**Reacting IG Boilerplate 2018**

*HOW TO TEACH WITH “REACTING TO THE PAST”*

“Reacting to the Past” is a series of role-playing games that places students in moments of intellectual ferment and controversy. As students take on historical roles, they also assume the perspectives and victory objectives of those roles. Their task is to advance their roles’ ideas through persuasion—using formal speeches, position papers, informal discussions, negotiations, and even skullduggery—in order to win the game.

Each student has a game book that includes historical background, core texts (primary documents), and game rules and procedures. In addition to the game book, the instructor has digital files of the Instructor’s Guide (the document you’re currently reading), which includes a session-by-session guide to running the game; role sheets for the players; and handouts containing additional materials to be distributed to players during the game. Supplemental materials (additional readings, roles, and handouts) may be available online from the Reacting Consortium Library.

**1. Game Set-up: Preliminary Sessions**

The preliminary sessions, usually between one and three class periods, provide an introduction to the historical context and an overview of the game. Players read the historical background and selected core texts; the instructor guides players through the major points that they will need to understand in order to play the game well. Many instructor’s guides include suggestions for lectures, interactive activities, films, or suitable one-session “microgames” to spark engagement with the topic.

Encourage players to return to the historical background essay and core texts once the game has begun and they are in role. Game rules usually become increasingly important to them as the game unfolds. Remind them that players who have carefully read the materials and who know the rules of the game will invariably do better than those who rely on general impressions and uncertain recollections.

Instructors use the preliminary sessions to plan how they will distribute roles to their students. Some games include a questionnaire that asks students to indicate their talents and concerns in order to help instructors assign a role that best suits the individual. In all cases, the preliminary sessions offer time to observe students so you can assign roles that will best develop their critical thinking and academic skills.

**2. The Game: From Student to Player**

Most games begin with some sort of “liminal moment.” These are rituals that signal that the classroom has become a different place in which the students will be interacting in unusual, and delightful ways. The game book or instructor’s guide provide suggestions for each game. Regardless of your specific approach, it is your task to clearly announce when the game begins.

Players are now in role. Some are grouped together into factions with the task of advancing common goals and winning over those who do not yet have a specific agenda for the game, called the indeterminates. Each role sheet sets forth an individual strategy, ideas and texts to consider, relationships with other roles, as well as victory objectives.

In order for faction members to achieve their objectives, they will need the support of the indeterminates. They will never have the strength to prevail without allies. Consequently, collaboration and coalition-building are at the heart of every game.

Players should be reminded that their roles contain secrets that must remain confidential. These can be revealed in the debriefing.

Once the game begins, players preside over the sessions. Each game makes different provisions for some sort of “presiding officer” for each session. Redundancies are usually built in to the game to deal with absences. The presiding officer may act in a partisan fashion, speaking in support of particular interests. If players take this too far, remind them that they must allow for a vigorous exchange of ideas.

The challenges of achieving their victory objectives highly motivate many students even if the impact on their grades is insignificant. Some instructors grant a small number of points to the final grade for players who meet their victory objectives.

**3. From Instructor to Gamemaster**

Once the game begins, you become a gamemaster (GM) with the responsibility of keeping the game on track and running smoothly. You should act as an impartial source of information and advice and provide assessment and encouragement. Some games ask you to occasionally take on a small role as a master of ceremonies. Others may ask you to step in to a role as a gadfly or provocateur for a single session. When doing so, make it clear to the players that the role you are playing is temporary role; after the session ends, you will return to your usual, impartial self.

During regular game sessions, you may want to take a seat in the back or side of the room. Nevertheless, the GM observes proceedings carefully and often takes the following common actions:

* Pass notes to spur players to action or remind them of core texts they might cite
* Redirect proceedings that have gone off track
* Perform scheduled interventions, such as a news flash

Your GM work will also occur outside of the classroom. It is likely that students will seek your counsel about game rules, strategies they have invented, core texts they hope to understand more deeply, and speeches that they are preparing. It is also important to give timely feedback to their formal written assignments because these are often crucial to future game sessions.

**4. Exiting the Game: Debriefing**

Every RTTP game sets aside time for debriefing the experience of the role-play and comparing the results of the game to the historical record.

Instructors are often surprised by the level of students’ emotional engagement with the game. The debriefing gives players the opportunity to reveal their secrets, disclose skullduggery, put aside any in-game conflicts, and talk about the experience of playing their roles.

RTTP games are not reenactments of the past, instead they give students agency to determine intellectual debates; consequently, games may end with ahistorical outcomes. The debriefing is the moment to set the record straight and to examine historical causation and contingency.

**5. Assignments**

In general, RTTP games require several distinct but interrelated activities:

* **Reading:** This standard academic work is carried on purposefully in a Reacting game, since what students read is put to immediate use.
* **Research and Writing:** The exact writing requirements can be tailored to suit your learning objectives, but in most cases students will be writing to persuade others.
* **Public Speaking:** Expect most of your students to deliver at least one formal speech.
* **Strategizing:** Communication among students both in and outside of class is an essential feature of Reacting games.

**6. Grading**

RTTP games include formal as well as informal writing assignments as well as formal and informal speeches. Some games include quizzes on the historical background. Vigorous participation in the proceedings of each game session also serves as a basis for grading a student’s work.

**7. Schedule**

The Instructor’s Guide includes a number of sample schedules that help you to fit the game to a variety of class formats.

**8. Student Discomfort**

The challenges of public speaking or the difficulties of supporting unfamiliar or controversial positions can make students uncomfortable. It is therefore crucial to make your expectations clear from the beginning, both in the syllabus and in preparatory sessions. Describe the ways in which students may become emotionally invested in their positions, emphasize the importance of openness and civility, and explain the intellectual value of role-immersion pedagogy, so that students appreciate the rationale behind the Reacting method. Encourage students to talk with you if they become uncomfortable. In the vast majority of cases, you will be able to talk them through their discomfort.

The sense of being immersed in a role may be particularly challenging to students charged with promoting worldviews that are antithetical to their own beliefs. If this causes discomfort, remind them that they are playing roles in order to understand the values and motivations that informed significant intellectual conflicts.

Establish ground rules for games in which some students must promote especially controversial ideas: for instance, limiting the use of certain words or symbols, incorporating out-of-character “timeouts,” or asking students to complete a contract outlining expectations and procedures.

During the game sessions, it is important that all players note the differences between their roles and themselves as individuals. They should always assume, when spoken to by a fellow player—whether in class or out of class—that the person is speaking in role and expressing that role’s point of view. In the heat of in-class debates, you may need to redirect criticisms to roles rather than to fellow students. For example, if someone says, “Sally’s argument is ridiculous,” guide them to say, “Governor Winthrop’s argument is ridiculous.”

Think carefully about role assignments. While Reacting generally works well when students commit themselves to a different worldview, some students may have serious and sincere objections to espousing certain ideas. Many games include roles for “journalists” or “historians” who report on debates more than they participate in them; these can be useful positions for students who are unable to take a particular position. Assigning roles with sensitivity can prevent problems from arising mid-game.

The debriefing session provides a valuable forum for discussing students’ discomfort and exploring the differences between their characters and themselves.

**9. Modifications**

This game has been written to provide balance, pacing, and engagement. However, once you are familiar with the workings of the game, feel free to modify it as you see fit (additional readings, altered written assignments, new roles, etc.). It’s your game now.

**10. *Minds on Fire***

# For more insight into Reacting pedagogy, consult Mark Carnes, *Minds on Fire*: *How Role-Immersion Games Transform College* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).