who was allegedly accosted was pregnant or that throwing insults in public could be the basis of a lawsuit back then. The one-minute paper exercise encouraged students "to start thinking about where they go next with their learning."¹²

In the context of our class, this one-minute self-reflection served as a transition into a large group discussion that focused on more specific questions: 1) If a fight between two women was the reason why this criminal case originated, why were their own voices not recorded on file? 2) What about the way the aggrieved woman's husband framed his legal complaint stands out to you? Why? And 3) What do you think was the defendant's response to being sued by a socially-inferior family?" These questions allowed us to talk extensively about several themes running through the lawsuit including the ways in which the record reflected traditional conceptions of gender and patriarchal culture in colonial Mexico and how the plaintiff courageously filed a complaint with a well-crafted narrative even though his family was at a disadvantage for being poor and socially inferior.

To wrap up our group discussion about the details of the case, I asked students, "how did the multiple expert and witness testimonies help the judge arrive at a legal decision?" This time, all students responded quickly that the case was inconclusive. This was not meant to be a tricky question. Rather, it was meant to solidify students'

¹⁰ Allison Wolf, November 2nd, 2021, HIST 3702. Used with permission.

¹¹ Nilson, *Teaching at Its Best*, 169.

¹² Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 102.

“knowledge foundation through effective first exposure and then carefully planned sequencing and repetition.”¹³ It was also a useful way for me to change the focus and lead the group to the final part of our discussion. We returned to the frustrations generated by the incompleteness of this particular court record and I admitted that feeling frustrated was an outcome I had envisioned for this activity. This “confession” made some students confused. I explained they had just experienced first-hand some of the challenges professional historians face when attempting to reconstruct the stories of ordinary people from the past. While frustration can be disappointing and even paralyzing, in my view, it can also be turned into the fuel that ignites historians’ creative approaches to writing history “from below.” This final part of our conversation offered an opening to discuss why fragmented evidence is still considered significant by historians who are pushed to think creatively about their methods and approaches. Consequently, this allowed me to transition into the third part of our activity.

Problem-Solving in Small Groups

Our discussion about historians’ approaches to understanding the past centered on those in the fields of slavery and women’s history who have advanced the method of reading “against the grain” as a way to produce alternative readings that not only make room to incorporate less documented historical figures. This approach can also reveal silences and gaps which scholars can then productively highlight in historical narratives.¹⁴ With this in mind, I encouraged my students to view the incompleteness of the lawsuit less like an obstacle and more like an opportunity. We could read against the grain and engage in informed speculation. We could speculate about the defendants’ side of the story and how the lawsuit potentially concluded.

The significance of this activity centered, thus, on motivating students to think as historians and come up with a believable outcome based on the learning they had been building up to this point about social and cultural relations in colonial Latin America. To get students started, I laid out a set of questions for consideration before assigning students to small groups led by those who had acted out a part in the role-playing activity.

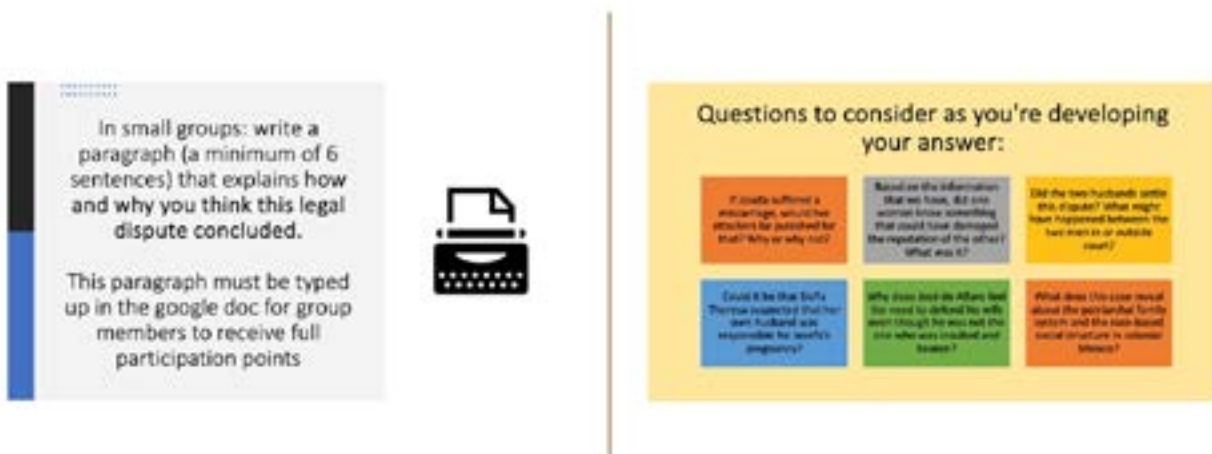


Figure 1. Small group instructions and questions to help students get started

To carry out this activity in our virtual classroom, students worked together in Webex breakout sessions where they put into practice their creativity and verbal communication skills by discussing potential scenarios and exchanging ideas with one another for approximately 30 minutes. I reminded students that historians who

¹³ Lang, *Small Teaching*, 89.

¹⁴ For example, Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); María Elena Martínez, “Sex and the Colonial Archive: The Case of ‘Mariano’ Aguilera,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (August 1, 2016): 421–43; Miles, *All That She Carried*.

engage in speculative thinking in their work, carefully consider potential scenarios or outcomes based on their methodical reading of a vast historiography and encouraged them to review their class notes. Once all members in a group discussed and agreed on a potential outcome, their task was to write up their answer—in the most convincing way possible—in the length of one full paragraph. Each group had to type up their paragraphs during class time on a shared Google Doc I had created exclusively for this activity. They easily found a link to the document inside that week's module on D2L eLearning, our learning management system at WMU. Since we had already used Google Docs for other online class activities, my students knew how to collaborate and edit together online.

Using online collaboration tools in the classroom such as Google Docs puts a healthy dose of pressure on students who understand they are expected to produce their best work possible for other classmates to read in real time. Students wrote interesting paragraphs that reflected student dialogue and critical engagement. For instance, one group wrote:

“The mayor was unable to come to a decision. He allowed Don Diego and Jose to challenge each other to a sword duel. It was clear to the judge that there was not enough evidence for prosecution. The obvious social disparity between the two may have made it hard to bring Don Diego to justice or account for his wife's actions, allowing the men to settle the difference. Thus, Don Diego and Jose proceeded to the street where they would duel. Don Diego was stabbed multiple times by Jose and would lose his life.”¹⁵

This was not the only group that brought up dueling as a potential outcome in this case. Another group raised it as improbable. They wrote, “[w]e also thought it was unlikely that the matter would be settled in a duel because the men did not injure each other.”¹⁶

The creative but unrealistic scenarios around dueling allowed me to open the following class session with a discussion about dueling and honor in colonial Latin America. I emphasized that dueling had, in fact, “long been a crime in Spanish colonial law, and it remained so after Independence.”¹⁷ To narrow it down to Mexico, I used Pablo Piccato's work to highlight, to the surprise of most students, that dueling was “seldom employed” across Mexico in the colonial period.¹⁸ It was only in the late nineteenth century that it became a frequent criminal practice connected to national elites' modernization projects and disputes. This meant that dueling was an improbable outcome. Additionally, both husbands in the court case belonged to drastically different social positions. If dueling ever happened, it happened between equals. I was glad to point this out to my students, even if this information weakened their propositions because it allowed me to emphasize that “informed speculation” must be, well, informed.

In the end, I downloaded the Google Doc as an accessible PDF file and uploaded it to the week's virtual module for all students, including a visually impaired student registered in the course, to read and explore on their own. As we wrapped up our class session, students eagerly expressed their interest in this particular criminal case and the topic in general both on screen and in the chat. For example, Leigh Murphy, a senior, revealed that in the problem-solving activity her group discussion centered on “the class of the people who were involved” in the case.¹⁹ They discussed how conceptions of racial and class difference might have shaped people's lived experience during that period and how that might have been reflected in this case. They strongly believed that “Doña Teresa's high status would have protected [her and her husband] from severe punishment” due to their connections

¹⁵ Group 5, October 28th, 2021, HIST 3702. Used with permission.

¹⁶ Group 4, October 28th, 2021, HIST 3702. Used with permission.

¹⁷ David S. Parker, “Law, Honor, and Impunity in Spanish America: The Debate over Dueling, 1870-1920,” *Law and History Review* 19, no. 2 (2001): 313.

¹⁸ Pablo Piccato, “Politics and the Technology of Honor: Dueling in Turn-of-the-Century Mexico,” *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 2 (December 1, 1999): 332.

¹⁹ Leigh Murphy, November 2nd, 2021, HIST 3702. Used with permission.

and influence over others. Power emerged as a critical factor in our concluding discussion. People with power could obstruct a legal process or even delay it and then use their influence to have the authorities archive it. The students agreed that the existence of the document is a testament to people's quest for justice in the past, but its incompleteness is a sign of how power (whether exercised by contemporaries or in the archive) created a perpetual silence that blurred what really happened.

Post-Activity Assessment

In a future iteration of this in-class activity, either online or in-person, I plan on making several changes to improve the flow and the lessons students get out of it. Grading is one of the areas that deserves careful revision. All students who attended and participated in each of the two class sessions received participation points, which added to their semester-long cumulative points. In addition to this, however, the problem-solving activity could be graded as well. This will further incentivize students to take good notes and contribute their creative ideas to produce a collective first draft in class using Google Docs. They will have a deadline after class to submit a revised draft that includes a summary of the case and their interpretation of how the legal dispute might have concluded with analysis backed up by at least three academic sources read in class. The group will be graded as a whole, but as suggested by Alison Burke, it won't "count for more than a small percentage of the student's final grade."²⁰



Figure 2. Introductory slides for future in-class activity

Framing a Purpose from the Start

Linda Nilson suggests increasing student preparation by giving them a purpose "that is, things to look for or a strategy for devising their own purposes [...] possible purposes include seeking answers to questions."²¹ Similarly, Kelly and Zakrajsek highlight that "students succeed when teachers convey the purpose for doing something, the tasks to complete, and the criteria for success."²² I realize that I gave my students a purpose only when we moved into the final part of the activity in which they had to work in small groups using problem-solving skills and informed speculation to answer: "What was the outcome of this court case? And why does it matter?" Retrospectively, I think that framing the whole class around these questions and presenting them to students

²⁰ Alison Burke, "Group Work: How to Use Groups Effectively," *The Journal of Effective Teaching* 11, no. 2 (2011): 92

²¹ Nilson, *Teaching at Its Best*, 242; Flower Darby and James M. Lang, *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes* (Newark, U.S.: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 184.


²² Kelly and Zakrajsek, *Advancing Online Teaching*, 47

before the roleplaying begins will help them stay focused throughout the activity, knowing that anything they observe or think about can lead to developing concrete ideas to accomplish our main task for the day. To borrow a phrase from *Small Teaching*, “connections improve comprehension” and students can arrive better prepared to the final problem-solving part of this activity if they know what to look for from the start.²³


Expanding Student Responsibilities and Participation

While all students in this online course had something to prepare for our in-class activity, it was clear that the students who volunteered to role-play put substantially more work and effort to make the activity a success. To make sure that future students in this class are equally involved in the activity and share similar amounts of labor and participation, a few changes need to be made. The first change is to frame the activity as a skit that will require the participation of every student in the classroom. The skit will be performed for an imaginary audience from the community who will “visit” to learn more about crime and honor in Colonial Latin America from the students themselves. Framing the activity as a skit with different parts will allow the instructor to assign other active roles to students who do not volunteer to act out a part of the eighteenth-century primary source transcript and expect they will produce work that significantly adds to the role-playing part of the activity. Everyone will then be expected to contribute equally either by providing historical context based on short research or by roleplaying the transcript.


Instructions for role-playing students




OPEN THE “SCANDAL AT THE CHURCH” PDF FILE AVAILABLE IN THE WEEK 7 MODULE




SEARCH FOR THE NAME OF THE HISTORICAL FIGURE ASSIGNED TO YOU



CAREFULLY READ THE PARTS IN WHICH YOUR HISTORICAL FIGURE INTERVENE IN THE TRIAL



REWRITE THE PART IN THE FIRST PERSON AS BEST AS YOU CAN. MAKE THE TEXT YOURS SO IT COMES OUT NATURALLY. YOU MAY EDIT THE TEXT AS LONG AS NEW WORDS COVER THE SAME MEANING.



COME READY TO ACT OUT YOUR PART IN CLASS. WE WILL PRETEND TO BE IN AN IMAGINARY COURTROOM. YOU CAN BE AS DRAMATIC AS YOU SEE FIT.

Instructions for the rest of the class

Group 1: In 3 slides, provide general historical highlights of San Juan Teotihuacán in Mexico

Group 2: In 3 slides, offer details about the town’s demographic and cultural life in the late eighteenth century

Group 3: In 3 slides, discuss the definitions for *calidad* and *castiza* and explain why these matter in the case

Be sure to read the full court document (“Scandal at the Church”) and come to class prepared to engage in small group discussion and activities

Figure 3 - Activity instructions for future students who take the course

Depending on the size of the class, the students who do not sign up for role-playing can be organized into small groups that prepare three-minute presentations that cover three main areas of interest for our imaginary visitors: The first group can provide general highlights about the history of San Juan Teotihuacán, Mexico, the town where the crime took place. These highlights can include details about the town’s Mesoamerican legacy and its significance in pre-Columbian research and culture in Mexico and the world. The second group can offer details about the town’s demographic, social, and cultural life specifically in the late eighteenth century, when the court case was filed. The introduction to the document offers some of these details, which the instructor can selectively provide to the group working on the research for this brief presentation. Lastly, a third group can present on the definitions of socially-constructed terms that denoted racial difference like *calidad* and *castiza* and why they

²³ Lang, *Small Teaching*, 99.

mattered in this particular legal case. Students in this group can use the footnotes on the court case transcript and, surely, any textbook assigned for the course to look for terms and definitions and share a persuasive interpretation of the racial language used in the case. Students will give these brief presentations in a strategic order: before and during the role-playing activity.

A skit in which some students perform the roles of historical figures engaged in a legal dispute at an imaginary courtroom while other students interject at key points to provide crucial background details to an imaginary contemporary audience will generate, I hope, an engaging interplay of past and present understandings of legal and social culture in colonial Mexico and Latin America more broadly. Assigning students different roles that are directly and indirectly related to the content of the lawsuit can help foment more dynamism and give *all* students a crucial sense of responsibility. This can also help students see that “both diversity of and participation by every student are of value” to the activity and, more generally, to the course.²⁴

Professor: introduces the skit and calls on Group 1 for general information	(Continues after brief recess)
Group 1: Provides general historical highlights about San Juan Teotihuacan in Mexico (5 minutes max)	Volunteer 1: Mayor Velasco returns and orders first testimony (17.3)
Professor: Transitions from the broad to the narrow by calling on Group 2	Volunteer 3: Don Bernabé, qualified surgeon, reads his testimony (17.4)
Group 2: Follows up by providing specific details about eighteenth-century San Juan Teotihuacan, for context (5 minutes max)	Volunteer 1: Mayor Velasco orders second testimony
Professor: Connects background with lawsuit and calls on students to start role-playing	Volunteer 4: Don Felipe, master surgeon, reads his testimony (17.5)
Volunteer 1: Mayor and judge Don Thomas de Velasco acknowledges receipt of a criminal complaint (17.1)	Volunteer 1: Mayor Velasco orders Jose de Alfaro to present witnesses (17.6)
Volunteer 2: Jose de Alfaro reads his petition and criminal complaint (17.2)	Volunteer 5: Don Manuel Delfin reads his testimony (17.7)
[Volunteer 1 improvises and says an investigation will begin, but calls some experts in first to define terminology used by Alfaro]	(Volunteer 1 improvises and calls second witness)
Group 3: Presents term definitions and their significance (5 minutes max)	Volunteer 6: Manuel José de Ocampo reads his testimony (17.8)
	Professor: Ends activity with discussion questions for the class: “What happened next?” “How did this lawsuit end?”

Figure 4. Order of speakers in the skit and their respective roles.

Arranging Class Observations for Feedback

Carrying out these activities in the history classroom requires coordination, planning, and, above all, commitment to improve the learning experience for future students through student feedback and what Stephen Brookfield calls “critically reflective conversations” with colleagues. He suggests that inviting a colleague to observe our class can “help us notice things we’ve missed and suggest aspects of our practice that need further scrutiny.”²⁵ Students would have to be warned ahead of time that a faculty visitor will join the class, virtually or in-person, with the sole purpose of observing the instructor’s teaching practice, not grading their work. Our conversations with colleagues interested in contributing to our pedagogical growth can also result in “alternative perspectives on situations we thought we’d analyzed correctly by offering us different readings of students’ behavior or power dynamics.”²⁶ Discussion of these perspectives can fruitfully highlight areas for improvement. For instance, refining one of the activity’s learning outcomes or trying out new digital tools to boost participation can improve student learning experience and success in the classroom while strengthening faculty pedagogical development and collaboration at our institutions.


²⁴ Kelly and Zakrajsek, *Advancing Online Teaching*, 143.

²⁵ Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, 116. For other literature on the subject, see Jeffrey A. Fletcher, “Peer Observation of Teaching: A Practical Tool in Higher Education,” *The Journal of Faculty Development* 32, no. 1 (January 2018): 51–64; Anne Brockbank and Ian McGill, *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education* (Philadelphia, U.S.: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1998), 108 and 115; David Spencer, “Was Moses Peer Observed? The Ten Commandments of Peer Observation of Teaching,” in *Peer Review of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. International Perspectives*, eds. Judyth Sachs and Mitch Parsell (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 183–99.

²⁶ Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, 116

Along the same lines, taking student feedback seriously is key to better identify student needs, make adjustments, and attract future students to our history classes. More students arriving in college with solid digital literacy skills want to take courses that incorporate active engagement and digital tools to facilitate their learning and interaction with others. As faculty committed to student success, this means that “continued training in digital humanities pedagogy and technological skills” is essential to meet students where they are, exceed their expectations, and promote the study of history in engaging and innovative ways.²⁷

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²⁷Nicole von Germeten, Chris Lindberg, and Meghan Naxer, “Examining the Impact of Historical Role-Playing and Narrative on Motivation in the Online Classroom: Lessons Learned.” White Paper (Oregon State University Ecampus Research Unit, 2024), 7.

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