

Engaged pedagogy through role-play in a Buddhist studies classroom

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Abstract

The article discusses two versions of a complex role-playing exercise in undergraduate courses on Buddhism. The pedagogical exercise demonstrated how imagination cultivated through creative writing could be used to enhance learning about history, culture, and religion. Students were also challenged to generate an understanding of religious practice that arose from both cognitive and sensory learning. The project showed that by interacting with a form of engaged pedagogy that worked with the imagination, without leaving the classroom students developed a deep care for and active engagement with communities located spatially and temporally far from home. With empathy and critical reflection, they came to see how religious meaning is constructed at a communal level through embodied action and emotional sensibility.

KEYWORDS

Buddhist studies, embodied learning, engaged pedagogy, role-playing

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this paper I introduce two versions of a complex role-playing exercise that I implemented in undergraduate courses on Buddhism.¹ The exercise was designed to test how the richness of imagination cultivated through creative writing in particular could be used to enhance learning about history, culture, and religion. With this teaching experiment I was interested in helping students generate an understanding of religious practice that arose from both cognitive and sensory learning. By interacting with a form of engaged pedagogy that worked with the imagination, without leaving the classroom students developed a deep care for and active engagement with communities located spatially and temporally far from home. With empathy and critical reflection, they came to see how religious meaning is constructed at a communal level through embodied action and emotional sensibility.

¹Course syllabi are available online (Garrett, 2014, 2015).

2 | COURSE OVERVIEW, ASSESSMENT, AND REDESIGN

The first iteration of this assignment took place in my second-year course, "Introduction to Buddhism," a year-long course with about sixty students. In this course, students were asked to imagine themselves to be living together in a predominantly Buddhist village somewhere in the Himalayan mountains, and as the year progressed they experienced and responded to ordinary and exceptional events from their own character's perspective. Each student was assigned a character, and as events in the village unfolded they developed a written narrative about village life in the voice of their character. The course syllabus articulated several objectives that helped shape the role-playing exercise that was at the centre of the course's design. First, students were expected to see and discuss links between religious ideas and practices and other dimensions of culture and social life by the end of the year. Second, students were to learn how to work with a team to complete a project that integrates original research with classroom learning, embodied experience, and informed critical opinions. And third, they were to learn how to read religious texts critically and apply knowledge to practical situations. With these objectives in mind, I designed assignments, class time, and research projects that I hoped would help students achieve those aims.

Coursework included fourteen written entries in a continuous journal, a final written piece articulating the end of that journal's story, a class presentation, and participation in the imaginative exercise. Roughly one fourth to one third of classroom time overall involved lectures and discussions about core Buddhist concepts, histories, and practices, following a modest set of core introductory readings in Buddhist studies. As an "Introduction to Buddhism" course, this component of learning served as the shared foundation of knowledge, on top of which students developed their own expertise as the year progressed via independent study in service of the role-playing exercise. Students began with an assigned character type – they were scholars, ritualists, doctors, farmers, traders, or craftspeople. Each student was also allowed to select a "secondary skill," such that, for example, a trader might also be a scholar. I assigned students their primary character type but allowed them to choose their own secondary skill, and over the year they could allow one or the other aspect of their character to develop as suited their interests. In other words, a student who was assigned to be a farmer in September might later decide on his own to give up farming, take ordination, and become a monk. In order to do this and write about it effectively in his journal, he would have to do his own research on how to take ordination under such circumstances. Character development research was in this way independently organized; required core readings for the course were intentionally light, with students expected to do a substantial amount of independent reading as the basis for their journal writing. Because relevant sources can be difficult for undergraduates to find, I provided access to an extensive set of research articles and books on community life, religious practice, cultural traditions, and so forth, in Buddhist studies, Tibetan studies, and Himalayan studies.

As a class, we imagined ourselves to be living in a Buddhist village somewhere in the Himalayas, although the exact place and time was not specified; when one student's character mentioned a television, however, our general era was established. As their first journal entry, students were asked to describe their family circumstances, origins, and living place. Students were given the following instructions:

Your blogs should focus primarily on your character and their family, if they have one, and their reactions to and reflections on events in the community. You should not ascribe words, actions, etc., to particular classmates without their consent or without referencing their blog. You are only in control of your own character, not others in the community. Interactions between your character and other real members of the community should be approved by both parties beforehand. (You wouldn't feel comfortable with people putting words in your character's mouth or saying that you did things that you didn't, so be careful about doing this to others.) For example, you could write "I wish that that we had saved more food so we wouldn't have experienced this famine," but it would not be appropriate to write "The famine happened because the farmers were lazy and refused to farm, even though I told them all to," unless this were a discussion that actually happened. Remember that you are a community and will only thrive if you work together. Similarly, you should try to represent the community or segments of it by

clearly reflecting what people have written in their blogs or in events as described by Professor Garrett. It may well be the case that something happened in your part of the village that others across town don't know about – but you shouldn't document the occurrence of a major happening across town that no one else witnessed (unless you are prepared to call this a dream or hallucination on your part).

A few students' characters lived alone in caves on the outskirts of the village, but most lived in homes with their (imagined) families. A significant number of women chose to live in the nunnery, which therefore became an important site in the village. Many students' initial character stories were impressively elaborate, and often quite touchingly imagined. One student, for example, developed an extensive story about being a trader from the mountains of southern China, raised in a poor village temple as an orphan, who earned his living copying Buddhist sutras and traveling to urban regions to sell them. After marrying, his story went, his family moved to our Himalayan village where he worked as a calligrapher and trader.

As students developed their identities in the first weeks of class, I realized that we needed a map and found a beautifully hand drawn Tibetan map of a mountainside village. Students identified their residences on the map and discovered who their immediate neighbours were. Group discussions in class could therefore take place either by neighbourhood or by interest group (for example, those with skills needed to build a bridge would meet to discuss strategies, as described below).

As students established their characters and the village map was filled out, I began to develop scenarios building upon what students had written. Every other week in class I described something significant that had occurred in the village – a hailstorm, an epidemic illness, the visit of a religious figure, the building of a monastic library, New Year festivals, and so on. Students then did research on how their character might realistically react to such events and write journal entries in the first-person voice of their character. These journals were posted online as blog entries using the Medium.com platform. This ongoing journal was the primary writing assignment over the year, and as time passed the journals became increasingly complex as students built connections with each other and as our community developed its own history. In preparation for our New Year's festival in the winter, one student wrote of rising before the sun to refresh the offerings of water on her simple household altar. Evocative language put research about Buddhist offering practices into tender domestic settings, as students were able to deeply imagine the personal and emotional components of Buddhist practices. That a household might have an altar and how domestic rituals might be practiced were not topics we had discussed in class; such details were rather those that students picked up on in their independent readings and used to imagine the lives of their characters. The imagination they brought to these writings far exceeded my expectations and showed a passion for research and writing that is unlike what I typically see in an academic research paper. Students became highly attuned to the sensory components of religious practice, to the affective dimensions and embodied consequences of religious activity, and to the seasonality of communal religious life. In previous years of teaching "Introduction to Buddhism" with a more conventional syllabus, I had never seen these non-cognitive aspects of learning and understanding displayed so vividly in student work or classroom behaviour.

In my teaching I have often found it difficult to facilitate reliably effective group work; some students resist working in groups, and the problems of dysfunctional groups can be hard to remediate. The group work required for this role-playing assignment, however, enjoyed a degree of success I had never before observed. In our course, a number of large-scale community projects throughout the year required villagers to work together. After the October hailstorm, for example, the iron bridge connecting our hillside village to neighbouring communities was damaged. This required the group to work under the direction of our sole iron-worker; students had to discuss this project carefully in class to make sure that their journal entries reported on the event as a community. (My evaluation of their journals took into account whether they were integrating their stories with those of others in the village.) Soon afterwards, a neighbouring village suffered an epidemic, and a number of our doctors travelled there to help. Concerned about these disasters, the group decided to invite a Buddhist ritual specialist to visit the village. The community drafted a letter of invitation, and the following week my message to the class read,

A messenger has returned with good news: the lama has decided to visit the village! The community now has to work to assemble the offerings and preparations befitting such a visit: Contributions are needed to make tormas, food offerings, drawings of auspicious symbols, an offering mandala, dharma texts, and a throne.

Preparation thus required expertise from scholars and ritualists, artists, farmers, builders, and traders in the community. In their journals, students wrote about a feeling of relief that their bridge had been repaired, and excitement about the lama's visit. They described a gathering of scholars who were responsible for composing the invitation letter, and a craftsperson wrote that she felt humbled by the scholars' literary skill as the invitation letter was read aloud in the village meeting. In their journals students were not only demonstrating what they had learned about Buddhism, but they were also displaying the powerful and diverse kinds of emotions that shape religious practice and community.

At some point late that semester, I reported that the October hailstorm had also caused a landslide on a remote face of the mountain, which revealed the openings to several cliff-side caves. A group of villagers organized an expedition to explore those caves. After a harrowing journey, they found a cache of texts and artefacts; assessing this find required the expertise of the scholars, artists, ritualists, and traders in the group. A doctor who had accompanied them was able to treat one of the villagers who was injured while climbing into the cave. The journals of all students on this trip reported the same series of events generally, each journal written from their own character's perspective and set in the context of their character's own continuous narrative.

Over several months in the second semester, the expedition group worked with the village nunnery to rebuild their library (which had been damaged in the storm), augmenting the nuns' collection with texts found in the cave. Students spent time discussing what kinds of texts such a library might contain. The nuns also decided to begin printing their own texts. Students whose characters were artists, doctors, or religious specialists were required to study and imagine the details of their engagement with these community events. Some students wrote in detail about carving woodblocks, with evocative details about the strain on their eyes, the intense concentration required, and the feeling of their tools cutting into wood. One student beautifully described how she made inks for block prints from nuts she had gathered on the hillsides, and how her arms were stained for weeks from this process.

Toward the end of the year, a text found in the cave was discovered to be about a local protector deity for the village who was no longer being propitiated (which explained the hailstorm), so villagers rebuilt the cairn for that deity and conducted the necessary rituals. One student wrote of spending all night in the monastic library reading texts on mandala offerings and wind horse and smoke purification rituals, and then spending the next long and exhausting day gathering materials for builders working on the cairn.

Throughout the year many events required students to work together, as in the examples above, but there were also options for more solitary work for those students who felt attracted to independent living and exploration. Some villagers went on pilgrimage, for instance, or did a meditation retreat in a cave. Student research involved studying the purposes or key practices of pilgrimage or of meditation, for instance, and their journal entries described those activities with at least some reaction, as would be relevant in their circumstances, to what was happening in the village. Students who were traveling could write their assigned entries as letters back to the village, for example, or as a travel diary (which was a genre that we had studied). Students who wanted to learn more about Buddhism in other regions of Asia were allowed to travel as far as might be realistic in the time frame provided (we were operating in real time), and those interested in other time periods were allowed to travel in their dreams, writing journal entries that reported on those dreams.

2.1 | Challenges: Efforts to work with material culture

There were a few course components that we began with in September but then abandoned. After reviewing some of these challenges, I will then describe what I think was especially successful about this assignment and how I modified it for a future course.

In designing this course over the summer before it began, I received support from my teaching assistant and graduate student, Andrew Erlich, who is an avid gamer (which I am decidedly not). Following the model of many role-playing games, we began the school year with a complicated system of points that characters could accumulate on a character card. Events that occurred and the kinds of participation possible in those events would grant a student points in one of several categories. Wanting to make this assignment seem more real, and also wanting students to think about material culture, in addition to the character cards I also provided colored beads that students could collect for a “rosary” of points. We had thought that this points system could be motivating, that the rosary beads would add a material component to that motivating concern, and that this could have a positive effect on the experience overall. While some students did enjoy these components, most of them could not keep track of their points effectively and did not see the value in it, and so at our mid-year assessment of the course students voted to eliminate the points system and the beads. I was not sorry to see this component of the course go, honestly, as its game-like quality made me uncomfortable from the beginning. Himalayan peoples' lives are not “games,” and I certainly did not want this course's imaginative exercise to appear to trivialize – to gamify – the real concerns of real communities.

In another attempt to bring a material component to the assignment experience, at the beginning of the year I proposed that our university campus was to be remapped as the Buddhist world – such that, for example, Bodhi Gaya was in the library, Sarnath was in my department, and so forth – and I hid various religious objects in these places around campus for students to find and bring into class. Perhaps because I had not fully developed my own thinking about this technique and how it was integrated into the course overall (or because it also seemed uncomfortably game-like), I did not effectively convince students that this was a good idea. Very few students bothered to collect the objects, and it was also voted out in the middle of the year.

If I were to further develop this assignment I would like to work out in more detail how to bring material objects successfully into a continuous role-playing exercise. It had been my intention to use these exercises to help students think about how religious meaning adheres to objects, to consider their own attachment to those objects, and to extend their thinking about material substances as conveyors of culture and knowing – but perhaps this time the complexity of the course design was already too novel for most students, as well as for me. In the future I might try experimenting with an assignment focused solely on the possession and exchange of material objects, which would give me the experience necessary to more effectively integrate this pedagogical strategy into a more complex course design.

2.2 | Successes: Imaginative writing and empathetic connection

While some components of our original design were not successful, such as those involving material objects described above, this role-playing exercise was highly successful in helping students apply imagination and emotion to research and learning. Not unlike courses that use virtual reality platforms such as Second Life, participation in our village scenario over the course of two semesters had a powerful impact on students' “affective, empathic, and motivational” experience of learning. It also promoted the strong “sense of belonging and purpose that coheres around groups, subcultures, and geography” (Warburton, 2009), and it greatly helped students visualize and contextualize content that is historically or geographically inaccessible in person. These learning benefits are emphasized by pedagogical research on immersive environments, and I certainly saw these effects in action in my course.

While there were core readings for all students which were discussed during lecture and discussion periods in class, students' character development work was entirely individually directed. I posted over a hundred research resources (articles, book chapters, databases, videos) on Blackboard to support this individual research. Over the year, students were therefore able to pursue their own interests as they developed their characters – doctors did extra research on ritual healing, for example, and scholar-nuns did extra research on women in Buddhism and monastic libraries. One pedagogical objective of this course design was to personally motivate students to learn and to conduct independent research, and this was successfully achieved. Over the year most students became quite attached to their characters and felt increasingly motivated to learn how they might respond to what was happening in the village

in a realistic way. The academic research that is sometimes felt to be a burden for a busy student appeared in this case to be a real source of joy for most students.

This was a labor-intensive course to teach. While I was the one who decided on the general nature of events occurring in the village, the students took those events in unexpected directions. I had to react to what was happening and provide research resources to help students develop their stories as accurately as possible. I realized (belatedly) that students' stories should not contradict each other, but that they would not have time to read all sixty journal entries each week. To help them know what was happening in the village, therefore, I wrote an occasional summary report on my own blog, called *The Village Yak*, as in the following example (names have been altered):

After the lama's departure, life has largely returned to normal in the village. The lama's donation of funds to support a printing press and library in the nunnery was a surprise and has generated a lot of discussion. Shelly and Sarah had been reporting on conversations in the village about how poor the nuns' accommodations were compared to that of the monks. Fereshteh and Carmen have also expressed concern about the nuns' conditions. In speaking of the importance of supporting our community of nuns, Sam notes that "slightly more than 50% of our women are monastics; this compares to less than 25% of our men" – not only is this a village of doctors, it is also a village of women actively dedicated to religious life. Many of us have committed to increasing support to the nuns' community, beginning with reconstructions to the nunnery.

Others have spoken at length about the lama's additional donations to the building of a factory of traditional medicines in the village. Carol spoke clearly about the need for such factory, and Firouzh also has addressed the topic at length. Our builders will be stretched to the limits over the coming weeks, with construction on the factory and repairs to the nunnery. It's likely that we'll need to invite builders from neighboring areas to help out.

Trade has been busy for Norman and Alex in particular, and various people have been performing bsang rituals and making tormas. Rumors have been circulating about some cliff-side caves that were made visible after the recent storms – as landslides swept the dense cover of rhododendron down the mountain into the river, you can now see high on the cliffs to the northeast a series of caves. The village elders have recalled expeditions to similar caves, half a century ago, and the discovery of ancient texts, artefacts, and even gold inside. It could be worth organizing an expedition of climbers, scholars, and artists to explore the newly revealed caves before the winter snows make the trip impossible.

These summaries connected students writing about similar concerns with each other, and suggested directions for development or collaboration. Despite the extra effort that the course required, it was exciting and often quite touching to work together in what felt like an increasingly intimate community project. I must say that I had never before received student writing of such high quality, and I had never seen such an impressive display of empathetically inflected learning in student writing. Their connection to the material happened quite quickly. By the middle of the first semester, class discussions were lively and even impassioned, with many students referring to themselves and each other in character. As I moved from group to group I would hear comments such as, "Where should we get materials for the lama's visit?" "I have extra crop yields, does anyone need them?" "I can paint the murals for you!" A rather shy and quiet young man, our only iron-worker (a skill he identified for himself in September), turned out to be one of the most sought-after community members. I heard a student once ask him with some urgency, "Do you have enough supplies to make iron chain links for the bridge?" He looked momentarily surprised but quickly allowed himself to respond in character, as the iron-worker, with only the slightest grin. I remember a trader once running across the room to a group of nuns who were discussing renovations to their library, saying, "I'm already making a trip down to the plains, I can bring back some books!" When a group of scholars and artists began planning an expedition to the newly revealed cave site, a doctor, who lived alone in a cave outside the village, suggested that he come along in case anyone was injured while climbing (which in fact someone was).

When a massive earthquake struck Nepal in late April of that year, just after the course had concluded, a student posted on the still-active class Facebook page, “This happened right near our village!” This course design helped students personalize their learning about a remote region of Asia in a way that will, I hope, have broad and lasting effect.

2.3 | Revising the assignment: Setting the scene in the year 1450

The next fall I taught a third-year, one-semester course on Himalayan Buddhism with an assignment that was modeled after the one described above. Our lack of attention to temporal and geographic specificity in the course described above had felt intellectually problematic to me. In my next course, therefore, the scene was set in the year 1450. This time, we were to imagine ourselves setting out from Lhasa to walk to Chorten Nyima, a pilgrimage spot in the high mountains just above the border with Sikkim, as described in the initial scenario:

It is the year 1450, the male iron horse year. In 1434 the Rinpung government was established in Central Tibet, taking over from the Pakmodrupa administration, beginning a century of conflict throughout the region. You have come together as a group because you each have relatives associated with the Pakmodrupa, whom you've heard have been tortured or even killed, and your own livelihoods have been threatened by Rinpung affiliates. You are certain that your lives are in danger and have decided to flee. Your group has decided to travel with the pretense of going on pilgrimage, although most of you believe you will never return home (some of you are more or less committed to the pilgrimage, and more or less concerned about escape).

Your group has decided to leave on Thursday, which is the ninth day of the ninth Tibetan month. You will be leaving from Tsal Gungthang monastery (29.63971°N 91.22432° E), initially traveling away from the monastery in the dark, to avoid detection while near Lhasa.

Your initial destination is Dorje Drak monastery (29.353°N 91.132°E), and from there you plan to visit the nearby Drakyul Guru Rinpoche Cave hermitages (Drak Yangdzong is at 29.44222°N 91.24727°E). Dorje Drak is associated with the treasure tradition of Rigdzin Gödem, who is the author of the pilgrimage guide you will use. You will be given the guidebook at Dorje Drak and will formulate the plan to travel to Chorten Nyima.

On your travels, you should refer to dates using the Tibetan calendar. It happens that Friday, the tenth day, is Guru Rinpoche Day, a day when positive actions are multiplied 100 times. If you are so inclined, you should perform ceremonies.

Throughout the semester the group stopped at temples or pilgrimage spots of importance that actually existed in 1450. As described above, few days after setting out walking from Lhasa, a monk at a monastery where the group stopped to rest gave them a pilgrimage guide to Chorten Nyima. This was an English translation of a real Tibetan text that is dated to a time just before their trip.

As in the previous year, in this course the students' primary writing assignment was to keep a travel journal written in the voice of their character. Students therefore had to do research on each of the places they traveled in order to react realistically to the scenario as it developed along the way. Their journals were georeferenced and written in the My Maps feature of Google Maps. Each student recorded their journey on their own map (although they were all traveling together) and entered their journal writings into the description field of the relevant map points.

Unlike the previous year, this course was situated in a particular time period and focused specifically on Himalayan travel, pilgrimage, maps, and guidebooks; it also taught the use of different technologies. Some of the student journals in this course were again quite exceptional pieces of writing. It is difficult to compare the two courses because the second one was much smaller with only twenty students, and it was only a single semester, with the pilgrimage journey and journal-writing only lasting six weeks (because our walking trip was meant to occur in real time).

Student research in this course was historically oriented toward studies of real places – temples, monasteries, sacred lakes, mountains – through which we were traveling. Students had to imagine and study how travel happened in the fifteenth century. What were they wearing and what did they eat? What kinds of actions defined them as pilgrims? How does it feel to walk across mountainous terrain for weeks? When we reached Chorten Nyima at the end of the semester, some students decided to stay there and form a religious community, and others decided to continue their travels into the Hidden Land of Sikkim.

3 | CONCLUSIONS

In these courses I was interested in encouraging students to think differently about what religion is by directly addressing how it exists around us in a way that is inseparably linked to other dimensions of life. In both courses we began with discussion of Todd Lewis' work on how Buddhism is represented in undergraduate teaching, and his call that students try to connect to the lives of real Buddhists, thinking in particular about stories and rituals, and to the concerns of householder Buddhists as well monastics (Lewis, 2002). Study abroad programs, of course, can help students make these connections most powerfully, but not all students have access to such programs. How can we help students appreciate such issues in our classrooms? Readings that focus on ethnographic accounts of real Buddhist communities can help, but simply adding new reading assignments to a course would not move the pedagogical approach away from conventional text-focused and cognitively oriented learning. Approaches to embodied pedagogy, such as those described by Oldstone-Moore (2009) or Lelwica (2009), or engaged pedagogy, such as that presented by bell hooks (1994), emphasize the value of engaging students' senses and their bodies in the process of studying religion. Using role-playing exercises in the classroom is a productive way to enhance sensory, embodied, and engaged forms of learning.

Of course, some students do not like this kind of classroom experience. As expected, a few students dropped the course once they learned it would not be the familiar lecture setting. I am keenly aware that some students, especially very shy students, are not comfortable being required to participate in group work; I directly addressed these concerns, offering such students the chance to participate in village life as contemplatives, for example, or as traveling pilgrims. It was my perception, however, that a sense of intimate community was developed so quickly in the first semester that even the shyest students soon became comfortable participating in the group. Especially in the first, year-long course, classroom time was mostly fun, often filled with laughter and a feeling of excitement, and overall attendance was very high.

Compared to a more typical lecture course design, which is how I had previously taught "Introduction to Buddhism" a number of times, I struggled with the feeling that I was not delivering as much content in these courses. Group discussions took up quite a lot of class time, and it was sometimes difficult for me to figure out how to cover historical or doctrinal content that is usually at the core of an "Introduction to Buddhism" lecture series. I am sure that students in this course learned less about the history of Buddhism in India, its transmission to other parts of Asia, or about canonical Buddhist texts or philosophical doctrines, than they would have if I had lectured all year. But are these really the most important aspects of Buddhism? And what are the lasting effects of these different types of learning experiences? Do students effectively retain lecture content? Or do they more effectively retain emotional and sensory experiences of communal learning? Research suggests that sensory, embodied, and engaged forms of learning have a significant impact on students, but I am still experimenting with this myself as I continue to develop my own priorities as a teacher.

The events that took place in the role-playing exercises of my courses were designed to help students see how ritual, educational, medical, artistic, political, environmental, and contemplative aspects of Buddhist life are interconnected in Buddhist communities. By interacting with these events directly as members of (imagined) Buddhist communities, students were physically and emotionally deeply engaged in constructing religious meaning and religious work, and therefore they were understanding religion in a deeply felt way. When students imagined living or traveling in another place or across another sort of landscape, they had to think about multi-sensory ways of knowing – and

about what that might have to do with our understanding of religion. I was hoping to see how this type of imaginary experiential education could help students truly care deeply about other places and other times. Observation and student feedback suggests these aims were met by this role-playing experience, and I hope to continue experimenting with this type of design in future courses.

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How to cite this article: Garrett F. Engaged pedagogy through role-play in a Buddhist studies classroom. *Teach Theol Relig*. 2018;21:336–344. <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12462>