

“I had to double check my thoughts”: How the Reacting to the Past Methodology Impacts First-Year College Student Engagement, Retention, and Historical Thinking

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REACTING TO THE PAST (RTTP) is an innovative history pedagogy adopted by colleges and universities nationwide, in many cases as part of programming for first-year students.¹ Featured in articles published in higher education periodicals such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Change*, Reacting is a pedagogical method that is widely known both inside and outside the historical profession. This embrace of RTTP by college and university history departments and administrators does not come in a vacuum. For universities nationwide, the issues of student engagement, retention, and graduation loom large in public discussions in the media and in state legislatures.

This was certainly the case at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), a Midwestern public comprehensive university, where Reacting was implemented as part of an institutional first-year student retention initiative. After *The New York Times* pointed out the low graduation rate at our institution in 2009,² EMU's then-Provost, Jack Kay, mobilized the resources of the university's Academic Affairs Division to address the issue, beginning with the freshman

year experience. Responding to this call, EMU's Department of History and Philosophy developed a series of Reacting to the Past seminars for first-year students, drawing on the work of Professor Mark Carnes at Barnard College, Columbia University.

Carnes has argued that the Reacting curriculum produces an increase in student intellectual and social engagement that leads to greater integration in college life, and to an increase in student retention.³ Previous studies of Reacting to the Past have focused on how the Reacting curriculum impacts students' worldview, and how it may lead to higher engagement both inside and outside of the classroom.⁴ A white paper produced by an RTTP team for the Teagle Foundation summarized the evaluation data on RTTP as follows:

Assessment confirms that students in a variety of institutions are becoming more engaged in classroom discussions, more willing to work in teams, and are demonstrating improvement skills in rhetorical presentation, critical thinking, and analysis. They also develop higher levels of empathy and a greater understanding of contingency in human history and thus the role of individual action and engagement.⁵

While the results of Reacting are impressive on student self-confidence and expression, previous studies have not focused on RTTP's implementation in the first-year history classroom. This study focuses on students' experiences in the RTTP history classroom, on how the course's unique structure impacted student engagement (positively and negatively), and on RTTP's impact on students' ability to think historically. The study concludes with an examination of RTTP's retention outcomes at one institution, with suggestions for future implementation and research.

Reacting to the Past Methodology

Reacting to the Past is a methodology of teaching history that emphasizes active learning and student engagement. In many ways, RTTP is a form of a "flipped classroom," in which students read and prepare ahead of class to engage in activities, with less focus on lecture and whole-class discussion.⁶ Physicist Eric Mazur pioneered this method, requiring his students to do the reading ahead of class, then using class time to work on key problems.⁷ While the professor gives some historical background and sets the

ground-rules of the game, many course sessions of a Reacting class are run entirely by students.

However, RTTP goes beyond most flipped classrooms, giving over much more control of the class to students themselves. Once the background of the “game” is explained, a majority of class time is driven and directed by students, working in their factions—speaking, plotting, writing, conferring, and negotiating with their fellow students. Carnes, the founder of the methodology, stresses that both in-class and out-of-class student engagement are boosted by the method, as students need to meet and work outside of class to succeed in their classroom goals. Before each game begins, a quiz is administered to make sure that students know the basic information needed to start the game, such as key definitions and concepts.

Thus, a Reacting to the Past classroom does not look like a “normal” freshman lecture course, as students and their speeches form the core of the classroom experience. The faculty member chooses the game that will be played, and assigns roles to the students in the class based on the game’s requirements. These might be actual historical figures (e.g., Pericles, Gandhi) or they may be composites of types of people (e.g., a “rich athlete” in Ancient Athens or a merchant in Colonial New England). A number of characters are grouped together in a faction, who must work together to “win” the game. A number of players are “indeterminates,” whose votes are needed to put together a winning coalition for the game. The speeches and behind-the-scenes plots to bring the indeterminates into your coalition provide the margin of victory for the game, and Carnes believes that students need to be rewarded for their victory with a bonus to their grade.

In our Reacting to the Past class designed for first-year students, for example, two complete games were played—one set in Ancient Greece, the other in Puritan New England. The first game addressed the restoration of democracy to Athens, as students deliberated over the fate of the Thirty Tyrants who ruled the city backed by Spartan military power. In the second game, Anne Hutchinson’s religious beliefs are on trial before the Massachusetts General Court, while newcomers to the colony attempt to gain entry into the Puritan church through conversion narratives. This course was entirely based on the Reacting game—other courses use Reacting as one

exercise embedded in a more traditional course, often serving as a culminating activity for the term.

Engagement in the Reacting Classroom

To understand the impact of RTTP on first-year students, this study used an online survey, focus groups, and an analysis of RTTP student retention. In a survey of the students in the class, conducted electronically, they were asked about what motivated them and what discouraged them from the class and its methodology. Similar questions were asked in the focus group, with an emphasis on what factors engaged the students and which factors did not. Finally, EMU's Office of Institutional Research and Information Management compared retention rates of students from our cohort of RTTP first-year seminars to those of other first-year students, as well as to a group of students matched to the RTTP students by GPA and ACT scores.

Structure: More Student Control and Participation

Reacting class sessions have a unique structure, in which students preside over many class activities, such as debates and votes. The professor is brought "off stage" to be a coach, helping individuals and factions craft arguments and understand their roles. First-year students responded well to this innovation, contrasting it to their rigid high school classes and impersonal college lecture experiences. One student told the focus group, "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."

The structure of the class, with the professor and others in the class as a support, created a classroom atmosphere that fostered participation by students who reported that otherwise they might be reluctant: "Participation was extremely easy because the atmosphere was so relaxed. Speaking up you did not feel like you were being judged. In other classes, kids do not ask a question because it might be a dumb question. Since you are playing another person, you feel freer to ask a question." Another student connected the class atmosphere and lack of focus on tests and grades to greater

participation: “the atmosphere was laid back and not stressful. You were not always constantly worried about your grade. Your grade did not get in the way of doing good in the class.”

The majority of students in RTTP classes report being far more engaged than in their high school and their other freshman-level classes. From early in the term, they are assigned a role, and take up the challenge of debating, arguing, and making deals with their fellow classmates in character. While a few students found this atmosphere problematic, the vast majority noted that the environment and student-directedness of the classroom raised their own participation level. One of the students noted, “The entirety of this class is engaging. You must really try and jump into your character in order for this class to really shine.”⁸ Being part of a faction helped motivate students to work harder. As one student noted, “The aspects of this class that engages me the most are the aspects of teamwork and communication enhancement.”

Most students reported that they had not experienced anything like RTTP in their high school coursework. One wrote, “This class is all about interaction with how things were handled in the past. My high school classes were all textbook and nearly no peer to peer interaction.” While some K-12 teachers have used simulations in their courses, use of the methodology was never widespread, and the methodology of simulation would seem out of place in high schools currently dominated by concerns about testing and test-measured achievement. Much high school instruction is still centered on the teacher, in terms of either lecture or leading a discussion. As one of the students wrote, “This class acts out historical events whereas high school you just listen to a teacher.”

The majority of students also noted that RTTP classes were more engaging than their other first-year college courses. Though a few students preferred traditional class structure, others pointed out differences in their level of engagement in RTTP. One wrote, “Other classes are boring because they are ‘lecture’ style classes. All I could do in there was day-dream and take notes.” Other students pointed to the student-driven nature of the RTTP classroom. One stated, “the class relied heavily on participation to function. The students truly lead the course.” This sense of student leadership in the class motivated some students to step forward into difficult roles, or as leaders of their faction.

Students noted that the Reacting class was different because it was smaller and more interactive. One wrote, “I feel accepted and my answers are not frowned upon.” However, students also noted discomfort about the class. One wrote, “Well I am a quiet person by nature—this class made me reach beyond that boundary. That is something I did not like.” While the atmosphere of the class helped students move out of their comfort zones, some students with a fear of public speaking found that the demands of the class—public speaking and debate—was a barrier for their participation.

Engagement: Students’ Varying Reaction to the Methodology

The central idea of RTTP is that students will be motivated by the desire to “win” the classroom game, and this will lead to higher student engagement. This was true of some students at EMU, where some were immediately swept up in the task. One student stated, “It is like a debate class. You give your speech, you answer question, but these go towards a goal—a victory goal. You want to do something through that speech—you want to get into the church, you were excited to be heard to bring people over to your side. It was kind of a victory, it was also just fun.” More students reported that winning was only part of the experience, and did not connect victory to their own performance in class. One said, “I didn’t think that winning would affect my grade.” Another student questioned whether the games were tilted in favor of a faction by design, “I think the games are set up so that you already know who is going to win.” Students overall viewed participation as key to their own grade, with winning as only a small “extra credit.”

Students told us that being part of a faction group did motivate them to attend and participate, so as not to let down their fellow students. One noted that attendance could cost a faction if a key vote came on the day a student chose not to attend: “When you are in a faction, numbers count. If someone is not there, you may lose what you want to do.” Another student added that not only attendance, but involvement was required: “What motivated me was that my factions depended on me. If you did not participate, you could cost your whole faction.”

Like all group work, however, this team dynamic could lead to de-motivational “free rider” problems, in which students could take

advantage of the hard work of their fellow students, demoralizing those in the class doing the work. One student reported, “There is an opportunity to skate by. There should have been a consequence for giving a speech and making an error.” Another added that “There were other classmates not doing the work and getting about the same grade I did.” A third student asked for grade penalties for those students not living up to their faction’s expectations: “My partner did not come often, and he had no idea what his role was. I think if people are blatantly going the opposite, somebody should get markdown, because it would help them be more responsible.” The lack of visible consequences that would come to bear on the free riders bothered freshman students in the RTTP classroom, who expected to see students doing little punished publicly.

Connections (or not) to Other Classes

Students who could make a connection between what happened in the Reacting class and their other courses in the first semester of college reported that these experiences reinforced each other, and strengthened performance in both courses. One student reported that the group work and presentation aspects of the class were also found in her introduction to women’s and gender studies course. Several students taking an introductory philosophy class suggested that the two classes be linked, as the Athens game tied to the ancient Greek unit in philosophy. Another student connected the class to a public speaking course requirement, telling us, “In another class, I need to give a speech in my other class at least twice a month. [This class] made it easier for me.” This ability of RTTP to successfully pair with other classes has real potential for helping students make a successful transition to college.

For a small minority of students, RTTP seemed completely disconnected from what they were doing in other classes, with negative results. Some students did not find that the Reacting pedagogy motivated them, and self-reported that their learning and participation were higher in classes that are more conventional. One student told the focus group, “I am really active in other classes. I talked a lot.” Other students reported that the class did not lead them to engage much with the readings. One stated, “I did not touch the books. I went off what I learned in high school and what I had

read [in the past].” When RTTP classes are seen as too different from other college coursework, some students will interpret this as a reason to ignore or downplay the importance of the class, with disastrous results for their performance in the class.

Reacting and Historical Thinking

Leading history educator Sam Wineburg has identified “historical thinking” as among the most difficult skills to impart to students, even top students, in the history classroom. The skill of being able to reconstruct a past culture and thought system, and understand that it is different from present ideas, eludes most students throughout their education. The RTTP pedagogy offers students a chance to think through the differences between present and past thought styles, as the game forces students to relinquish arguments that would be made outside the historical period in which the game is set.

Students reported multiple consequences of taking on a historical role in the RTTP game. As part of the experience of the game, students learn about their faction or their individual indeterminate “character” and need to craft arguments in the words and ideas that this individual would be familiar with. The professor stops the game if anachronisms are introduced, or if the game is taking a direction that was historically impossible.

This feature of the game had a number of impacts noted by students. One stated that this aspect made the game more difficult: “I think by having us become some of the people at the time, we did learn more than this happened here, this happened here. You learned about the time period and the beliefs. It helps you relate a little more now to then. There were so many points that people wanted to bring in that had not occurred yet, so we could not use them.”

Students reported that this situation of playing a role forced them to look more deeply at what they would argue: “I had to double check my thoughts—are they my thoughts or my character thoughts?” Another student noted, “Within your character, you will be asked questions, and if you answer wrong, no one else will know it. It gives you an option to go inside yourself and decide that this is the way you should answer the question.” When asked what types of students would do well in a RTTP class, one student said, “Someone who can come into a situation, put aside their own

beliefs, and take on new beliefs, just for the class, and go off beliefs that are not theirs.”

Not all students were able to make this historical “leap of faith” for all topics. One student found the Anne Hutchinson game raised issues that he did not want to deal with: “I have my own set of beliefs, and I could not take the second game seriously at all, because religion is such a touchy subject for me.” Another student noted that a range of students might struggle with the issues raised in the Hutchinson game: “Religion is something that is hard for everybody. When you have to put yourself in a different religion and fight for that, it makes it difficult.” Instructors in the RTTP classroom need to be aware of this potential for disengagement, and work with students to help them see that they can still participate in the game when their views differ from their characters’ views.

While not all students were able to make the leap to take on the role of another person fully, this aspect of Reacting promises significant cognitive gains for students that are difficult to attain otherwise. In a standard freshman survey class in history, students do not have experiences that force them to grapple with the issues of what it means to “think historically,” except perhaps in a writing assignment. Students in a Reacting class, however, grapple with these issues almost each class session, as they attempt to craft and respond to arguments made by people in another radically different time, place, and culture.

Retention Rates and Reacting to the Past

The enrollment numbers for Reacting students at our university (eight sections taught in 2012-2013) show a small but positive impact on both retention and on students going on to major in history or social studies. There were 129 students total who volunteered to take Reacting to the Past, whose average high school GPA was 3.15 and average ACT score was 22. A matched control group (equivalent GPA and ACT) was created by EMU’s Office of Institutional Research and Information Management to test the impact of the program on students’ academic trajectory.

The students who took Reacting to the Past in the first semester of freshman year were more likely than their matched peers to return to EMU sophomore year by 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 population for retention. Further, students in RTTP declared History majors at a higher rate than the general EMU population with 5% of the RTTP students majoring in History or Social Studies, compared to a rate of 1% of students overall. The gains in retention by RTTP are modest, about 5%, but mark it as a promising strategy for retention efforts.

As a retention strategy, then, the Reacting methodology fits with Vincent Tinto's theory of student retention and student engagement—that if students are able to find work inside the classroom and activities outside the classroom that connect with what motivates them, they will persist in college. George Kuh's National Survey of Student Engagement is also based on this premise—that colleges that are successful at building experiences that compel student effort will have higher retention rates, graduation rates, and learning outcomes.⁹ However, there are limits of what one class can do for retention rates. As Tinto writes, “It is regrettable that too many institutions still use the freshman seminar as a ‘vaccine’ to treat the threat of freshman attrition. By leaving the freshman seminar at the margins of institutional life, by treating its ideas as add-ons to the real business of the college, institutions implicitly assume that they can ‘cure’ attrition by ‘inoculating’ students with a dose of educational assistance and do so without changing the rest of the curriculum and the ways students experience that curriculum.” While there are many positive impacts to RTTP, if it is deployed alone as a retention strategy, it may not yield the expected benefits than it would if combined and integrated with other efforts to build student academic engagement.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Classes and Research on RTTP

The vast majority of students found the RTTP pedagogy far more engaging than their high school coursework, and their first-year college classes. The student-directed structure of the class gave students a powerful sense of ownership in class, and motivated many to work harder than in traditional format classes. However, while “Reacting to the Past” is a powerful and positive experience

for those students attracted to its methodology and for those who found connection between their Reacting class and other coursework, some students failed to engage with its non-traditional methods and reported lower performance than in their more conventional classes. The strength of the Reacting curriculum—forcing students to recognize the unfamiliar terrain of the past, and the different ways in which individuals thought in previous times and distant cultures—can also lead students to become disengaged from the class when this process becomes too difficult.

Thus, the unique intellectual strengths of RTTP, building an engaging non-traditional classroom and successfully making history “unnatural” (as Sam Wineburg puts it), is its weakness as a retention strategy. RTTP is able to take students out of the present, and draw them into past debates in a way that truly challenges them to think historically and to devise arguments and debates based on that thinking. But as a retention strategy for first-year students, Reacting’s challenges can leave some students—particularly those less able to make connections to the material—disengaged, more so than they report in their conventional classes.

While RTTP has been implemented at many campuses nationwide, the in-depth evaluation of it as a methodology is still at a beginning stage. First, while it is clear that RTTP increases student engagement, both inside and outside the classroom, it would be important to know for what types of students it is most and least effective. This would help academic advisors and others steer to the RTTP curriculum the students who are going to benefit most from it, and dissuade students least likely to find success from the classes. Second, it would be valuable to see more examples of RTTP classes tied to other coursework (such as Freshman Interest Groups), as students who were able to make connections between RTTP and other classes reported higher engagement and greater learning gains in both classes. Finally, more effort should be made to understand the impact of RTTP on historical knowledge and historical thinking—key aspects of the history discipline.

Notes

1. The RTTP website lists thirty-nine colleges and universities as members of the RTTP consortium, which implies a higher level of commitment than simply offering courses that use Reacting pedagogy, but includes hosting regional conferences or service on the RTTP advisory board.
2. David Leonhardt, "Colleges Are Failing in Graduation Rates," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2009, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/business/economy/09leonhardt.html>>.
3. Mark Carnes, "Inciting Speech," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 37, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 6-11.
4. Mark Higbee, "How RTTP Games 'Made Me Want to Come to Class and Learn': An Assessment of the Reacting Pedagogy at EMU, 2007-2008," *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at EMU* 2, no. 1 (2008), <<http://commons.emich.edu/sotl/vol2/iss1/4>>; 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," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101, no. 3 (August 2009): 605-620.
5. John Burney, Richard Gid Powers, and Mark Carnes, "Reacting to the Past: A New Approach to Student Engagement and to Enhancing General Education," White Paper Report submitted to the Teagle Foundation, 2010.
6. Daniel Berrett, "How 'Flipping' the Classroom Can Improve the Traditional Lecture," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 19, 2012.
7. Eric Mazur, "Farewell, Lecture?" *Science* 323, no. 5910 (January 2009): 50-51.
8. Student responses have not been edited—original wording is preserved.
9. Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993); George D. Kuh, Ty M. Cruce, Rick Shoup, Jillian Kinzie, and Robert M. Gonyea, "Unmasking the Effects of Student Engagement on First-Year College Grades and Persistence," *The Journal of Higher Education* 79, no. 5 (September/October 2008): 540-563.