Acting Out Gilgamesh

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One of the early struggles with a new class is developing enough rapport that they feel comfortable speaking up and participating in other activities. While most of us have ice breakers for Day One, I use Shanya Sheinfield's Word Cloud suggestion, similar such assignments for early in the semester content heavy days are harder to come by. I have taught “Introduction to the Hebrew Bible” in some capacity at multiple universities and always felt a bit bored with my Ancient Near Eastern backgrounds series of lectures before jumping into Genesis. The last two years that I have taught this course, I decided to shake it up and have the class act out Gilgamesh with me as a way to get into background discussions and biblical parallels in far more engaging way.

How Does It Work: I ask for three volunteers to play the parts of Gilgamesh, Enki du, and Multiple Roles. While I could break up the “Multiple Roles” into more parts in order to allow for more individual participation, I find that the smaller number of actors allows me more of a sense of control, particularly due to spatial reasons, and makes it easier to find the number of participants I need without forcing anyone’s hand. Once the actors have their parts I inform the class that they are not off the hook. They will play the role of the city of Uruk and the narrators who guide our actors’ performances. This places the onus on the class to re-tell the story rather than myself or the individual actors. I tend to play the role of Shamhat (the temple priestess) and Ishtar so the students are not uncomfortable acting out anything that involves sex. This allows me to control this part of the narrative re-telling, which usually involves flirty winking and moving on with the implication that more was involved. Those who have done the reading laugh at this, and those who have not have no clue what I am talking about, but at least the joke piques their interest.

I break the story up into acts, so Enkidu’s friendship is the end of Act 1, Enkidu’s death is the end of Act 2, and the quest for immortality the end of Act 3. From here I use leading questions to the rest of the class in order to serve as co-narrators along with me such as “What comes first?” “Why are we mad at Gilgamesh?” “What do we do about it?” These questions serve as “director’s notes” that allow the class to recreate each scene together. For example, after the class recounts the details of Enkidu’s first encounter with Gilgamesh the actors playing these parts tend to wrestle or throw fake punches at each other or the person playing Multiple Roles will switch from the Hunter to Utnapishtim between the end of Act 1 and the beginning of Act 3 in order to pretend to be a storyteller. Here the actors have a bit of freedom regarding how elaborate or in-depth they want to go for the performance. Some years students really get into and others are more mellow. The overall point is to have them serve as character placeholders in order to recount the story in a memorable fashion. Regarding the class as a whole, besides helping narrate the story, they also have actions I ask them to do as the people of Uruk such as when we call out as a class “O Aruru, save us from Gilgamesh!” These chants are also things I prompt them to do but they help keep the whole class engaged and lead to a good laugh or two.

When we come back as a recap, I show the clip of Gilgamesh from the best episode of Star Trek the Next Generation, and we begin to discuss key themes (e.g., friendship, morality, kingship), connections it has to other stories they know including the Bible (someone always says Noah and Adam and Eve), and how these connections are a microcosm of what we will be doing in this course.
What Am I Hoping To Accomplish: First, I want the students to know this story well and have found that if I am just hoping that they have read it our discussion has no energy. The performance helps even those who did not do the reading to feel a vested interest in the story. Second, it serves as a helpful mnemonic. Every time I ask the class to recall one of the ANE stories we have read on the midterm they always pick this one and write about it in detail. Third, it helps me gain rapport with my class. I am a person who likes laughing at his own jokes, so the ad lib nature of this process allows me to reveal some of my personality to my students and for them to feel comfortable revealing some of their personality to me. Fourth, I hope it creates class camaraderie as we all have our roles to play in performing this story together.

A caveat: I do not want to harm any students suffering from anxiety. The assignment could be modified with the instructor playing the main actor, while having students direct the actions. The point is to find a way where the onus of retelling the story falls on the class and not the teacher.

Conclusion: Describe Value of Role-Playing. Role-playing is a fantastic pedagogical tool that creates class camaraderie and memorable mnemonic devices. Role-playing is active and immersive and allows the professor to break out of the model of the Sage on the Stage by inviting the students into the role of class mobilizer. These scenarios, in turn, create a classroom dynamic in which participation in the scenario drives the action and the learning. Nonetheless, if role-playing does not work for your course, there are other ways to bring the story of Gilgamesh to life. First, there are several animated versions of Gilgamesh that are not a hundred percent accurate but still quite engaging. Second, there are several interesting Gilgamesh lectures put out by Digital Hammurabi such as this one on Gilgamesh and intertextuality. Third, Gilgamesh has been made into several graphic novels and a children’s books, such as the Gilgamesh trilogy by Zeman or a single volume, illustrated version by Yiyun Li. Above all, we want our students to see these ancient stories as engaging and insightful narratives with which they can relate and see themselves, rather than as undecipherable texts from strange civilizations.

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1 This argument predominately comes from Anthony Weston, Teaching as the Art of Staging: A Scenario-Based College Pedagogy in Action (Sterling, VA. Stylus, 2019). Also, see Mark C. Carnes, Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) alongside the pedagogical model he invented called Reacting to the Past. My role-playing scenario is not as gamified as theirs and does not take up entire weeks but has a similar spirit.