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TEACHING

# How an Idiosyncratic Role-Playing Game Became a Popular Teaching Tool

By *Kristen Doerer* | SEPTEMBER 22, 2019

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Mark Abramson for the Chronicle

Instructors from around the United States and abroad participate in an annual faculty institute in New York City to introduce them to the role-playing game *Reacting to the Past*. Here they engage in a version that brings to life the women's-suffrage movement in Greenwich Village in 1913. Later they can take what they learned back to their own classrooms.

When Gretchen Galbraith stopped by her department chair's office a few years ago to let him know she was thinking about trying a role-playing game in her history class, she had barely mentioned *Reacting to the Past* before he made his derision clear.

"Yeah," she recalled him saying, "that gamification."

Galbraith kept quiet about her interest in the game. But she indulged her curiosity: She tried it out at a conference and eventually brought a game about the French Revolution back to her class at Grand Valley State University, in Michigan.

Still, she kept mum about the experience, not wanting to face the skepticism of her colleagues. But word spread on the campus about how her students were eagerly reading primary texts, taking intellectual risks, and, in some cases, emerging as outspoken leaders. A colleague approached Galbraith to tell her that a student had raved about playing the game. "Could you tell me what's going on in your class?," she recalled the colleague asking.

The experience of Galbraith, who has since become dean of arts and sciences at the State University of New York College at Potsdam, mirrors a broader pattern in the adoption of *Reacting to the Past*. It is an unusual pedagogical approach that assigns students to play characters in elaborate games that are based on pivotal moments and ideas in history. Students read classic texts and then marshal complex arguments in an effort to win the game.

The approach has evolved from an innovative experiment that was devised by Mark C. Carnes, a professor of history at Barnard College, for use in his own class. Now it has a consortium of faculty supporters nationwide to guide its development, and it is the subject of two annual conferences that draw more than 300 professors from a range of disciplines. The games are now thought to be a presence on more than 500 college campuses, according to W.W. Norton, which publishes the game books that give the broad outlines of the period being inhabited, describe the characters and their objectives, and set out the rules.

As colleges seek to engage students, encourage faculty members to try new approaches to teaching, and bolster learning, the spread of *Reacting* offers a case study in how pedagogical innovation can occur and take root.

While online learning has spread in recent years with the help of for-profit corporations and venture capitalists, *Reacting* has made its way to hundreds of colleges with comparatively little investment — \$350,000 from the Teagle Foundation, \$180,000 from the Endeavor Foundation, and \$275,000 from the National Science Foundation — and with only one paid, full-time employee.

The role-playing game is an unlikely candidate for widespread uptake: It immerses students and requires substantial time and commitment from faculty members to implement. And the very things that make it distinctive and appealing — imagine students dressed in homemade costumes, yelling passionately, plotting against one another late into the evening — also make it an odd fit for the sometimes staid culture of academe.

So how has this idiosyncratic approach to teaching caught on?

**R**eacting has spread mainly through the evangelism of its supporters, many of whom believe it can help remedy some of higher education's most stubborn ills, like lagging retention, attendance, and graduation rates. While much of the growth in the number of colleges adopting the role-playing game has been through word of mouth, the Reacting Consortium has fostered the spread of the pedagogy through administrative support and college-specific plans to institutionalize the curriculum.

And, as it turns out, attending a workshop or conference and playing a game — like "Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence, 1945," or "Frederick Douglass, Slavery, and the Constitution: 1845," or "Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor, 1587" — appear to be the surest way to persuade a faculty member to adopt the approach.



Mark Abramson for The Chronicle

Faculty participants in the Reacting to the Past role-playing session on women's-rights activism in 1913-era Greenwich Village experience the sort of active learning that they are encouraged to promote in their teaching. It's

"It's only sort of living in it that can give you a sense of what it can be," said Jennifer Worth, the consortium's one full-time employee. It also explains why few Reacting supporters bother to spend much time explaining what it is and instead insist that those interested in learning more — including reporters — should be assigned a role and thrown into a microgame. Participating in the

best not to force the technique on anyone, though, said one professor who's used it. It's "an incredible pedagogy when it's done well with some training," he said, "but it's not a magic pill for a disengaged teacher or disengaged classroom."

game also gives instructors something else they rarely experience: the feeling of not being in control.

Instead, professors serve as "game masters," who give a brief opening

lecture to set up the historical context, assign roles, and then intervene only sparingly as the game unfolds. They can grade students' performances on speeches, debates, and pop quizzes. History sometimes goes off the rails — as lines are drawn differently, slavery in the U.S. comes to an end 20 years early — or games can end in impasses.

Experiencing the game as players also helps professors see it through their students' eyes. Jae Basilière, an assistant professor of women, gender, and sexuality studies at Grand Valley State, was already considering using Reacting in their class when they attended the consortium's Winter Institute, where they played "Modernism vs. Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-89." "I was a really bad student," Basilière said. "I didn't do any of my homework."

They valiantly tried to catch up. Still, the experience sold them on Reacting, showing them how easy it is to get wrapped up in the game. "I learned so much about French art," they explained, echoing a common sentiment.

Having to play a role made it more urgent to do the reading, and to do so with a goal in mind. The act of later writing about the experience, debating complicated topics from a point of view, and giving speeches cemented the knowledge. But they also acknowledged that it might not be for everyone. "I get that for a lot of people the unknown is really anxiety-producing," said Basilière.

But it's also common to get absorbed in the role-playing. Cayla Dwyer played four Reacting games, one in English and three in French, before she graduated from Grand Valley State, in 2018. Each time, her competitive side would take over, and she would find herself leaving classes thinking like her character. "I remember during the French Revolution game when I was Danton, and I was trying to run Lafayette out of town, and I

was staying up late at night to read old transcripts of the French National Assembly from 1791, trying to find dirt on him. And it was 2 in the morning," she said. Dwyer was in awe of her own dedication. "I'm staying up to read this, and I don't have to?"

Some professors have seen deepened learning as a result of such dedication.

David Eick, an associate professor of French literature at Grand Valley State, said most of his students rate at the intermediate level in oral proficiency. But they can, with support and effort, perform at advanced or superior levels during Reacting games. "Play is a powerful learning tool," he said.

If playing the game, along with student and faculty reviews, piques faculty members' interest, the community that has grown around Reacting gives them the confidence to try the game in their own classrooms. This larger community also helps connect and support professors who are otherwise siloed on individual campuses.

Long before Basilière tried Reacting, they had heard about it from another colleague and had sleuthed around Reacting's Faculty Lounge, a Facebook group for faculty members and administrators, to see what it was all about. The group, with more than 2,000 members, has doubled its size over the past five years. It is the go-to source for faculty members troubleshooting their game — often in real time. "I go to our Facebook Lounge and get an answer in minutes," Basilière said. Sometimes the answer is from the author of the game.

That type of support is indicative of the Reacting community. More than 300 professors in a range of disciplines, from history to astrophysics, attended Reacting's latest Summer Institute, held at Barnard. Where networking and job-hunting usually occur at conferences, the discussion at the Summer Institute often centers on the pedagogy and the games that faculty members are experimenting with or developing.

**M**any administrators want to encourage faculty members to try new things in their classrooms. Such efforts often involve sending professors to the campus center for teaching and learning or offering course releases to

develop new courses. When it comes to Reacting, administrators try to strike a balance between encouraging instructors to adopt it without forcing the pedagogy on them.

"Administrators have probably for two decades been told, you have to promote active learning, ... or you're just going to bore your students into dropping out," said Carnes, the Barnard professor who created Reacting. "And in the same sessions they're told ... the most dangerous thing you can do is try to lead the faculty from above. So they're scratching their heads: How do we promote active learning without leading from above?"

Sometimes administrators have to persuade one another first. Charlie McCormick had recently arrived at Schreiner University in 2009, becoming provost at the small, private institution in Texas, when he found himself in a room full of deans. They were discussing the perpetual issue of how to help students learn more and approach their studies with more passion.

McCormick mentioned the role-playing game he had seen in a history classroom when he was at Cabrini College. During the game "India on the Eve of Independence, 1945," a student became so furious about what was happening in a simulated meeting about the partition of India that she, in character, stormed out of the classroom.

The deans looked at him skeptically. "It sounds like a game, and they think in pejorative terms — edutainment instead of education," said McCormick, who is now president of Schreiner. "I don't think any were convinced until they went to the conference."

Serendipitously, the university happened to receive some unrestricted money, which it used to send a group of faculty members and deans to Reacting's Summer Institute. McCormick stayed back. "I thought it was better for me to stand on the sideline," he said, "and see what conclusion they would reach on their own." When they returned, the faculty members decided to use Reacting in Schreiner's first-year seminar beginning in the fall of 2011. Since then retention rates have increased 8 percentage points, though the president says he can't attribute that solely to Reacting.

Not everyone on the Schreiner faculty was excited about the prospect of teaching using the game. "We had a couple of faculty members who said, 'I can't teach that first-year seminar if that's what we're doing,' " McCormick said. So the university allowed them to teach other classes.

It's best not to force the pedagogy on anyone, says Peter Anderson, a professor of classics at Grand Valley State. He's seen people at his discipline's national conference leave panels on Reacting thinking that they'll bring it back to their campuses. "Reacting is an incredible pedagogy when it's done well with some training," he said, "but it's not a magic pill for a disengaged teacher or disengaged classroom."

Angela R. Linse, president of the POD Network, a group devoted to improving teaching and learning in higher education, says an administrator's role is to create an environment that fosters innovation. That's partly why the Reacting Consortium has developed a strategy to encourage colleges to adopt the games, with faculty members typically bringing them to their campuses, and administrators lending support.

Administrators, she said, "send a message whether it's OK to experiment or not." Relying on faculty reviews based solely on student ratings dissuades innovation, she argued. "It puts too much on whether students like it — we need to know that students learn."

Linse, who is executive director of the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence at Pennsylvania State University, said faculty members who are interested in bringing Reacting to their campuses should look to their teaching-and-learning centers for help. They can help professors adopt Reacting to the Past in their courses and communicate its educational effectiveness to administrators.

"I have no question that teaching-and-learning centers would be on board with this," she said. "It's the consummate example of having students engaged in their own learning."

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1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037

