

# Engage students with gripping classroom drama

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BY DAN LASOTA



Myron: We are in a tough spot brothers! But we must hold out. I have seen what men do to their enemies in war. I have seen the atrocities committed against the innocent. If you love your families, you will not surrender to the Spartans!

Rhinon: What Myron says is true, but he didn't mention something important. The gods favor those who are bold in battle. We may yet survive this crisis, if we hold together. But if we give up now, our cause is through and Athens is lost.

Democles: I agree with Myron and Rhinon.

Myron and Rhinon: Dude, you have got to do better than that. Read your character packet, get motivated by what you think Democles would have done in his best interest. Take this seriously!

This was more or less the conversation that I took part in at a training conference that featured a reenactment of the Siege of Athens in 404 BC. In the span of two hours, everyone was given just a few bits of information describing the historic persona that they would role play. Guided by personal motivations, background and general summary of contemporary news we delved into a historical play that most were only vaguely familiar with. It was completely engaging.



Immersive roleplay can bring your subject alive and engage your students like no other learning activity.

Since that time I have presented others with this same introductory role playing activity. While the particulars of conversations, speeches and pleas are always different, they do tend to be very focused with people quickly becoming invested in their roles and the outcome of the overall activity.

Why is it that strangers from a different time, with nothing more than a few pieces of paper quickly enter fevered debate, even to the point of exerting social pressure on those less engaged, to get with the program?

The reason, I believe, is that those participating in activities like the described immersive role play scenario realize that

the outcome depends entirely on their own actions, choices, and knowledge of the issues at hand. Unlike the traditional lecture which dutifully march through a series of slides with or without the active participation of students, an historical reenactment is an example of active learning.

Active learning happens when the student becomes responsible for not just getting through a lesson, but becoming part of it. When people have a choice, they usually figure out how to make the best of it. In classroom role play, knowledge of course content becomes a source of power. The more students invest in learning, the more insight and range of choices they have in the scenario.

These kinds of activities are best deployed over a number of class sessions throughout the semester. It gives purpose to the readings and lecture that your course already has. The choices and performances of the students give you a chance to formatively assess student knowledge and further inspire them to learn more. Students are eager to discuss all the events that transpired and this gives you and them a chance to reflect and dig deeper into the content.

Most disciplines have pivotal moments that can be studied and played out. If you are interested in immersive roleplay and want more information, check out the resources below. The instructional design team at UAF eLearning is always interested in helping you craft engaging learning activities.

## AT UAF

Susan Todd, Associate Professor, modeled the Paris Climate talks in NRM 101 *Natural Resource Conservation and Policy*. In NRM 340 *Natural Resources Measurement and Inventory*, she uses roleplay to have students study a management plan for a large multiple use forest.

Peter Westley, Assistant Professor, ran an asynchronous fish management study simulation in FISH 493/693 *Salmon and Society*.

## RESOURCES

Immersive Roleplay: <https://iteachu.uaf.edu/immersive-roleplay/>

Reacting to the Past: <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>