



AMERICA: THE LAST BEST HOPE

How To Use Simulations in the History Classroom

Simulations can provide students with perhaps their most memorable experiences in a history classroom. There may be no better way to help students “step back” into the past and experience the feelings and emotions of another time. Any teacher who incorporates simulations into his curriculum has likely had the experience of asking students a year or two later what they remember from their history class and having students reply, “the time we acted out the trial of Galileo” or “when we rewrote the Versailles Treaty” (or whatever simulation was incorporated).

The difficult decision for teachers is often when, which, and how many simulations they can use in any academic year. This relates to the “breadth verses depth” issue that every teacher faces – the pressure to “cover” as much history as possible as opposed to the desire to explore some historical issues in depth and provide students with rich learning experiences. Many simulations do indeed demand a great deal of class time to be effective.

But not all simulations require multiple days of instruction. Included in the *Roadmap* and *Premium Roadmap* are different types of simulations that can be done in as little as a class period. The [plays](#) for each chapter are certainly a type of simulation in which students take on historical roles and “get in the head” of historical characters. The debates for each chapter (also in the *Roadmap* and *Premium Roadmap*) often are simulations as well. For example, [this debate](#) is in the format of a role-play in which students take on the perspectives of Parliament and colonial legislatures on the eve of the American Revolution. Virtually any of the other debates included in the *Roadmap* can be transformed into simulations simply by making the “historical setting” the time period covered by the chapter and asking students to research and take on the role of people actually engaged in the debate at that given time and place.

More involved simulations can typically take a great deal of class time – often a week or more as students prepare for their “roles” and then conduct the simulation. For that reason, most teachers elect to use one or two simulations a semester to break up class routines and to center on topics of particular interest to themselves or their students. Virtually any historical event (trial, battle, election, strike, treaty negotiation, controversial decision, other) can be made into a simulation in which students research significant historical personages, take on their perspective and point of view, and “replay history” in the classroom.



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As teachers use simulations, a few instructional principles to keep in mind include:

- Great simulations begin with students researching their “roles.” This should include student analysis of primary sources relating to historical characters. Students should be encouraged and acknowledged for analyzing primary sources relating to their character and for including quotes or information from those sources in their depiction of that character
- Insist that students maintain a “first person” persona throughout the simulation. Although this may seem unimportant, it is key to helping students “step into the past” and truly begin to understand the motives and perspectives of another person in another time.
- Simulations can be among the most effective ways to use cooperative learning in the classroom as students work together to research roles and ultimately to band together on “one side” of an issue from the past.
- Although not imperative and often not possible, having students “dress up,” perhaps even in period costumes, adds to the excitement surrounding a simulation.
- Simulations offer an effective way to incorporate writing into one’s curriculum. Students will be more effectively prepared for their role if they conclude their research with a first person essay elaborating on their historical perspective.
- Simulations are not complete without a “debriefing session.” Students need to discuss what they learned, what emotions they felt when simulating a historical event, and how closely they believe their simulation reflected historical reality.
- Some teachers conduct a simulation *before* teaching an event and then debrief how closely the classroom simulation reflected, “what actually happened.” For instance, one might simulate the writing of the Versailles treaty after only providing students with the key issues facing the “Big Four” in Paris. Then after the students simulate key decisions, the class can compare the student treaty with the actual treaty provisions. Alternatively, simulations can be used after teaching a key event as way to reinforce key concepts.

Team Hope looks forward to creative simulation submissions developed by teachers and classrooms using *America: The Last Best Hope*. Such submissions will be shared with other schools in the *Last Best Hope* community on the *Premium Roadmap*. Until then, Team Hope provides links to what we believe to be great classroom history simulations that teachers can sample and perhaps add to their own curriculum.