

Reacting to the Past Pedagogy in the Classroom

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Abstract

Reacting to the Past (RTTP) consists of elaborate games, set in the past, in which students are assigned roles informed by classic texts in the history of ideas. Class sessions are run entirely by students; instructors advise and guide students and grade their oral and written work. It seeks to draw students into the past, promote engagement with big ideas, and improve intellectual and academic skills. Reacting roles, unlike those in a play, do not have a “fixed” script and outcome, so while students are obliged to adhere to the philosophical and intellectual beliefs of the historical figures they have been assigned to play, they must devise their own means of expressing those ideas persuasively, in papers, speeches, or other public presentations; and students must also pursue a course of action they think will help them “win” the game.

“Eyeball to Eyeball”

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon in April in Thayer Hall at the United States Military Academy, people walking by a closed classroom door heard shouts of excitement and frantic discussions. A passerby probably heard words like “Cuba” or “nuclear missiles” being bandied about in loud voices. The students in the class were taking part in a mini-game of Reacting to the Past (RTTP), a pedagogical method that attempts to teach history from an immersive experience. The class was History of the Military Art, or MilArt for short. The lesson covered the start of the Cold War and the strategies assumed by both the United States of America and the Soviet Union. However, there were no students taking “boards” to do group work or a discussion on the different forms of presidential strategies embraced during the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations. Instead, President Kennedy was in the room, vehemently attempting to somehow get missiles out of Cuba in October 1962.

One of the students received notification the afternoon prior that he would be assuming the role of President Kennedy; another got Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Every student received a role, some ranging from United States CIA Director John McCone to *El Presidente*, himself, Fidel Castro. Students received background sheets on their assigned individuals in order to understand the historical actors that they would soon portray. The only instruction the students received was that the class session did not have to play out true to history. When students entered the room for the next class, they found themselves transported back in time to Moscow and Washington, D.C. When the class started, the groups began receiving reports of Soviet missiles in Cuba and American reactions to this discovery. As the exercise continued, it became readily apparent that this class would not follow history and how the crisis unfolded in 1962. Instead of negotiations and backroom deals in order to mediate the crisis, both sides assumed hardline stances and threatened war. Soon tensions spilled over and Cuba was invaded by a US amphibious assault; the Soviets retaliated by invading West Berlin. Tension continued to spill over as other aggressive acts of war took place. By the end of forty-five minutes of role playing, much of the world was engaged in a conventional force-on-force conflict, something that did not happen with the rather benign ending to the actual conflict.

As the class went back to their seats to make sense of the whole affair, students continued to try and understand what had just transpired. One raised the question, that while the exercise was fun, what benefit was it to the class since it did not play out according to history? Once seated, the first question the teacher asked the students was a relatively simple one: “Even in light of what was going on in the scenario, why did no one drop a nuclear bomb?” With that relatively simple question, students eyes lit up as their synopsis in their brains began to fire as they quickly began to mentally connect the dots. Even in light of the escalating tensions in the game, the idea of dropping “the bomb” appeared too drastic, final, and a point of no return for many. In a game where there were no life or death decisions, students still felt the magnitude of the potential decision. No one wanted to be known as the student who was willing to order what others did not agree on and cause Armageddon. With that realization, the class quickly realized the application to the lesson in the textbook that they had read the night prior that discussed this same uncertainty that gripped the world during the 1950’s and 1960’s. While the mini-game did not cover the assigned lesson in its entirety, the exercise proved to be an effective pedagogical technique as the students commented repeatedly not only how much they enjoyed the class, but that they now had a greater appreciation and understanding for the themes and details provided in the textbook.

The Stigma of History

The discipline of history is an often polarizing subject that has the potential to fill students with dread. A lot of people did a lot things at a lot of different places during a lot of different time periods. Often times, it either interests students or it does not and there are rarely those that fall in between. This tall order of perceived rote memorization leads many students to attempt to study by “cramming” for examinations the night prior and then attempting to somewhat coherently regurgitate these facts and figures rather than developing a coherent answer to the question being asked. Even for those students interested or inclined towards history, they often become enamored or obsessed with the details that their peers loathe. They can readily spout off with facts and figures of certain battles, the characteristics of a piece of equipment, or some other piece of random knowledge better suited for a trivia contest at a local bar. While they may have more knowledge and interest, this will only take them so far. Arguably they have missed the “forest for the leaves” in their inability to understand the context and “so what” of the material and how it relates to other themes or actions as a whole.

Teaching this subject poses its own unique set of challenges for many professors. Students obviously have to know some level of facts, figures, people, and dates. After all, these details are crucial to providing evidence to an overall argument that students are often asked to craft in response to broad questions that do not necessarily lend themselves to an “approved solution” like so many Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) inclined students prefer. However, at some point do the details get in the way of students understanding of the bigger picture? Are they so consumed with facts that they cannot see the overall themes and relationships being drawn across time periods or continents? If a teacher attempts to focus too much on a thematic-approach in order to build a cohesive narrative, the lack of details being covered must also be weighted. Are enough facts being understood in order to provide evidence to the thematic narrative?

This is not a new phenomenon to the discipline. Arguably teachers of the discipline have been forced to walk this delicate tightrope of facts and themes ever since the discipline began. With that in mind, Dr. Mark Carnes of Barnard College attempted to bridge this gap in order to make history relevant through an immersive experience. Rather than just reading about individuals and time periods, students would be figuratively transported back to the time period in question and assume the roles and responsibilities of historical figures that they only knew from the pages of a textbook; thus, RTTP pedagogy was created.

The Advent

RTTP pedagogy is not a new phenomenon in the classroom. Dr. Carnes first had the idea of needing to do something different in his classroom in the late 1990's when he realized that despite his best efforts and his students' obvious intelligence, his classes were not engaging and the students were unable to fully grasp the significance of the material being covered. "I had smart students, but they weren't giving it their all," he stated. "This was not their passion. They were doing enough to get A's, but it didn't deeply resonate in their lives."¹ One student stated to Carnes, "[A]ll classes are sorta boring. Yours was less boring than most."² Carnes soon realized that this was not a new problem faced in academia; Yale University literature professor Henry Seiden Canby had long ago pointed—all the way back in 1915—out the "deathly indifference that hangs like a fog bank" over American universities, marveling at "the astonishing power of the undergraduate mind to resist the intrusion of knowledge."³ Canby's rationalization revolved around the social lives of students and the competing interests—fraternities, sports, clubs, and friends to name a few—that pull students away from academics, arguably the reason that they are in college. Henry Adams wrote something very similar about his college experience in 1918, stating that his Harvard professors had "taught little, and little ill."⁴ Carnes realized the same thing, even in light of improved classroom technology, pedagogical workshops attended by faculty, and better facilities. "Students live in these worlds of social competition, whether its Facebook friends or leveling up in video games—that's part of what motivates [them]," he states.⁵ Current statistics in American higher education indicate that more than a third of college students in the nation fail to complete their degree regardless of socio-economic class. While some students may quit due to lack of money or extenuating circumstances, many quit because they lack motivation and interest.⁶ In order to attempt to channel this spirit of competition, Carnes took in unpopular position in academia. While many colleagues frowned at the idea of competition and its creation of "winners" and "losers," he embraced it.

What started out as classroom debates soon transitioned into something more in-depth. As Carnes developed his games, he developed supporting documentation in tandem. Students must read hundreds of pages of background, much of it in the form of historical documents, and write several papers. In other words, students participating in RTTP have to basically do everything their professors want them to do in a college class—read and analyze texts; learn about historical contexts; learn how to construct forceful and convincing arguments—all in the guise of a game.⁷ Grading is based not only on their writings but also on their master of historical characters' points of view and their ability to make them come to life in class. Games run upwards of a month in length as students assume the very lives and

¹ Greg Toppo, "Role-playing history game gets students jazzed," *USA Today*, 28 March 2015, accessed 10 April 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/03/28/history-reacting-past-game/24651641>.

² Mark Carnes, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ Colleen Flaherty, "Minds on Fire: In new book, creator of 'Reacting to the Past' details history of the pedagogical technique and advocates its wider adoption," *Inside Higher Ed*, 27 August 2014, accessed 10 April 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/08/27/book-advocates-reacting-past-pedagogy>.

⁵ Toppo, "Role-playing history game gets students jazzed."

⁶ Mark Carnes, "Setting Students' Minds on Fire," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 March 2011, accessed 10 April 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Setting-Students-Minds-on/126592>.

⁷ Adeline Koch, "Reacting to the Past: An Open Game Based Pedagogy Workshop at Duke, January 19-20," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 November 2012, accessed 10 April 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/reacting-to-the-past-an-open-game-based-pedagogy-workshop-at-duke-january-19-20/44236>.

roles of the people that they portray. Likewise, a RTTP game is a serious academic endeavor for teachers who build the scenarios. Each game consists of 200,000-300,000 words of historical background, rules, advisories, role packets, and instructor guidance.⁸

The Evidence

At its base, Dr. Carnes sees RTTP as a way to transform higher education, especially general education. He calls such foundational courses the “sick man” at most colleges and universities.⁹ Students are required to take certain “core” level classes across a variety of disciplines, regardless of their overall academic major. Likewise, many departments view these classes a “requirement” rather than an opportunity to engage with and expand their students’ knowledge bases. Carnes also cautions that historians, like teachers of other disciplines, are wary of the “next new thing” in pedagogy; many have seen different fads come and go, so why should RTTP be any different?¹⁰ In fact, Carnes himself believes that RTTP is not merely a fad, but something that has been taking place in classrooms for a long period of time and that many other teachers have utilized; what makes a difference is taking the role-playing farther, the associated detail involved, arguably, the total immersion of the class into history itself.¹¹

James Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association, says the games clearly engage students, helping them “situate themselves in the past” in a way that simply reading history does not. “There’s a lot there that contributes greatly to student learning in history and to helping students think historically, which is our goal,” he says. “Most historians believe that thinking historically is more important than inculcating an ability to memorize names, dates, and facts. And I think ‘Reacting’ does that.”¹² Dr. Amy Curry recognizes inherent tradeoff that occurs as a result of devoting so much time of a survey course to a six-week period covering one specific event; her answer, “It depends on how you quantify learning.”¹³ Yes, some content is given short-shrift in the interest of time, but is this not usually the case anyways with any class? In return, students develop skills not only useful to academia, but also their lives.¹⁴ Dr. Montgomery Wolf seconds this opinion, believing that any tradeoff in content is worthwhile as students gain greater perspectives in contingency and agency due to the work they must devote to understand their assigned role and how it fits into the larger game.¹⁵

Reacting instructors report better—in some cases perfect—class attendance, fewer students dropping or failing classes, and engagement that is often beyond compare. At Eastern Michigan University, Dr. Mark Higbee conducted a study and found that students were three and a half times more likely to skip class on non-RTTP game days.¹⁶ In addition, any students who were going to miss a day of RTTP class made sure to let their professor know ahead of time, suggesting that RTTP alters students’ sense of responsibility.¹⁷ “What everyone says about Reacting classes is that students show up,” Carnes

⁸ Mark Carnes, “You’re gonna make us do weird, role-playing games?”, *Process*, 31 August 2015, accessed 10 April 2018, <http://www.processhistory.org/youre-gonna-make-us-do-weird-role-playing-games/>.

⁹ Flaherty, “Minds on Fire.”

¹⁰ Carnes, “You’re gonna make us do weird, role-playing games?”

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Toppo, “Role-playing history game gets students jazzed.”

¹³ Amy Curry, “Give Your Students the Chance to Revolt,” *Process*, 2 September 2018, accessed 10 April 2018, <http://www.processhistory.org/curry>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Montgomery Wolf, “Letting Go: Reacting to the Past and Student-Centered Classroom,” *Process*, 3 September 2015, accessed 10 April 2018, <http://www.processhistory.org/wolf>.

¹⁶ Mark D. Higbee, “How Reacting to the Past Games ‘Made Me Want to Come to Class and Learn’: An Assessment of the Reacting Pedagogy at EMU, 2007-2008,” *Making Learning Visible* 4 (Fall 2009): 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

says. “Part of it is they don’t know what’s going to happen that day. They don’t know who’s going to win a particular debate, what sort of thing is going to occur, and there is an element, in these worlds, of drama, which is true of any good competition.”¹⁸

Due to its game-play methodology, a group of students may be declared the “winner” but that does not always mean that the final answer is the approved answer or that the outcome mirrored history. Carnes points to one of his students who played Emma Goldman in a game about women’s suffrage. She told Carnes she had thought of Goldman as a “crazy lady,” fighting the government “virtually alone,” although in a previous game on Confucian thought, the same student—who is a member of a prominent political family—advocated adherence to tradition and order.¹⁹ After the student, acting as Goldman, presented a strong defense of anarchism, Carnes asked her what she now felt was “right.” “I am truly conflicted,” she replied. “Both make sense, although they are seemingly opposite extremes.” Carnes then asked if the net result of taking contradictory roles created confusion. “Not confused,” the student replied. “Curious. I now have the knowledge to look at our society through the lens of the other perspectives. Not just what I have been taught to believe, but to take a step back and see that I can think for myself.”²⁰

Additionally, as Carnes points out, the idea of “subversive play” gets students to do the work in order to prepare for class. Citing numerous examples of students and their individual vignettes, he lays out a pedagogical approach that consumes students. As humans, we want to do what makes us happy, and college is filled with numerous opportunities—ranging from fraternity and sorority parties to clubs and sports. As Carnes states, “Subversive play worlds commonly oblige players to work harder than ever before. This also explains why the activities that students commonly dread (and often evade)—going to class, reading, researching, and writing papers—become ‘fun’ in the context of a role-immersion game.”²¹

Although initially developed for upper-level and seminar style history classes, RTTP pedagogy has moved to larger survey classes and other disciplines as well. Bridget Ford, an associate professor of history at California State University at East Bay, recently experimented with RTTP in her U.S. history survey course. She received a grant from the California state legislature to increase technology on required courses with a high failure rate across the California State system in order to improve student performance. After using a portion of her grant to increase the use of technology, she implemented RTTP’s “The Constitutional Convention of 1787: Constructing the American Republic” game for her more than 125 students.²² While she cannot say why her failure rate dropped by more than half the following semester, since she made many changes in the course, she believes RTTP made a difference. Students were more engaged, attendance was full, and she connected to students on a more “personal level” leading her to credit the curriculum as the primary culprit for increased performance.²³

Dr. Jessica Blatt implemented RTTP pedagogy in a most unlikely location: a maximum-security prison. Blatt recognizes that many of RTTP’s critics may point to where the game developed and their own students do not possess the same level of initial understanding, obligations, or family dynamics to allow them to devote so much time and energy to a mere “game.”²⁴ After playing through two games, she

¹⁸ Toppo, “Role-playing history game gets students jazzed.”

¹⁹ Flaherty, “Minds on Fire.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 85.

²² Flaherty, “Minds on Fire.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jessica Blatt, “‘Subversive Play’ in Prison,” *Process*, 1 September 2015, accessed 10 April 2018, <http://www.processhistory.org/blatt>.

readily acknowledges the problems of attempting to utilize game-based learning with a population that has different amounts of time to prepare, competing demands, and uneven background knowledge of the topic. However, she also just as quickly acknowledges their accomplishments within her highly scrutinized classroom, stating, “In short, they did all the things one hopes students will do in college: engage seriously with big ideas and major texts, and improve their research, writing, and public speaking skills.”²⁵

With games involving such science-based topics as Darwin and the rise of Naturalism and the Galileo and Cosmology, RTTP has bridged the gap across the academic spectrum. David Henderson, a professor of chemistry at Trinity College in Connecticut, has embraced the pedagogy. Having taught for over forty years, Henderson finds RTTP as a way to engage non-science majors in a way that is more comfortable yet still engages with the necessary course material.²⁶ Tony Crider, chair of the department of physics at Elon University, had attempted to update his classroom with all of the latest technology available to him, however, still felt his classes lacked depth and understanding. Desperate for a change, he identified three motivators commonly found in games and hobbies: role-playing, on-line socialization, and “leveling up.”²⁷ Wanting to know if RTTP was more than enjoyable diversion, Crider looked to measure the effectiveness of this new pedagogy in a discipline that it was not necessarily designed for. His research showed that RTTP students did just as well answering astronomy-based questions as students who took a normal class. However, when students answered a question incorrectly, it was often a result of the game and the “false history” being propagated by participants who assumed the roles of historical figures. As such, Crider determined that it was necessary to modify RTTP games for use in other disciplines, which he has since done in order to ensure the appropriate material is discussed in depth.²⁸ Likewise, Dr. Carnes and his associates have also attempted to make inroads into the STEM community. There are currently eight RTTP STEM games in development with topics ranging from applying math principles to analyze Social Security legislation to feeding African refugees through modified food.²⁹ While certain modifications of RTTP are necessary for use across other academic domains, Crider makes the critical assessment that in his quest to build a more “modern” classroom, he found that “some decidedly old school” methods for learning—games, acting, and debate—proved more useful than most new hardware and software.³⁰

While this pedagogy sounds innovative and fun, it is still fraught with risks. Take for instance the scenario described at the beginning of this paper. The students quickly threw history aside for the sake of aggressive intervention in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Luckily, however, this RTTP game was a “mini” only taking one class period. But what if the game extended for a month on end? How do you limit alternative or revisionist history from becoming common understanding? Carnes and his legion of supporters spend years attempting to perfect each game. Each RTTP game undergoes three to eight years of development, including dozens of test-plays. These iterations reveal potential issues, which the designers attempt to fix by adding new rules and roles to prevent the same thing from happening. What RTTP designers do not want to happen is for the teacher to have to interject themselves into the classroom as an arbiter as it breaks the character of the game; thus, the guidance has to be found within the game

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Flaherty, “Minds on Fire.”

²⁷ Tony Crider, “Debating Pluto: Searching for the Classroom of the Future and Ending Up in the Past,” *Astronomy Beat* no.74 (June 2011): 1, accessed 10 April 2018, <http://www.astrosociety.org>.

²⁸ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁹ “STEM Games,” *Reacting Consortium Library*, accessed 11 April 2018, <http://reactingconsortiumlibrary.org/stem>.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

itself.³¹ This realization should be seen as both a positive and negative to educators attempting to use RTTP in their classroom. On the positive side, if a teacher decides to utilize a RTTP scenario, they should have confidence that the game has been vetted in order to ensure that students reach the desired learning objectives of utilizing the scenario. However, RTTP scenarios are somewhat limited; currently there are seventeen published RTTP games with another twenty-eight in development.³² Therefore, if there is not an already established RTTP game for a topic that a professor wishes to cover, it would be recommended to not attempt to recreate RTTP oneself unless the same level of scrutiny and academic rigor was applied. However, Carnes still sees value in ahistorical or revisionist outcomes that may result of RTTP play. Students are forced to grapple with “the collision of big ideas as articulated in major tasks” and determine the viability of their actions.³³ While teachers can attempt to rectify any issues, yet is the damage already done as students will remember things from memorable events while immersed in the game? Carnes says this is no different than any other narrative in a history class as not every topic can be given equal treatment and teachers are prone to tell their own “narrative” in order to impart the information that they think is important to their students.³⁴

Although bearing certain inherent risks with this pedagogical approach, the numbers generally support the method. The most complete evaluation of RTTP came from a FIPSE grant allowing psychologist Steve Stroessner to compare and contrast classes that did and did not use RTTP within and across a half-dozen colleges. Stroessner sums up his findings as such:

Interviews indicated that the method was generally popular compared with traditional pedagogies, although several concerns about the course were raised. Quasi-experimental procedures were then used to examine consequences of the pedagogy on psychosocial variables and skill development at both the host (Phase 1) and affiliated (Phase 2) institutions. In both phases, students in Reacting to the Past showed elevated self-esteem and empathy, a more external locus of control, and greater endorsement of the belief that human characteristics are malleable compared with controls. Rhetorical skills were enhanced, but writing skills were unaffected. Phase 3 investigated individual differences in predicting course enjoyment and performance. Although individual differences correlated with enjoyment of the pedagogy, they were generally unrelated to grades received. These findings suggest that this role-playing pedagogy adds diversity to student experience while producing some beneficial psychological consequences and improvement in academic skills.³⁵

From Stroessner’s findings it appears that RTTP does generally produce its advertised results. Students are more comfortable engaging with their peers and understanding different points of view. Additionally, they are able to effectively argue their position and use persuasion to their benefit. While student writing appears to not improve—perhaps to the more informal writing favored in RTTP versus traditional academic writing—it also does not decrease as a result of using this pedagogy. Also of note, students enjoyed showing up to class and participating. In an age of increased and competing demands in

³¹ Carnes, “You’re gonna make us do weird, role-playing games?”

³² “Published Games,” *Reacting Consortium Library*, accessed 11 April 2018, <http://reactingconsortiumlibrary.org/published-games>.

³³ Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 255.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 256-257.

³⁵ Steven J. Stroessner, Laurie Susser Beckerman, and Alexis Whittaker, “All the World’s a Stage?: Consequences of a Role-Playing Pedagogy on Psychological Factors and Writing and Rhetorical Skill in College Undergraduates,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101 no.3 (2009): 605–620.

students' lives, getting students to be excited for class and show up has to be of some value in and of itself.

Beginning in 2010, Eastern Michigan University began a study of RTTP methodology in freshmen history courses in order to evaluate overall graduation rates. Emphasizing the “flipped” nature of the class, one student commented, “In high school, most of the classes were run by the teacher, with the occasional question. This class was more run by us. We were more the leaders of our own class.”³⁶ In addition, the mechanics of the game created interdependence amongst students to accomplish certain goals in order to advance their overall position in the game. While some students advocated for agency in the classroom, others saw RTTP as a way to do minimal work without penalty. Some students complained about others lack of preparedness or not being penalized for making a mistake in a speech or presentation.³⁷ Even in light of these concerns, the Eastern Michigan study showed that a small, but positive, impact on both retention and on students going on to major in history or social studies. Utilizing a matched control group of students similar to the ones taking RTTP courses, the findings showed that RTTP students were 10% more likely to return for their sophomore year—77.31% to 67.49%. The university average for retention during this time period was 73.2%, meaning that RTTP students outperformed both their matched peers and the overall university retention levels.³⁸

In addition to improving results in the classroom, RTTP pedagogy also increases relationships amongst its player due to the close contact and interdependence the game necessitates. In a classroom study, Dr. Jeff Webb from Salt Lake Community College and Dr. Ann Egar from the University of Utah found that RTTP found that students reported a greater increase in both the acquaintance and friendship networks as a result of this methodology.³⁹ Although more of these connections were that of an acquaintance than a true friend, these multiple ties eliminated social isolation in the classroom with no student reporting not at least having made one acquaintance or friend.⁴⁰

While these findings appear to support RTTP pedagogy, these sentiments are further reinforced through the findings of a 2013 survey of 100 faculty who utilized RTTP in their classrooms. These faculty overwhelmingly assert that RTTP methods directly contributed to students achieving AAC&ULEAP Essential Learning Outcomes standard of a contemporary liberal education. Faculty surveyed provided the following data: 96% of students effectively engaged with “big” questions; 96% of students connected their knowledge with choice and agency; 91% of students understood how to effectively question positions being brought forth; and 78% gained an increase in their understanding of ethics.⁴¹ In light of this evidence, it appears that RTTP has a legitimate claim to effectiveness and a place in the modern classroom.

Conclusion

Gretchen Galbraith, an associate dean of faculty and associate professor of history at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, sums up RTTP quite well, stating, “The complexity arising from

³⁶ Russell Olwell and Azibo Stevens, “I had to double check my thoughts”: How the Reacting to the Past Methodology Impacts First-Year College Student Engagement, Retention, and Historical Thinking,” *The History Teacher* 48 no.3 (May 2015): 564.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 567.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 569-570

³⁹ Jeff Lake and Ann Egar, “Exploring Classroom Community: A Social Network Study of Reacting to the Past,” *Teaching Learning Inquiry* 4 no. 1 (2016): 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Jose Antonio Bowen, “Reacting to the Past will revive your teaching,” *Teaching Naked*, 15 July 2016, accessed 10 April 2018, <http://teachingnaked.com/reacting-to-the-past-with-revive-your-teaching/>.

honestly and fully addressing contingencies around what become ‘historical’ events is embedded in [Reacting]: to be informed about facts and to grapple with the plausibilities is a challenging, rigorous, and intellectually demanding exercise for the teachers as well as the students.”⁴² Dr. Galbraith’s beliefs are also echoed by cadets at the United States Military Academy. Having been exposed to various RTTP games throughout the course of a semester, cadets agreed with the validity of the information. Through a survey conducted across three different sections of randomly sectioned students, cadets provided the following feedback: 82% of cadets either “strongly agreed” or agreed that they now have a greater appreciation for historical situations and the decisions made by historical actors; 79% either “strongly agree” or “agree” RTTP is “value-added” in the classroom and helped them understand the material at a deeper level; and 72% of cadets surveyed either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that RTTP games should be added to the curriculum on a consistent basis; this informal survey conducted at USMA is in line with data found at Eastern Michigan in 2009 that supported RTTP pedagogy and its associated benefits.⁴³

Although acknowledging all of the great things that RTTP does for students and teachers, Carnes recognizes the limits of its methods. He states, “Reacting will never replace traditional pedagogies. Reacting games cover less chronological terrain than lectures; and probably the games are less effective at instilling the analytical detachment that is a prerequisite for solid scholarship. On the other hand, its hard to learn a subject if you don’t care about it.”⁴⁴ Likewise, students still have a certain expectation of a class and the information being covered, even if it is to their detriment. Even in light of “strongly agreeing” that RTTP provided extreme value in understanding the material, one cadet made an annotation on their survey with a startling observation, stating, “[RTTP] helped me understand the difficulties of history, but I feel like the only way to prepare for a [test] is to memorize facts about a few lessons and throw them in there. Having a broad appreciation for history is not useful for testing.”

This is the uphill battle that teachers face, especially in the domain of history. Students have pre-conceived notions of what they must do in order to excel or achieve a good grade. Instead of understanding the motivations and relationships between historical actors and events and how they shape the world that they now live in, students instead believe that they will be given the information that they must memorize and repeat on an exam in order to pass a course and move on to other things they are more interested in. While RTTP offers a potential pedagogical approach to break down these barriers, time will only tell on its relative effectiveness against these age-old stigmas brought forth by students.

⁴² Flaherty, “Minds on Fire.”

⁴³ Higbee, “How Reacting to the Past Games ‘Made Me Want to Come to Class and Learn’: An Assessment of the Reacting Pedagogy at EMU, 2007-2008,” 57-58.

⁴⁴ Carnes, “You’re gonna make us do weird, role-playing games?”

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