

“REACTING TO THE PAST”: PEDAGOGICAL INTRODUCTION

THE BASIC CONCEPT

In most classes students learn by receiving ideas and information from instructors and texts, or they discuss such materials in seminars. “Reacting to the Past” courses employ a different pedagogy. Students learn by taking on roles, informed by classic texts, in elaborate games set in the past; they learn skills—speaking, writing, critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork—in order to prevail in difficult and complicated situations. That is because Reacting roles, unlike those in a play, do not have a fixed script and outcome. While students will be 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.

Sometimes students chafe at the notion of playing games in college. The idea of “reacting” to the past may bring to mind the Thanksgiving pageant of grade school, when one dressed up like Squanto and Miles Standish. But that experience has as much relation to Reacting as Tic-Tac-Toe does to chess, or arithmetic to calculus. A Reacting game is among the greatest challenges many students experience in college.

Reacting is also fun: it is designed explicitly as a game, and amusing things will happen. But many games have a serious side: few players laugh their way through a football game. Sometimes Reacting games similarly acquire heart-pounding tension in the final sessions. Any game is enjoyable if one plays it well, but this nearly always requires hard work.

Reacting games last from four to fourteen class sessions, although most games are in the eight- to twelve-class range. The length of the game is set in the game booklet. The course syllabus will indicate what game(s) will be included in the course and what materials should be acquired for each game.

A Reacting game consists of four components:

- a) a student game book (published by Norton);
- b) one or more central philosophical or historical texts (available at the bookstore, library, or online);
- c) a role description, which will be provided to the student by the instructor;
- d) an instructor’s manual, which supplies the Gamemaster with guidance in setting up and running the game.

The first two components (a and b) are available to everyone. The role description is secret: students should **not show it to anyone**. The instructor’s manual, which is not available to students, provides a menu of elements that instructors select in setting up a game. This allows them to shape a game to suit their interests and pedagogical purposes. It also ensures that Reacting classes differ even when multiple classes are playing the “same” game on the same campus.

THREE PHASES: SET-UP, GAME, & POST-MORTEM

During the first few sessions of a game, known as the **set-up phase**, the instructor will provide general guidance on the historical context, major texts, and intellectual issues of the game. These sessions will be much like a “normal” class, perhaps consisting of short lectures and instructor-directed discussion. Students will surely find the complexity of the game to be confusing, so they should ask questions! During or after the second or third set-up class, the instructor will distribute the roles. Later in that class, or sometime in the next, the class will break into factions, allowing students in the same factions, or with similar roles, to determine how to work together to accomplish their objectives. Students should also meet regularly with their faction outside of class meetings.

By the fourth or fifth session, and perhaps earlier in very short games, the **game phase** will commence. Students whose characters function in a supervisory capacity—for example, as president of the Athenian Assembly, First Grand Secretary of the Hanlin Academy in Ming China, Governor General of the Simla Conference in India—will preside over the proceedings. The instructor, now a Gamemaster (GM), will likely sit in the back of the room, intruding only to resolve disputes or issue rulings. The GM will determine when the game is over. Then follows the **“post-mortem” phase**, in which winners are announced, students relinquish their roles, and the entire class freely discusses the game and attendant issues from (their own) contemporary perspective.

COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Reacting games are designed to reflect the multiple causal forces that shape history—economic, political, sociological, technological, and cultural. But unlike conventional history courses, which teach what happened and why, Reacting games may depart from the actual events and outcomes of the past. Socrates may be acquitted; conservatives may circumvent the radical phase of the French revolution, and so on. This may seem to be an odd way of “teaching” history.

There are several justifications for the Reacting approach.

The first justification concerns historical causation. Most history lecturers and textbook authors seek to tell clear and persuasive narratives: Event X led to Event Y which led to Event Z. If the narrative is too complicated, students will not learn “what happened.” Historians thus rely on strong declarative statements of a causal character. But all causal statements include (often unstated) counterfactual hypotheses. For example, the statement—“Aggressive British tax policies caused the American colonists to break away from Great Britain”—includes the unstated premise—“If Britain did not pursue aggressive tax policies, the American colonists would not have broken away from Britain.” Reacting games, by providing the possibility of alternative narratives, illuminate counterfactual premises and deepen our understanding of historical causation.

The second and related justification concerns the role of the individual in history. Because historians commonly focus on the large forces of a universalizing character (industrialization, modernization, technological change), they sometimes neglect the role of the individual. In Reacting, students can **change** history; this presumes that history is contingent—that it could have pursued a different course from what happened. By asserting the centrality of individual agency, Reacting provides a balance to the conventional emphasis on the “large forces” that figure so prominently in most historical accounts.

WINNING THE GAME

In most games, players know all of the rules at the outset; and they commence the game with equal prospects of winning. But life adheres to neither of these game conventions. Often the best-laid plans

fall apart; and people do not begin life on equal footing. In Reacting, similarly, things may happen that one may not anticipate and over which one has little or no control. Moreover, the role students are assigned affects their prospects for winning. Some objectives are more difficult to achieve than others, and chance may intervene in unpredictable ways. A student may play a game brilliantly and lose, or he or she may bungle his or her way to victory. All of this is to concede that Reacting is not “fair.” Nor is life. [Note: Remember that a student’s grade is not dependent on winning: if a student’s papers and class performance are superb, he or she will likely receive an A even if he or she loses the game; conversely, if a student’s papers and class performance are poor, he or she will likely receive a poor grade even if he or she wins the game. The instructor **may** choose to award a small grade bonus to “winners”: the “winner’s bonus” is applied to the **class participation component** of the student’s grade; if students are unsure of whether their class includes the “winner’s” bonus, they should ask their instructor.]

Persuasion is at the heart of all Reacting games. Although most roles are partisan in character, obliging students to advance views with which others will disagree, some roles are indeterminate or ambiguous. “Indeterminates” are partially free to consider the primary texts and listen to the class debates with an open mind. But heed the modifier **partially**: the indeterminate roles are not **determined** but they are **shaped** by history. The “victory objectives” of “indeterminate” players require that they faithfully “represent” a type of actual historical person. This cannot be defined precisely: the “indeterminates” will have the freedom to arrive at their own opinions, but their opinions must in some way be consistent with their historical “role.” This, too, is like life. When, for example, one is called to serve as juror, one is free to vote his or her opinion, yet one is also bound by one’s oath as juror to abide by the laws of the state. “Indeterminates,” though free to take whatever position they wish, are still obliged to represent with some credibility their assigned social/historical role.

In order to win the debates—to persuade the “indeterminates” to support one’s objectives—students must understand the historical/social context of their assumed lives. To further promote historical verisimilitude, instructors may include additional “roles.” That is, the objectives of some players may be “determined” (stated at the outset) and yet not correspond with those of the major factions. In life, some people always have their own, or merely different, agendas. The purpose of such roles is to establish additional links to the actual forces that impinged on the historical debates. All of this is to say that a Reacting game is very complicated; one cannot possibly “figure it” all out. Nevertheless, a close reading of the historical context will provide clues to some of these forces.

Students can improve their prospects for success in several additional ways: first, by plunging into the gamebook and the readings **before the first meeting of the set-up session**; by forming an effective and cooperative team; by studying the world one will inhabit; and by making plans for the unexpected. In addition to understanding those whom students wish to persuade, they must study the views of those who seek to block their goals. Students should read the game materials several times and the accompanying texts carefully. They also need to cultivate skills that enable them to speak and write clearly and persuasively, solve problems, and work effectively with others.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

Reading

The central premise of “Reacting” is that ideas and life are interwoven. A less obvious corollary is that the study of ideas cannot be undertaken without consideration of the social context in which they emerged, and that the study of people requires an awareness of the intellectual constructs that have shaped their societies and cultures.

This is important to the game because students will be obliged, in a very short period of time, to acquire a solid understanding of complex ideas and difficult texts, and also to navigate through a historical situation that is equally complicated.

The readings, consequently, tend to be of two types: 1) the works of important thinkers; and 2) books and articles that establish the social or historical context. Students may be daunted by their first encounter with Plato's *Republic*, the *Analects* of Confucius, or the sermons of Puritan ministers. These works are not easy because the ideas themselves are (literally) so thoughtful. There are good reasons why they have influenced civilizations so powerfully. Students must engage with these texts fully and in the light of the historical moment that brought them to the fore. Students may be tempted to take a point that makes sense to their classmates without bothering to figure out how the argument was originally framed. ("We all know that democracy is good, right?") This lazy strategy almost surely will not work: the superficiality of the engagement with the material will be evident to the instructor. More important, easy arguments, though perhaps attuned to one's classmates, will be hard to defend when sharply examined by those whose roles contradict one's own role. Socrates/Plato has devised an ingenious worldview, with a series of powerful presuppositions; this is also true of Confucius and the Reformation Parliament at the time of Henry VIII. If students have failed to scrutinize the entire train of these ideas, they will be hard-pressed to make persuasive arguments.

A student's task as reader is simplified by the fact that his or her **position** is determined at the outset. That is, if a student has been assigned the task of persuading the people of Athens in 403 B.C. that democracy is good, then his or her reading of Plato's *Republic* will be adversarial. If a student is assigned to be a Hindu radical in India, 1945, he or she will be inclined to criticize the literature of the Islamic nationalism. A student will look for weaknesses of evidence or argument.

A key point: Students should not wait until the game phase begins to do the reading. Reacting games unfold swiftly and often shift focus. Students must possess advance knowledge to be prepared and should commence reading even before the first setup phase class.

Making Arguments

Students need not believe what they argue, but they must make their cases persuasively. To argue effectively, students should keep several things in mind:

1) Students must **build their arguments on solid facts**; lazy students may merely articulate "their" ideas as outlined on their "role sheets". But even well-expressed opinions, if unsupported by fact, will not persuade. Students must conduct research, often of a historical character, to support their opinions. [Note: everything that occurred in history prior to the beginning of the game can be cited in a student's speeches and papers; but one cannot cite events that occurred after the beginning of the game. For example, for the game on radical labor and woman suffrage in Greenwich Village in 1913, one cannot cite the Bolshevik victory in Russia in 1917.] Whether students will be obliged to footnote their "facts" depends on the instructor;

2) While advancing **an argument, students should anticipate and rebut the best argument of their likely critics**. For example, if one is a radical democrat in ancient Athens, it is not sufficient to show the merits of democracy; a student should also explain why the arguments of the anti-democrats are wrong. Often students will cite the actual words of other student-players, and then illuminate deficiencies of fact, logic, or argument.

3) Keep the audience firmly in mind; students must connect with their listeners and readers. A factual solid and irrefutable argument may not prevail if one's audience isn't paying attention.

Writing

The purpose of written work is to complement class presentations: students write in order to win the game. Usually this means that a student's writing will be an attempt to persuade people of his or her views.

Each game will have approximately two written assignments, although this may vary for some roles. The instructor will inform students of the total number of pages they are expected to complete for the game, and also what proportion of their grade is based on written work. (If there is no announcement, students may likely assume that 2/3 of their grade is based on their written work, 1/3 on oral presentations.)

Because the purpose of written work is to persuade other students, it should be posted on the online class discussion board, or distributed to the entire class through e-mail or by hard copy. Students must submit their work on time. A beautifully crafted defense of Socrates does him no good if he has already sipped the hemlock. Late work harms a student's team as well. The requirements of the game—particularly the mechanism for posting all papers on the web site—further necessitate timely submission of written work. The instructor will likely impose a penalty for written work that is late.

Students are largely free to choose whatever form of written expression they wish. The purpose of written work is to help students achieve their "victory objectives." A student may think it advantageous to write a legal indictment, a poem, a sermon, a newspaper article, a diary entry, or whatever else serves his or her purpose. A common form of expression will be an essay that advances one's position and rebuts the arguments of his or her opponents. Following this paper is an appendix with "writing advisories" for Reacting students. [Some faculty may not include these "writing advisories."]

Class Participation

Students' class participation complements their writing; both are tools they must use to the best of their ability to win the game. Students will sometimes speak as a member of a particular team, or faction; sometimes alone; and sometimes they will have an indeterminate role and have the freedom to write some of their own game objectives in response to what they have read and heard. But in most roles, students must sooner or later seek to persuade others so as to achieve their objectives and win the game.

There is one constraint on a student's oral performance: although students may refer to notes, reading aloud is unnecessary (the full and precise text of major presentations may be posted on a web site) and often dull; the instructor may forbid it entirely. It is nearly impossible to receive an "A" for classroom presentations that have been read aloud.

The instructor will inform students as to what portion of their course grade is based on their writing and class participation. Some instructors include a half grade bonus (B becomes B+) **in the class participation** component of the grade for those who win, that is, achieve their game objectives. The instructor will tell students at the outset whether the game includes a class participation bonus for winners.

Unless a student is "dead" or has somehow been silenced, students can participate freely in all oral discussions. Students whose roles make them responsible for running the class may determine who speaks and when. This may prove frustrating. As a means of ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to speak, the classroom may be provided with a podium or some other privileged space, at which anyone may stand. Anyone who approaches the podium asserts the right to give a speech, to pose questions, or to

address the class. If someone is already at the podium, students may take a place in line behind him or her.

ROLES: SHIFTS, SECRECY, AND ROLE-PLAYING CONFUSION

In life, most people are assigned multiple roles. People “perform” as students, parents, spouses, employees, voters, etc., without being fully conscious of their goals, or, more precisely, without understanding how one role may affect our performance of another. (One example: bosses may script a role that requires a total commitment to work and offers abundant rewards for a good performance; yet sometimes this role may be rejected because our friends or family demand a different performance.) No one knows for certain his or her own ultimate goals; sometimes, in the course of demanding circumstances, a person learns things about him or herself that the person does not anticipate.

For this reason, and for some practical ones as well, students should not assume that their initial, printed “game objectives” are “permanent.” Opinions change, as do objectives. The fates (or the Gamemaster) may alter students’ objectives, perhaps informing them so by e-mail. Sometimes students will be enjoined to secrecy. Again, as in life, students should never assume that their knowledge is complete or perfect.

Other Players: “In” Role or “Out” of It?

Reacting games often acquire considerable intensity. Sometimes debates continue in dining halls and dorm rooms. Sometimes factions will meet on weekends. Sometimes roommates find themselves on opposing sides. Students should remind themselves that they and their “opponents” are **performing roles** and **playing a game**. When another player criticizes a student’s speech or argument, he or she is not criticizing **the student** as a person; this player is criticizing the role and ideas that have been assigned to the student. Nevertheless, players will often identify to some extent with their roles; once someone attacks their roles, they may perceive it as personal.

One way to help reinforce the point that “it’s all a game” is to be sure to identify yourself by your game role (and name), and, when addressing others, to call them by their Game Name. Consider the difference between the following: “Your argument, Laura, is ridiculous” versus “Your argument, Mr. Oligarch, is ridiculous.”

In some games, one’s Game Name is explicit: A student may be assigned the role of Thrasybulus in ancient Athens, Thomas Cromwell in Reformation England, or Nehru in India. Often, however, students will be a “generic” member of a faction. In that case, the Gamemaster may assign them a Game Name or suggest that they provide one of their own. When students cannot remember someone’s Game Name, they can usually think of a generic appellation: “Athenian,” or “Citizen” (revolutionary France), or “Professor.” When students post papers on a website, they must use their Game Name; insofar as their written work is graded not by the Gamemaster but by the Instructor, students should put their real name in parenthesis on copies that are to be graded.

Those students who are assigned roles where they preside over sessions should distribute name cards with each student’s Game Name. And the presiders should remind students not to refer to other players as “Laura” or “Bob.” Student leaders should politely interject: “I assume, fellow Athenian, that you are referring to Red-Headed Oligarch,” or “I assume, Mr. Azad, that you are referring to Mr. Nehru.”

Students should also use their Game Names when they are in game mode out of class. Say, for example, that a student in the dining hall spots an indeterminate in the French Revolution game and wants to

persuade her to join the radical faction. That student might signal that she is in “game mode” by approaching the indeterminate in this way: “Hello, Citizen of France.”

Even when a student is talking to someone he or she knows well—perhaps even one’s roommate—the student should use Game Names whenever he or she is still in “game mode.” This repeatedly affirms that what transpires is not meant personally, and that one is only “playing a game.”

Students should never allow someone to confuse their game identity with their personal identity. If, for example, another player says: “Please vote with me on this issue. After all, I’m your friend / roommate / etc.,” the student should reply: “If we are in Ming China, you are not my roommate. You are a fellow academician and scholar.”

When a student makes a personal appeal—an appeal to the person one really is—he or she is not only violating the spirit of the game, but also unfairly transforming a game into something of a personal character. That is unwise and unfair. Again, the best reply is to insist on a clarification of identities. If the issue pertains to what is transpiring in a game, students should insist on being addressed by their Game Name; and refer to their fellow players by **their** Game Names. A fair appeal, outside of class, can be expressed as follows: “Citizen: please vote with me on this issue. The fate of Athens depends on it.” If the other player decides not to do so, then neither player will be likely to take it personally. Students should remember that what players say and do is part of their role, not an expression of their personal feelings. Remember, too, that bitter foes in one game will likely be staunch allies in the next.

Instructor versus Gamemaster

The instructor for this course has two somewhat different roles. On the one hand, he or she will grade a student’s oral and written work much like an instructor in other courses. During the introductory classes for each game, moreover, he or she will lecture or lead discussions in the conventional manner. But the instructor is also responsible for running games and advising students on matters of strategy and rhetoric. His or her main goal in running the games is to ensure, as best he or she can, that the game will be a fulfilling and historically credible experience. Thus, the instructor cannot disclose to a member of Faction A the strategy of someone in Faction B. Nor can he or she reveal some of the elements of game design that were hidden from the actual historical figures. The instructor is not being sneaky or duplicitous; he or she is enhancing the game—and a student’s experience. Part of the game experience is the unfolding of these elements.

So that students can distinguish between when the instructor is behaving in the conventional manner and when acting in proprietary fashion as Gamemaster, he or she may so identify him or herself. That is to say, when instructors identify themselves, in class or in e-mails as “Gamemaster,” they are functioning in that special role. When they identify themselves as “instructor,” they are acting as a “normal” teacher. If the instructor addresses the student by his or her Game Name (“Mr. De Lancey, I do not think that your speech about Thomas Paine is consistent with your goals.”), then the students know that the instructor is functioning as Gamemaster. If the instructor uses the student’s own name, he or she is probably functioning as Instructor. If students are not sure which hat the instructor is wearing, simply ask. Remember: An “Instructor” will be fully transparent; a Gamemaster must keep secrets from the student (and students should keep their secrets, if they disclose them to him or her, from OTHER factions).

DECORUM, LEADERSHIP AND TIME COMMITMENT

People are taught to be polite to and considerate of others. Such behavior is good and has been praised by moral philosophers (and parents) for millennia. A genial manner is also a wise rhetorical strategy: it helps win people over to one’s views; sarcasm, on the other hand, is dangerous because it often alienates

undecided listeners. Sometimes, however, one will be obliged to disagree with others and muster up all possible rhetorical power to refute them. If a person is obliged to defend Socrates, can he or she smilingly let stand an argument that digs his grave?

Those students who are assigned leadership roles, or who are elected to them, will generally have a heavier workload. They may organize after-class strategy sessions for their faction, cajole dilatory essayists, and take the lead in class debates. But to equalize the burden, the Instructor will try to avoid having the leaders in one game repeat as leaders in subsequent games.

If students have a special activity during part of the semester that will restrict their time, they should advise the instructor before he or she distributes the roles. A student might be given a “lighter” role for that month. Sometimes the major roles—the central figures in any game—are not explicitly defined as leadership roles. Often students with seemingly “minor” roles emerge as the critical figures in the game—and in history.

REACTING FELLOWS/PRECEPTORS

At some—but not most—colleges and universities, veteran students of Reacting serve as “preceptors.” In that event, preceptors will be assigned to work with a class. Preceptors are analogous to GMs. Their purpose is to provide suggestions and guidance: 1) on the structure and workings of each game; 2) on possible paper topics and writing strategies; 3) on approaches to oral presentation and rhetorical speaking more generally; 4) on how to make papers clearer and more persuasive; and 5) on group dynamics such as functioning as a leader, working within a team, coping with adversity, etc. Students should not hesitate to ask questions or raise problems with their Reacting Preceptor, who have no function in assessment or grading. Preceptors are a resource; students are not obliged to consult with them.

Preceptors will not work with factions, become involved in the dynamics of any game, reveal anything about one student’s work or plans to any other student, or proofread papers for errors. Preceptors work under the direction of the Instructor for the course. They do not supercede the Instructor. Students should not hesitate to consult with the Instructor, either by e-mail. Students should meet with their Instructor, or send him or her an e-mail query, at least once during the first two weeks of a game.