

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

## Teaching the difficult heritage of Italian Fascism

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### Abstract

In recent years, the architectural legacy and so-called ‘difficult heritage’ of Fascist Italy has become a flourishing field of research. These topics have also begun to make their way into the undergraduate classroom. To date, however, there has been little research carried out into the methods we use to teach the history of Fascism in particular. In this short article, we outline how we have applied problem-based learning and scenario-based learning approaches to tackle this topic. After presenting three assignments, we explain the benefits associated with a PBL/SBL approach, summarised under the headings of interdisciplinarity, creativity and authenticity, before highlighting some aspects on which colleagues may wish to reflect if they are considering adopting a similar approach in their teaching.

**Keywords:** Fascism; teaching; pedagogy; difficult heritage; problem-based learning; scenario-based learning

### Introduction

In recent years, the architectural legacy and so-called ‘difficult heritage’ of Fascist Italy has become a flourishing field of research (see Malone 2017; Carter & Martin 2019; Jones & Pilat 2020; Albanese and Ceci 2022) and has ignited numerous controversies, especially between scholars based in Italy and those working abroad (Carter 2020). These topics have also begun to make their way into the undergraduate classroom. Perhaps surprisingly, however, to date there has been remarkably little research carried out into how we teach key controversial historical topics, the history of Fascism being a prime case in point (see Williams 1994; Cooper and Nichol 2015; Goldberg and Savenije 2018). A recent, novel exception regarding the teaching of historical Fascism(s) is elucidated in Riccò (2020).

A question that each of the authors of this article have posed to themselves is how to teach the ‘difficult heritage’ of Fascist Italy. In this short article, we wish to outline and discuss different approaches we have adopted to teach this topic. Broadly speaking, each assignment under examination uses a problem-based learning (PBL) or scenario-based learning (SBL) approach to tackle this subject. The process of PBL can be summarised as follows: ‘Learning ... begins with learners encountering an “ill-structured” problem,

which refers to real-world scenarios with no fixed solutions' (Rehmat, Glazewski and Hmelo-Silver, 2022, 2). PBL has many similarities with scenario-based learning which 'incorporate[s] the simulation of true-to-life tasks with realistic challenges similar to those found in the workplace.' (Errington 2011, 84) While such approaches have been used in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), medicine and law teaching since the 1970s, they are employed more rarely in the humanities classroom. However, as we intend to demonstrate here, they can prove enormously effective in encouraging the development of higher-order and transferable skills and in increasing student engagement with and understanding of complex topics. Writing an article about teaching in 2023 cannot fail to take account of the impact that artificial intelligence systems, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, may have on what and how we teach. Already, many academics across the world, especially in the anglophone sphere, are considering abandoning the beloved long essay in favour of a return to handwritten invigilated examinations. The PBL assignment offers another alternative, which resists easy responses from AI and pushes students to engage in deep, authentic learning. Creativity, critical thinking, empathy and originality – all features with which AI struggles – lie at the heart of PBL assignments (Ifelebuegu 2023). Furthermore, assignments which have clear real world implications – as in the study of difficult heritage – as well as promoting higher-order cognitive skills can help to reduce the impetus to cheat (Trust 2023).

In this article, we will first lay out the structure of the three assignments we each use with our students before explaining the pedagogical benefits associated with a PBL/SBL approach, which are summarised under the headings interdisciplinarity, creativity and authenticity. We will then highlight some aspects on which colleagues may wish to reflect if they are considering adopting a similar approach in their teaching.

All three authors took as the starting point for their teaching intervention a heritage-related contemporary controversy. Daly and Malone both focus on the controversy surrounding the proposed Museum of Fascism in the former *casa del fascio* in Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace (see Heywood 2022; Storchi 2019; Mira and Pirazzoli 2018), while Wilcox's assignment takes the future of the Foro Italico complex in Rome as its central subject (see Petersen 2020; Carter and Martin 2017). While Daly's assignment asks the students to imagine and design a Museum of Fascism, both Malone and Wilcox opt for a debate-style role-play to highlight the positions of diverse stakeholders.

## Assignment overviews

### *Daly – Designing a Museum of Fascism*

Daly's assignment is part of a final-year undergraduate module in the UK entitled 'Memories and Legacies of Fascism since 1945', as part of an Italian Studies degree programme. The module covers the memories of key topics such as the Holocaust, Italian Fascist colonialism and the Resistance as well as considering neofascism in contemporary politics, the postwar image of Mussolini, and difficult heritage of the *ventennio* both in Italy and in former Italian colonies, including Eritrea and Albania. Analysis of museums and sites of memory related to each topic is threaded throughout the module.

The brief that Daly provides to students for this assignment is quite simple. Students are asked to work in small groups (around three people) and to respond to the following prompt:

'You have been asked to present a proposal for a Museum of Fascism. It should include:

- Details on the choice of location and rationale for this choice;
- The scope of the museum and how it intends to approach the subject;

- Examples of exhibits that will feature and details of how they will be interpreted for the visitor.’

Students are encouraged to be creative in their approach and can choose any location in Italy (or, indeed, internationally) to house their museum and may choose to focus on a particular aspect of Fascism, rather than present a comprehensive account of the *ventennio*.

Presentations should last approximately 15 minutes and are all delivered during the final session of the ten-week module. The assignment is worth 25 per cent of the overall module grade and students are provided with the prompt and assigned their groups in the first week of the module.

### Malone – Debating the proposed Museum of Fascism in Predappio

Malone’s assignment is part of a final-year undergraduate history course on ‘Global Legacies of Fascism’ delivered in the Netherlands. The course explores how Italy, Germany, and Japan – as the Axis Powers – have dealt with the built legacies of their fascist dictatorships from the end of the Second World War until today. Transnational, comparative, and global, the course uses a test-case example of ‘difficult heritage’ in order to tackle questions that remain unanswered. Students examine the physical and functional transformation of a selection of physical sites in Italy, Germany and Japan, as concrete case studies for shifting attitudes to the past. In class, short lectures alternate with active learning and PBL activities, including debates, discussions, and role-play activities.

One of these assignments takes the form of a fictional conference in Predappio with the aim of discussing proposals to manage the material legacies of Fascism. Students are tasked with preparing a group presentation that outlines their strategy for handling the town’s history (around five minutes per student). The class is divided into four groups of four or five and each group is assigned a different role:

- Group 1: The *historians* provide background, outlining the history of Predappio under Fascism, its connection to the Mussolini family, and its problems after 1945 especially in terms of neo-Fascist activity.
- Group 2: The *members of the municipal council* present the project to transform the former Fascist Party headquarters into a museum. They are free to suggest changes to the existing project but their role is to justify the creation of a museum and explain what it will contain.
- Group 3: The *architects* provide an account of the Fascist Party Headquarters and of other buildings in Predappio, addressing the question of whether the Headquarters is worthy of preservation as architectural heritage.
- Group 4: The *critics* are a group of left-wing historians, journalists, and intellectuals who oppose the project on political or ethical grounds. Their role is to present the case against the project and to propose a suitable alternative.

Depending on their role, the students might prioritise the threat of neofascism, the political ambitions of the local council, the economic benefits of tourism, or the architectural quality of the buildings. In representing groups with different visions of history, the students gain an awareness of how different memories can coexist within the public sphere (Rothberg 2009, 3–4). They also experience how decisions around heritage result from messy processes of negotiation between individuals (MacDonald 2009, 20). Each presentation is followed by a Q&A session in which students continue to inhabit their fictional personas and challenge or defend their positions. Similar role-play assignments address the

controversies surrounding the Nazi Party rally grounds in Nuremberg and the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo. Each assignment is worth 5 per cent of the final grade.

### *Wilcox – Debating the future of the Foro Italico, Rome*

Wilcox's assignment is a group project for use in an upper-level undergraduate seminar course within the American liberal arts system, delivered in Rome to mixed groups of Italian, American and other international students. Variants of this assignment have been used in courses on cultural memory and popular culture, and on the politics of sport. In this assignment, groups of students are tasked with coming up with recommendations for the future of the Foro Italico site in Rome and its fascist artworks and iconography. The goal is to understand the complex, multifaceted nature of the site and the multiple roles it plays: a historical location for the propagation of fascist ideology, a work of fascist visual culture, a piece of shared Italian heritage and a current, much-used sports facility.

After a class visit to the site, students are arranged into groups of four or five. Each individual in the group then assumes a role as a stakeholder, to research and write a short briefing paper from that angle. These roles might include an antifascist educational group; antiracism campaigners; a local residents' association; labour unions representing immigrant workers on-site; the Rome city councillor for culture and heritage; the Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano, the site's governing body; an art historian, architect or conservationist; or a football fans' group from AS Roma or SS Lazio, as regular site users. For assessment, the group perform an oral presentation in which each student presents their position in a simulated public planning meeting or town-hall debate; the other students are encouraged to question presenters on their position. A group portfolio – which may include maps, photographs and sketches as well as written reports – is also submitted for grading. This assignment is usually worth 30–40 per cent of the overall course grade, depending on context.

## **Advantages and benefits of adopting a PBL/SBL approach**

### *Interdisciplinarity*

A major advantage of these approaches is the fact that interdisciplinarity is at their core. The complex issues that form the basis for the initial problem or scenario cannot be tackled and addressed from a single disciplinary perspective. As can be seen from the three assignments described above, students are required to call on history, public history, history of art, architecture, memory studies, and museum studies among others. Interdisciplinarity encourages students to make connections across subjects, an essential skill for the workplace, but it is also useful in helping us manage increasingly diverse cohorts with students from multiple different degree programmes taking the same module.

Daly's module, taught in the UK, requires an advanced level of Italian language proficiency but can still attract students studying subjects such as political science and European studies alongside Italian. While the students speak Italian, many have never taken a module in Italian history before. Malone's course, taught in English at a Dutch university, welcomes students from various degree programmes who are undertaking a minor in history, while Wilcox's module, taught within the US liberal arts system, can be taken by undergraduates enrolled in a very wide range of degrees. A class on historical memory or on Italian history might include students majoring in economics, nursing, art history, marketing, finance, engineering or political science.

For students who are not specialists in history, either Italian or otherwise, PBL and SBL assignments are an attractive option. Unlike an essay, PBL assignments are not solely reliant on historical research skills and so they give students the freedom to draw on their different disciplinary strengths. For non-history students, writing a conventional history research paper can be extremely challenging, and the usefulness of developing the skills involved is not always obvious. For students who are majoring in a humanities subject (e.g. history, Italian studies), offering diverse assessments, beyond the more traditional essay or research paper, encourages them to develop a broader suite of skills and to apply their knowledge in new ways.

### Creativity

In terms of assessing learning outcomes, PBL and SBL assignments allow students to reach a deep and nuanced understanding of the topic at hand. The inherent creativity and flexibility within the assignment structure allows students to work at the very highest level of the revised Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, i.e. creating, defined as producing 'new or original work', with an emphasis on design and investigation (see Armstrong 2010). As an example of creativity, a group of Malone's students developed a project to enclose Predappio in a glass case, which sought to 'neutralise' Fascist influences by transforming the town into a museum artefact. In line with best practice for PBL/SBL implementation, the assignments described here 'provide an ideal platform for students to experience deep level learning tasks, and attain higher order cognitive skills (decision-making and critical analysis)' (Seren Smith, Warnes and Vanhoostenberghe 2018, 144; see also Errington 2011). Research has long demonstrated the links between the development of higher-order thinking skills and increased student motivation and engagement (see Brookhart 2010). Students themselves, in formal evaluations and in informal commentary, have indicated that all of these learning experiences have been extremely positive and engaging. The high standards of student work commonly created during these assignments reinforce this view.

### Authenticity

PBL/SBL approaches focus on presenting authentic problems as prompts. The 'real-world' nature of these assignments is especially appealing in the interdisciplinary contexts described above, as students can easily see that they are developing transferable skills whatever their main field of study and intended career. This may include developing argumentative, communicative and research skills, learning how to defend one's positions and teamwork, among others. Being able to connect historical content to live, contemporary issues in Italy and beyond, helps increase intrinsic motivation and engagement. Especially in Malone's and Wilcox's assignments, students learn to inhabit positions that are not their own, to see the world from the eyes of another, and to debate (politely) on thorny issues. These are all useful skills not only for a career in public administration, education, politics, or heritage, but also for active citizenship in an era of polarisation.

Perfectly 'authentic' problems are neither feasible nor required for deep learning to occur (Petraglia 1998; Herrington and Herrington 2006). Problems and scenarios can be 'near world' rather than 'real world' (Errington 2011, 95), which allows for elements of simulation, imagination and creative latitude as part of the learning process. For example, in Daly's assignment, students are not required to consider financial limitations when designing their museum or could choose to use an existing building for their site without needing to consider the minutiae of practical logistics involved in repurposing it. PBL is as much about the problem-solving process as the problem itself.

## Managing PBL/SBL assignments in practice

### *Dealing with different backgrounds of students*

All three authors teach cohorts of students from multiple national backgrounds, and student diversity is a real asset in group PBL/SBL activities. However, this diversity also requires careful and sensitive handling, especially in the case of Malone's and Wilcox's role-play assignments. Some students may have no emotional investment in the topic of Fascism whereas Italians, Jews and students from former Italian colonies may have complex family histories and personal connections with the Fascist past which can shape their reaction to the material. While none of the assignments call for students to adopt neofascist positions (see below), care must be taken in assigning specific tasks or positions to be defended in debate, depending on the students in the cohort. Group work in particular places students in positions where they need to share their views and reactions openly, which may be difficult for some. The very 'realism' of a PBL/SBL assignment can make this more challenging.

At the same time, the assignment can be an excellent way to encourage acts of historical imagination and support students in understanding positions which might be alien to them personally. The contrasting attitudes and views of Italians and international students – or even locals who have long been familiar with a site compared to those who come from further away – can be a great asset for lively classroom discussion and a mutually enriching exchange of experiences. When teaching non-Italian students, in particular, it is essential to help students avoid falling into national stereotypes that portray Italians as apolitical or opportunistic and condemn them for failing to handle their fascist heritage. Commonly this is contrasted with Germany's supposedly successful confrontation with its past (on Italian and German stereotypes, see Goeschel 2016). PBL/SBL exercises support a more nuanced and multifaceted reflection on the topic. Students can be encouraged to contribute examples from their own country, which cultivates an awareness of how 'difficult heritage' is an issue common to all nations. For example, many students from Eastern Europe or former Soviet states bring valuable perspectives on living with the aftermath of dictatorship. Drawing parallels with today's global debates around monuments associated with racism, imperialism, and slavery also highlights that the issue is still very much alive today.

In managing these potentially difficult conversations, the role of the lecturer is key. Given the need to maintain a safe class environment, Malone opts to act as a neutral referee ensuring that the debate remains respectful at all times. Another option is to explicitly require students to engage with their own perspective and how it affects their response to the task. In this regard, an add-on reflective practice task may be beneficial. Wilcox asks students to consider not only what they think they learned, to promote metacognition, but also to consider the work they have carried out as a possible starting point. Students are asked to outline a short future research project – not necessarily in Italian history – which would draw directly on their SBL experience, highlighting where it had enabled them to identify gaps in existing knowledge and understanding.

It is also important for the lecturer to reflect on their own positionality when teaching potentially emotive and divisive topics of this kind. For example, when teaching imperial history Wilcox has sometimes discussed with the class her own grandfather's time as an officer in the British Indian army, and used this to illustrate how family histories can shape our early understandings of the world.

### *Group composition*

Group and collaborative work are at the centre of PBL/SBL approaches and care must be given to group composition. There are many different schools of thought regarding how



groups should be constituted, i.e. whether self-selected or by the lecturer (see Kelson and Distlehorst 2000; Mantzioris and Kehrwald 2013). All three authors opt to assign students to groups rather than allowing them to self-select. Considering the issues regarding divergent perspectives discussed above, each of us attempts to assemble a group that is balanced and complementary, whether that be based on language skills or different national backgrounds. Particular sensitivity should be shown to those who have familial links to the events under discussion, or whose racial, ethnic or religious identity makes the debate more personal. Obviously each student has multiple different elements to their identity, not all of which may be shared with a lecturer, so we propose being open with students about the rationale behind group composition and to allow students a right of reply on a case-by-case basis.

### Scaffolding

Creative assignments of the kind described here are likely to be unfamiliar to students and require a certain amount of risk-tasking. Colleagues should carefully consider the weighting of an assignment of this type within the overall module structure; a lower weighting may encourage a higher degree of risk-taking.

Regardless of the weighting, appropriate support and scaffolding of learning are key to implementing successful PBL/SBL tasks. The role of the lecturer in these assignments is akin to that of a facilitator and guide (Maudsley 1999). Since students may have very widely varying levels of knowledge of Italian history and culture, a rigorous instructional scaffolding and support system is essential for enabling student success and ensuring that work demonstrates in-depth understanding. Scaffolding can be analysed at multiple levels: conceptual, procedural and strategic (see Jumaat and Tasir 2014).

Conceptually, students need a solid foundation for their assignment. First, students need a clear introduction to the core theoretical debates about difficult heritage and the specific focus of their assignment. None of the students taking Daly's module have a background in museum studies or public history and so extensive scaffolding support is essential to aid students in developing their museum concept (see Ertmer and Glazewski 2015; Hmelo-Silver, Golan Duncan and Chinn 2007). In the second week of the module, students engage in an in-class discussion, based on prior assigned reading, about the history of the proposed museum in Predappio and the arguments for and against this location. Class discussion of assigned readings, breaking them down into shorter sections where necessary, enables instructors to ensure student understanding of these key concepts through questioning. Students may also need a brief but solid introduction to contemporary Italian history, which may best be provided through a concise in-class lecture, as Malone offers, or equally through an assigned online video lecture. Wilcox has the distinct advantage of teaching in the same city where the subject of the assignment is located. At the beginning of the module, the entire class is taken to visit the site with the instructor, to explore the space, understand its layout and see the various artworks (mosaics, sculptures, obelisk) for themselves. In-class lectures and background readings provide additional context for the history of the site from its construction through to its present-day sporting use, along with information about the function and style of fascist iconography. Sometimes students choose to attend a sporting event at the Stadio Olimpico and feed observations about this event into their work.

At a procedural level, instructors should provide students with detailed bibliographies of secondary sources as well as links to relevant digital archives and websites. Malone offers students access to a collection of her own photographs of the site; provision of appropriately translated primary sources could also be helpful. Research guides that explain the process of historical research (perhaps produced by or in collaboration

with university library services) can also be useful. This body of information can be made easily via the online LMS to facilitate students' independent learning.

Strategic scaffolding refers to the process of learning how to problem-solve, develop alternative solutions, and develop a writing process within the course of the assignment. This requires breaking down the assignment into multiple stages: all three authors have a series of steps through which the project proceeds. Strategic scaffolding is best done through regular feedback, which may come from individual meetings with the instructor or through built-in activities such as Daly's assigned mini-research activities. These small weekly tasks are assigned throughout the module: students study different museums in Italy (e.g. the Fondazione Memoriale della Shoah in Milan; the Museo Diffuso della Resistenza in Turin; the ex-Museo Coloniale in Rome, the Casa Natale di Mussolini in Predappio etc.). These tasks require them to focus on key elements they will need to address in their projects, including whether the museum should be in a purpose-built building or a repurposed one; the location of the museum within a particular cityscape; the kind of objects and documents to be displayed; the sensory experience of the visitor etc. Feedback and discussion of these mini-assignments support students in identifying their own strategies for the main PBL assignment. Malone and Wilcox offer feedback on written research proposals, annotated bibliographies and drafts. Daly also offers students a hands-on session with a museum curator who can offer additional feedback on their work in progress. In this way students can be encouraged to reflect on missteps or dead-ends in their work and shift their focus while the work is in process.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we return, for a moment, to the question of AI. While ChatGPT, and similar, can provide generic suggestions about the controversies surrounding sites like the Fascist Party Headquarters in Predappio and the Foro Italico in Rome, they are currently incapable of producing the levels of creativity demonstrated by our students. For example, one of Daly's groups suggesting replacing the right wing of the Casa del Fascio in Predappio with a new exhibition space consisting of three enormous spherical structures, to represent an ellipsis, as an architectural rejoinder to Croce's famous description of Fascism as a 'parenthesis'. Wilcox's students have variously identified specific contemporary sculptors whose work they would like to commission to replace the 'Mussolini Dux' obelisk, or produced hand-drawn sketches of ways to redesign the site. Similarly, all three assignments are based around oral presentations followed by Q&A or live debates, which test students' ability to defend their positions on the spot, tasks with which an AI system cannot assist.

All three assignments were designed before the rise of Fratelli d'Italia and before Giorgia Meloni took up her position as Presidente del Consiglio in October 2022. There is no doubt that the current political climate in Italy has an impact on how we teach these topics. In their role-play assignments, neither Malone nor Wilcox includes an explicitly 'neo-Fascist' stakeholder group (although a spokesperson for a football club's fan association could involve some of these positions, in Wilcox's case). Students should not be required to adopt the position of far-right, racist ideologues – but some of them may already hold far-right ideas and even seek to express them, particularly in the history classroom, a challenge for which instructors need to be prepared (see Blazevic 2021). Moreover, with the 'post-Fascist' Fratelli d'Italia now in government, this is an issue that can no longer be ignored. Future iterations of these assignments might even need to explicitly research and present the likely response of Fratelli d'Italia to proposed museums or sites of memory.<sup>1</sup>

As an area of academic innovation, teaching often passes under the radar because it is infrequently discussed in print outside of explicitly education-focused academic journals.



Thus, we hope that this article may encourage and stimulate further debate about pedagogical methods in Italian history. In addition, our intention has been to present ways of integrating cutting-edge research fields into classroom practice in order to break down boundaries between research and teaching. As the difficult histories and legacies of Fascism and colonialism in Italy become ever more mainstream topics for researchers, we should seek to ensure that they are also embedded into current undergraduate education. We believe that adopting PBL/SBL approaches can be an effective and useful way to bring complex and controversial questions into the classroom, which might otherwise be hard to broach. Ultimately, teaching that engages with ‘real-life’ problems demonstrates the role that the humanities can play in enriching education, preparing future citizens, and expanding public discourse.

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## Note

1. The authors informally canvassed a number of colleagues teaching aspects of Fascism and difficult heritage in Italian universities but did not encounter any examples of PBL/SBL approaches being implemented. If any colleagues in Italian universities are incorporating PBL/SBL approaches, or similar, in their teaching of Fascism, the authors would be very pleased to hear from them.

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### Italian summary

In anni recenti il patrimonio architettonico e il cosiddetto ‘difficult heritage’ dell’Italia fascista sono diventati un campo di ricerca fecondo. Questi temi hanno cominciato a farsi strada anche nelle aule universitarie. Tuttavia finora sono state condotti pochi studi sui metodi che utilizziamo per insegnare la storia del fascismo nelle università. In questo breve articolo, delineiamo i modi in cui abbiamo affrontato questo argomento applicando metodi di apprendimento che si basano su problemi e scenari verosimili (PBL/SBL). Dopo aver presentato i tre compiti che abbiamo affidato ai nostri studenti, spieghiamo i vantaggi associati a un approccio PBL/SBL, che sono riassunti sotto le voci di interdisciplinarietà, creatività e autenticità, prima di evidenziare alcuni aspetti su cui i colleghi potrebbero voler riflettere se stanno pensando di adottare un approccio simile nei loro corsi di insegnamento.