

Briefly, on Roleplaying Games in Teaching: A Sample Assignment Response

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While opinions still differ regarding tabletop roleplaying games, with some still viewing them as gateways to occult knowledge and practice, they are increasingly incorporated into mainstream United States cultures. Accordingly, they are receiving more and more attention from those who study those cultures and the various components of those cultures, looking at what they do and what use they are. One thing that emerges is that, among their many other values, roleplaying games are good to use in the classroom.

For example, Celeste (2017) remarks at length about the value of roleplaying games, comparing the most iconic of them to graduate school and academe. For him, the two activities, roleplaying games and academic humanistic study, tap into the same impulses and offer training in similar skillsets. Perhaps most important of them is making the arcane accessible and engaging. Celeste points out the common obfuscations of literary criticism and roleplaying games, remarking that “A role-player and an academic, then, must know how to explain their world to others.” He also notes the delight that emerges from clearing both away for new audiences. Indeed, his piece is valedictory throughout, bespeaking a joy in the subject that is often lacking from academic writing and that itself argues in favor of incorporating it into the classroom.

My own experience has not been dissimilar. I have remarked on incorporating bits from my roleplaying gaming into my teaching (Elliott, 2019), for example, and my academic career has several times turned its attentions to gaming. Since my research typically incorporates itself into my teaching, roleplaying games have not seldom appeared in my classes. I have found that using roleplaying game materials as professional examples in my classrooms has been particularly useful. They do well as technical writing samples, since they have to make

themselves accessible amid gaming, and they tend to be artistically laden, so that paratextual concerns show up in them quickly. They also do reasonably well as more “literary” pieces, as many offer short narratives throughout; sometimes, the narratives are connected, but not always, or not overtly, and the interleaving of those narratives offers material for analysis. And, ultimately, because they are somewhat silly, they help students to get away from the perception of stolidity that often accompanies academic humanistic study. It allows them to get into materials more deeply than might otherwise be expected, and so it makes for good classroom use.

That roleplaying games have a place in the classroom does not mean that all classes must incorporate them, of course. “The classroom” is not the same as “all classrooms,” and there are disciplines that do not readily admit of the kinds of things that roleplaying games do. But there are a great many that do, and they would do well to look not only to Dungeons & Dragons, but also to the many other games readily available, for ways they can more effectively reach their students. Perhaps in doing so, they can help more students take more from their studies, fostering a lifelong love of learning that is one of the stated goals of many curricula.

References

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