

ROLE PLAYING HISTORICAL DECISIONS

SNAPSHOT

Students travel back in time in 19th-century Japan, assuming the roles of advisors to the Tokugawa shogunate. They must synthesize primary readings on social and political unrest to propose reforms that could prevent the regime from collapsing.

SPOTLIGHT

This activity combines research with policymaking, historical analysis with role play, and individual writing with group work. Its unique approach to history pedagogy overcomes a limitation of standard approaches: Hindsight bias makes it difficult for them to fully appreciate the context in which these decisions were made, often characterized by limited information to work with, a different set of prevailing social norms and values, and inability to anticipate future developments. Assuming the roles of historical advisors to the shogunate, students come to appreciate these challenges as they are forced to make high-impact recommendations based on the limited information contained in a few contemporary primary sources.

LESSON PLAN

Goals:

Students learn to:

- Synthesize information from primary sources.
- Consider political situations from a contemporary perspective to avoid hindsight bias.
- Foreshadow political and social reforms that were implemented.

Class:

Japan in Asia and the World

Background:



This activity takes place midway through a course on Japanese history. It helps students better understand the forces shaping political decisions. They interpret issues through a contemporary lens, propose solutions, and identify the challenges of anticipating the consequences of their proposals.

Procedure - Before Class:

Students are assigned three primary source readings prior to class, written by

WAYS TO ADAPT

This activity can be adapted to other history classes, specific to the era or region your class is studying. Alternatively, it can be used for classes in other disciplines. One way to adapt it for the latter would be by inserting a mini-unit on the history of the particular field. So, for example, you could have students see how health professionals at a particular time and place used to think about diseases, or how astronomers used to think about the universe. Have students read relevant, contemporary primary sources on the topic and write a report predicting, based only on those sources, how the relevant community of thinkers might solve a contemporary problem.



19th-century commentators who had identified different **social, economic, and political issues** facing Japan at the time. They then respond to this prompt:

“Imagine you are an advisor to the Tokugawa shogunate who has received copies of these works and must write a response. **Citing the readings and lecture, discuss one issue (or a related cluster) the Tokugawa world is facing, and offer recommendations for resolving the issue.**”



Procedure - During Class:

Based on students' response papers, the instructor groups students together based on similar themes. For example, one year, she grouped students based on moral issues, foreign threats, and famine/inequality. Students then spend the next 15 minutes discussing in their group to consolidate their ideas into one coherent recommendation. Then, each group has the opportunity to present its plan to the class and instructor, who plays the role of the Tokugawa shogun. Lastly, they debate the proposed plans.

Procedure - After Class:

The whole class joins for a debrief and identifies common themes to look out for in upcoming class material. **The instructor also notes cases where students' recommendations were ones that had actually been implemented in Japanese history, to show that the government's decisions were not “stupid” but motivated by pressing issues.**



Materials:

Relevant primary sources on the historical issue, and imagination

This activity was submitted by Dana Mirsalis.

THINGS WE LIKE

The range of issues—social, economic, and political—covered in the primary sources encourages students to take the sort of holistic view that real-life advisors would have had to when evaluating their options. One of the greatest challenges of policymaking is deciding how to weigh the costs and benefits of a decision across variables that may not be commensurate. By testing the interaction of these variables—e.g. political gain against economic costs, social welfare against political risk—students develop intuitions about what historical figures most valued and most feared when they decided the way they did. As a result, they come to find history more intelligible.

THINGS WE LIKE

Allowing students to choose a topic for their individual responses enables them to draw on their areas of expertise and connect them to the real-world situation at issue. Economics students, for example, may discuss how Japan's economy expanded at the time, whereas sociology students may be intrigued by its social class structure. During the group exercise, they engage in peer-to-peer learning, discussing concurrent developments and seeing how these developments interacted with one another and, together, contributed to the unrest.

WAYS TO ADAPT

Engage students' critical thinking further by having them discuss or write up why they think certain roads were not taken, and how hindsight bias might have affected their brainstorming. This wrap-up activity presents an opportunity for them to apply what they have learned from the primary sources, their groups, and the debate about the shogunate's values, aims, and constraints.



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