

Appendix 1: Background and development

Background

The simulation originated as the result of a successful collaborative funding bid between the Department of Political Economy, King's College, London (KCL), and Coney, a theatre company specialising in immersive techniques. Funding was received from the Higher Education Innovation Fund provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), aimed at promoting innovation and knowledge exchange which draws on university expertise. In this case, the project focused on developing both a theatrical performance, and a simulation which could be used in a classroom setting.

Central to this was the idea that both these outputs would have a sound conceptual core, exploring democratic theory in a context of political change that was informed by current scholarly debates. The project brought together writers, actors and directors with scholars working at KCL in order to develop the two outputs in a collaborative manner.

The distinguishing feature of both the performance and the simulation was the immersive element of the sessions. In each case the participants were not treated as a passive audience but were given agency over the structure of the session, notwithstanding some foundational elements of emplotment and structure.

Development

There were three phases to the development of the project outputs:

Scholarly development

The early stages of the project involved a series of meetings with academics from KCL, in order to ensure that from the start of the writing process, the piece was structured to address live scholarly concerns. Both the theatrical performance and the classroom simulation aimed to present the participants with a set of problems which needed to be resolved through collaboration, each of which highlighted a different issue or debate within the literature on representation.

Various iterations of the piece were then produced, and the writing team collaborated closely with academics in testing and developing different ways of presenting the ideas to the participants. Throughout, the collaboration was focused on the need to tread a careful balance between dramatic performance and scholarly rigour, and the process involved close work between the theatrical teams and the university.

Theatrical performances

Once the basis of the piece was constructed, and the structure of the performance was in place, theatrical performances were held. These were 'scratch' performances. That is to say, the final piece was not determined at this stage, and the lessons learned from each performance informed subsequent showings.

Three performances were held at the Battersea Arts Centre, a professional theatre venue in London, UK¹. One was held in the Anatomy Theatre of King's College, London. The Battersea performances were open to the public, the performance at KCL was attended by staff and students from the College. During the performances, the participants' role was facilitated by five professional actors, four acting as members of each 'region', and one as the 'speaker' of the national assembly. In the different settings, various ideas were tried which utilised the space and facilities available; in Battersea, the regions were allowed their own separate rooms for private deliberation away from the main assembly, which took place in a disused ballroom (see Figure 1 below); at KCL, audio-visual facilities were used to play pre-recorded 'news broadcasts' at intervals during the performance.

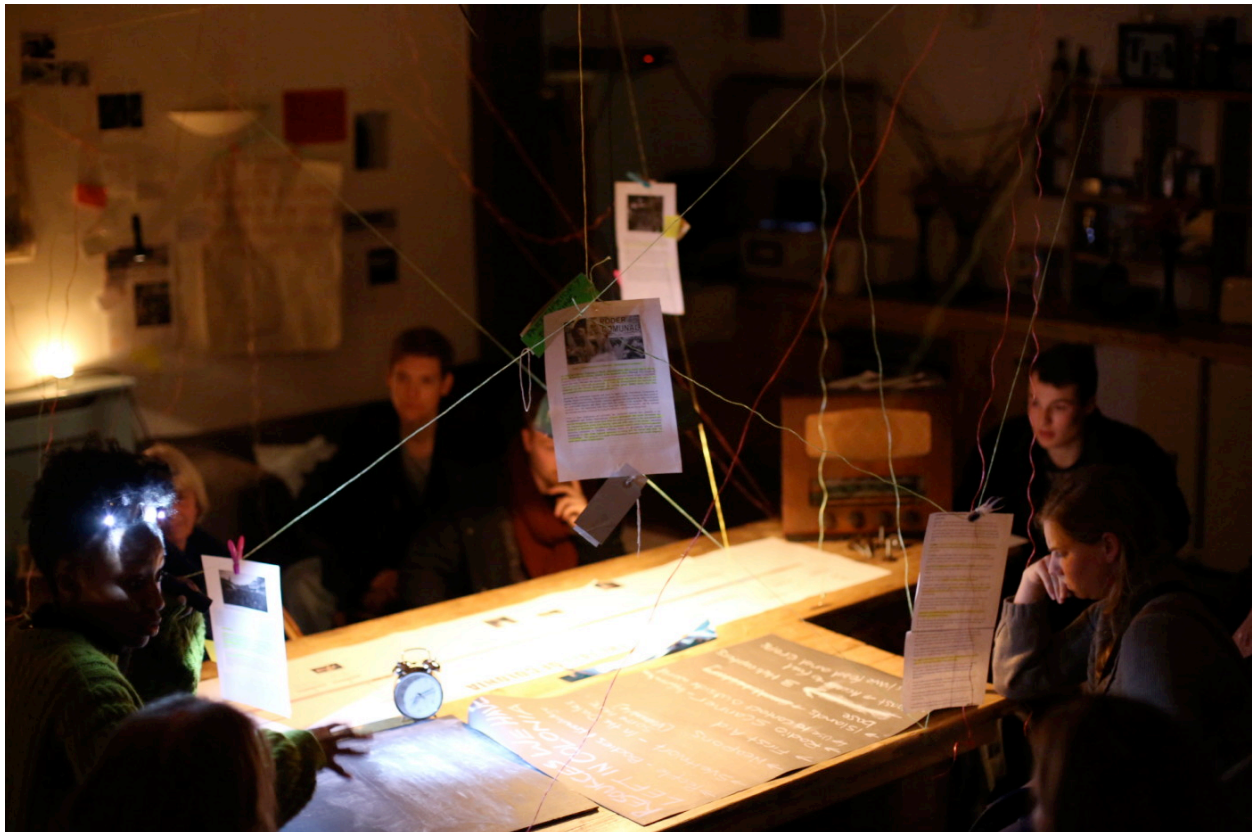


Fig. 1: Scratch performance at the Battersea Arts Centre

¹ This space was ideal for immersive performances. Smith (2012) describes it as 'a Victorian municipal building with a rambling, generally unknown and unexplored complex of offices, workshops, attics and halls'.

Once these performances concluded, the piece underwent further development before further performances. More recently, the show has been toured internationally, and played the Edinburgh Festival, and the UK's Parliament Week.

Developing the simulation

The lessons from the theatrical performances were used in the development of the simulation, and the project team worked closely to examine the potential for the immersive elements of the performance to be translated into the classroom. The potential for the use of immersive techniques had been recognised at an early stage in the project, and the ability to push the boundaries of conventional simulations by both introducing (where possible) theatrical conventions of plot and staging but also giving the audience the ability to take control of the direction of the session, were appealing in the context of the module. Immersive theatre presents the audience with a series of choices, and asks them to make decisions through a process of deliberation and collaborative action. However, there is no set outcome written into immersive performances – it is for the audience to decide how to negotiate the issues they face.

Necessarily, the simulation was rather different to the theatrical performances. During the simulation, the roles played by actors during the theatrical performances were reduced considerably and only the role of 'Speaker' was taken on by a member of the faculty. The learning objectives of the module were addressed directly during the session, and the simulation addressed representative democracy in a far more explicit manner. Equally, the constraints of timetabling, such as the size and layout of the teaching rooms, and the length of time available for the simulation, meant that it differed from the theatrical in length and structure, and consequently some of the more elaborate elements of staging and emplotment were not included.

Classroom context and learning objectives

The simulation has been used in a module focused on democratic theory, and aims to introduce advanced undergraduate students to the fundamentals of democratic theory, before introducing a number of critiques and complications in practice. Many, but not all, the students attending the module will be taking political science as the primary focus of their degree.

The overall learning objectives of the module are to enable students to:

- Describe and understand democratic theory, its principal critiques and development.
- Situate changing democratic practice in political thought, and consider this within its historical context
- Analyse critically and evaluate key original texts examining democracy.
- Demonstrate research, presentation and communication skills through preparation for, and participation in, classes

The simulation was focused specifically on representation within democratic theory. Students had, prior to the simulation taking place, attended a lecture introducing the topic, which detailed

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the emergence of representative forms of democracy in theory and practice, and introduced a number of theoretical debates, and provided an overview of the varying models of representation in the literature. Before the simulation, students were given a range of preparatory readings, which variously provided either an introduction to the topic, or different takes on the debates concerned with representation. One text (Edmund Burke's Speech to the Electors of Bristol) was required reading before the simulation, and students were asked to read at least one further text from the reading list in preparation.

The simulation was shaped to address the learning objectives of the module overall, and the specific requirements of the topic at hand. The design of the session focused on developing the contact students had with the themes of the literature from the preparatory work, through the simulation and to the debriefs. Consequently, the structure and narrative development of the simulation was constructed to ensure that the main topics of the week were addressed. The participants were faced with a programme of legislation which asked them to confront the main topic covered in the initial class. For instance, students acting as representatives had to balance their need to act in the national interest with the need to retain popularity in their region in advance of the upcoming elections, or consider whether to keep to promises made during their election 'campaigns' in the face of changing information introduced through the legislation. The theoretical context to the simulation, and the choices made by students, was considered during the debrief.