Edited by C. Edward Watson & Thomas Chase Hagood

PLAYING TO LEARN WITH REACTING TO THE PAST

Research on High Impact, Active Learning Practices

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C. Edward Watson • Thomas Chase Hagood
Editors

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Foreword

Being There

Mark C. Carnes, Barnard College, Columbia University

Students come to class. Nearly every student. Nearly every class. Some instructors report perfect attendance—for an entire semester. Many tell astounding tales of students' insistence on coming to class:

- When a freak snowstorm shut down the University of Texas at Austin, Julie Casey's students were dismayed: "Seriously, this is the one time I'm upset about a snow day," a junior posted on the class's Facebook page. Within an hour students arranged to hold class at an off-campus conference center.
- When Dordt College's Historian Paul Fessler announced that the semester would end before his class had completed all phases of the French revolution game, his students begged him to schedule additional classes. He agreed, but his students couldn't find a mutually acceptable time. When they finally came up with a free-time slot, Fessler blanched. For the final 2 weeks of class, every student showed up for the additional sessions at 7:30 am!
- Pat Coby, then chair of political science at Smith College, learned that one of his students had been hospitalized that morning for a collapsed lung. He was boggled when she showed up that afternoon to give a speech for *Henry VIII and the Reformation Parliament* game. (When I related this story at a faculty workshop, a provost declared that he did

not believe it. I reported his skepticism to Coby, who forwarded a video of that class. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUqSnPHQoUQ.) The student with the collapsed lung—identified as the Bishop of Colchester—can be heard coughing.

- In December 2016, Joe Sramek, a historian at Southern Illinois University, reported that when his class was playing *Defining a Nation: The Indian Subcontinent on the Eve of Independence, 1945*, the student "leading" the Communist Party of India was on the verge of pulling off a Maoist-style takeover of several provinces. He asked Sramek if he could "attend" class via Skype: His wife was about to go into labor. Sramek said no. The following day, the "Maoist" was absent, but one of his allies was texting feverishly. "What are you doing?" Sramek asked. "I'm communicating with my leader," she said. Sramek relented, and within minutes, the "Maoist" was delivering a speech to the class—from the delivery room.

These stories are among many told by college instructors who use Reacting to the Past, where students play complex in-class games, set in the past, their roles informed by classic texts. Students run the games; the instructor, after a two-session "setup" phase, serves as the game master, providing behind-the-scenes advice and encouragement and grading papers and oral presentations. Reacting games are taught in general education courses as well as courses ranging from classics, history, and political science to philosophy, religion, science, communications, and first-year English. During the past decade, Reacting has spread to over 350 colleges and universities, and nearly everywhere, Reacting instructors compile a cache of strange stories about students who will do nearly anything to come to class.

Sceptics dismiss such accounts as anecdotal. Others discount the importance of attendance: The fact that students are sitting in a classroom does not mean they are learning. This generalized skepticism about attendance, widely shared by faculty and students, is supported by considerable research: Many studies show a weak link between classroom attendance and learning.

Much of this research has focused on mandatory attendance policies. Multiple studies have shown that students who attend under duress do not learn much (Hyde and Flournoy 1986; St. Clair 1999). But what about the contrary case—students who brave a blizzard to come to class or who fight to make it to class while struggling to draw a breath of air? No one has researched this phenomenon because few researchers, until recently, could

imagine such a scenario. For that matter, course surveys seldom make any attempt to ascertain the strength of student motivation. Has any standard evaluation ever posed questions such as:

- Do you look forward to coming to class?
- How valuable is the classroom experience?
- Which do you prefer: (a) going to parties, (b) talking with friends, (c) playing video games or sports, or (d) coming to class?

Many students would snicker at such questions, and many professors would be outraged by the suggestion that instructors were in some way responsible for motivating students. Instructors are supposed to teach the material; students are supposed to come to class and be prepared to learn. If students lack the motivation to do so, they don't belong in college, or so many educators insist.

Most assessment instruments therefore focus on whether instructors "teach the material." To this end, the most common means of assessment is the multiple-choice test, administered at the end of a chapter or the course itself. Nowadays, many such tests are offered online and graded instantly. Instructors—teaching to the test—rely on the lecture, which is well-adapted to conveying masses of information quickly. Mindful that fact-filled lectures benumb the minds of students, instructors hope that students will remember the material long enough to pass the test. Few instructors imagine that students will long retain what they have "learned" in this way.

Even sophisticated assessment tends to reinforce traditional pedagogy. Recently, researchers with the Wabash National Study, after examining thousands of surveys, found that students who experienced academic gains gave their instructors high marks for using class time effectively, for being well-organized, and for explaining concepts clearly; conversely, students who experienced no such gains were more likely to report that their instructors had been disorganized, unclear, and ineffective in management of class time. The authors concluded that the "mundane practice of clear and organized instruction" had a greater impact on student learning than ostensibly "high-impact" practices such as learning communities, internships, and active learning. The authors advised instructors to "hone" their craft: begin class on time, organize lectures carefully, and emphasize clarity and comprehension (Blaich et al. 2016, p. 8).

This advice is good. Lecturers would do well to take these principles to heart. And yet, this conclusion is fundamentally flawed. Consider the

experience of anthropologist Rebekah Nathan, who spent a year pretending to be a first-year student at a large state university. Nathan faithfully attended an "excellent" lecture class in which "the professor presented what I considered to be interesting, beautifully organized, and up-to-date lecture material" (Nathan 2005, p. 119). But Nathan counted heads and compared them to the official roster. Half the students were absent from every class.

According to the standards of the Wabash Study, Nathan's instructor had been exemplary; yet, half of her students derived no benefit from that skill and diligence. This dilemma encapsulates the central paradox of higher education during the past half century. On the one hand, the learning platform for undergraduate education has been significantly broadened and strengthened. Libraries, laboratories, and teaching centers have been designed and staffed in accordance with the highest standards of professionals in those fields. Instructors have undergone exhaustive training and hiring committees have plucked the best from among vast pools of qualified applicants. Curricula and syllabi have been endlessly scrutinized, reviewed, and revised. Nearly all aspects of undergraduate education have undergone continuous assessment and improvement.

But if the learning platform has improved, it has largely failed to stimulate learning. For decades, nearly half of those admitted to college fail to earn a degree.[1] Dozens of major studies have reported high levels of disengagement, poor levels of effort, and paltry gains in learning. Probably the fairest assessment was offered by Derek Bok, former president of Harvard and one of the staunchest defenders of higher education. After surveying hundreds of studies in scores of disciplines, he insisted that critics were wrong to say that students don't learn anything in college—the problem is that students just don't learn very much. He put it delicately. Today's colleges "underachieve" (Bok 2006).

Bok explained that instructors and administrators persisted in relying on pedagogical modes—lectures and unstructured seminars—that research has proven to be inadequate. "What are the prospects for turning colleges into effective learning organizations?" he asked, and then offered a blunt reply: "Not good, unfortunately" (p. 323). Instructors were wedded to woefully

[1] In 2010, President Barack Obama, while noting that much had been done to improve access to college, bemoaned the fact that one-third of the nation's college students failed to earn a degree. (The actual figure was closer to one-half.)

deficient teaching traditions and administrators were powerless to induce change (p. 323).

During the past decade, many critics of higher education have nevertheless called for "pedagogical innovation." Usually, they equate this with online learning, which has promised to revolutionize higher education and has attracted hundreds of millions of dollars of investment capital. But results have fallen far short of expectations. If traditional pedagogies have been deficient, online alternatives have so far proven little better. There is no reason to believe that new pedagogical modes are necessarily better ones.

* * *

Reacting students come to class; often they exhibit astonishing levels of engagement. Instructors don't need sophisticated assessment metrics to make this determination: They've stood in the front of half-empty classrooms and watched helplessly as students' eyes glaze over and then close, one by one, as if a fog had descended upon a cityscape at nighttime. Instructors know when students are "there" and when they've tuned out. And instructors have observed Reacting classes where students aren't in their seats—not due to absence, but because they're standing up and shouting.

Such observations prove little if anything. Serious assessment requires research. When Steven Stroessner, a Columbia psychologist, received a contract from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) to assess the impact of Reacting at four separate colleges, he recognized that a radically new pedagogy required a different type of assessment. After running focus groups at each school, he was struck by the Reacting students' strong emotional response to the pedagogy. He designed a long questionnaire to be administered at both the beginning and end of the semester, whose questions were drawn from a cluster of standard psychological assessment tools. In addition to the questionnaire, he included special tests of students' speaking and writing skills. He then trained researchers at each college to administer the tests to students in Reacting and in traditional first-year seminars.[2]

[2] To test speaking skills, test subjects met individually with a researcher, who gave them a list of talking points about a familiar issue, such as gun control, and asked them to prepare a brief speech on the issue. After a few minutes of preparation, students then delivered the speech, which was tape-recorded. The tape-recorded speeches were then blindly scoured according to a standard speaking rubric.

It took several years to compile enough data to generate statistically significant results and to ensure that the groups were similar enough to justify comparison. Eventually, he learned that Reacting students, who spent nearly all of class time speaking and debating, improved far more in rhetorical skills than students in traditional classes. (With respect to writing, Reacting students improved as much as [but no better than] students in standard seminars.)

The results to the psychology questionnaires were more complicated. Most of the clusters showed no change during the semester among any of the students. This was to be expected: A single course rarely leaves an imprint on a student's psyche.

But then came the shocker. As the number of completed tests increased to the point where they generated statistical significance, some puzzling results emerged. At the end of the semester, Reacting students were more likely to indicate that closing scenes of movies moved them and they liked to watch people open presents. No such shift appeared in the surveys of students in the traditional classes. By inhabiting various roles during the semester, the Reacting students had become more empathetic (Stroessner et al. 2009, p. 611).[3]

Stroessner and colleagues noticed a similar shift in several other psychological categories. From an educational perspective, the most important concerned the extent to which students agreed with standard statements on the malleability of the self, such as "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Reacting students, having assumed multiple roles and identities during the semester, were more likely to agree that people could change in fundamental ways; the opinions on such matters of students in the traditional seminars underwent no change. Psychologists have found this belief in the malleability of the self to be one of the strongest psychological elements conducive to educational growth (see Dweck 2000).

As Stroessner and colleagues' study was making its way through the multiple reviews of the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, James Sloat, director of assessment of Washington and Jefferson College, embarked on a major research project comparing his institution's seven Reacting First-Year Forum classes with its twenty-one traditional (thematic) First-Year

[3] The questions relating to empathy were drawn from psychologist Albert Mehrabian's Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale, a standard measure for determining the empathy of potential nurses, social workers, and foster parents.

Forums. His team analyzed writing, critical thinking, and other reasoning skills of students in both types of classes based on a sampling of papers and essays at multiple points in the semester. At the end of the semester, Sloat's team also asked students and instructors to assess the courses. His study concluded that:

- Students gave Reacting sections a higher evaluation—even though they reported working harder in those sections.
- Faculty reported an increase in student learning and engagement in Reacting sections following the midterm—as compared to a slight decline in Thematic sections.
- Student test performance improved in the Reacting curriculum for both their best and worst students. Middling students also did a better job of integrating course materials when they were in the Reacting curriculum. Middling students, though, did fare generally better in the Thematic curriculum (Sloat 2007).

This last point is significant. It suggests that different students may respond to pedagogical innovation in different ways. Like the Stroessner study, the Washington and Jefferson study shifted emphasis from *what* teachers do to *how* students respond. This shift in frame of reference is crucial. Educators must do more to determine *what* motivates students to come to class, to take charge of their own learning, and to embrace the life of the mind.

As more institutions of higher education pursue pedagogical innovation and widen its definition to encompass active learning strategies within the classroom, they must also embrace innovation in assessment. The essays in this volume do much to advance this new perspective. They perform two related functions. They deepen our understanding of Reacting, arguably the most radical of the "high-impact" pedagogies; and they provide new approaches to the process of assessment itself.

To be sure, serious assessment is often expensive. The Stroessner, Beckerman, and Whittaker study (2009) and the Sloat study (2007) required researchers to tape-record and grade student speeches or essays, to administer long questionnaires, and to code and analyze masses of data. When asked to replicate such procedures, administrators may well balk at the expense and/or time commitment. Existing assessment tools endure partly because they are inexpensive and easy to implement.

The strategies outlined in this volume represent ingenious, and often inexpensive, approaches to innovative assessment. Many illuminate various facets of subtle issues of student motivation. Educators at even the most cash-strapped institutions will find it easy to apply these or similar modes of assessment at their own institutions, often at very little cost. But even if these strategies are beyond the reach of some college educators, they can instantly and almost effortlessly employ an even simpler mode of assessment. They can count heads in classrooms.

Because if students aren't in class, they aren't learning much. In higher education—and in life—being there matters.

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Acknowledgments

During the summer of 2015, we issued a call for chapter proposals seeking faculty wishing to further examine the impact of their applications of the Reacting to the Past pedagogy. In our call, we also encouraged multi-author approaches that coupled the expertise of faculty teaching with Reacting with that of educational researchers or assessment professionals. As a result, this book represents a collaborative effort of faculty and researchers from many different institutions and institution types. Most of the proposals we received were from faculty hopeful of beginning a research project they had been considering for some time. Faculty were notified in early fall to allow time for planning for a research study that most likely would occur during the spring semester 2016. Drafts of chapters were then delivered in July of that same year. We are grateful to this wonderful group of colleagues who spent nearly a year thinking about and studying their pedagogical practice and how it influences the learning and perceptions of their students.

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CHAPTER 1

Reacting to the Past: An Introduction to Its Scholarly Foundation

Thomas Chase Hagood, C. Edward Watson, and Brittany M. Williams

Since being introduced in first-year seminars at Barnard College, Reacting to the Past (RTTP) has offered instructors in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe a high-engagement, active learning alternative to traditional instruction in higher education. RTTP is a student-centered pedagogy that provides college students and faculty unique learning and teaching opportunities. At its core, RTTP is a game-based pedagogy examining some of the most conflicted moments in human history: from the fight to restore democracy in ancient Greece to the trial of Galileo, the struggles of the American and French revolutions, more modern concerns on the nature of Art in Paris circa 1890, the American social security act, the rise of a democratic South Africa, and the science of global climate change. Most of the games are currently with W.W. Norton press; others are published by the Reacting Consortium Press, an imprint of the University of North Carolina Press. Set in a liminal space of authentic historical struggle, students are given roles, read primary texts, conduct research, craft arguments, and engage their peers and the instructor in considering the big issues of

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a conflicted historical moment through argumentation, plots, and counter-plots as students (alone or within factions) strive to win the game (Carnes 2004).

Pioneered by historian and Barnard College professor, Mark C. Carnes, RTTP has currently been adopted by faculty at over 350 colleges and universities (see http://reacting.barnard.edu). RTTP offers faculty elegantly designed games complete with primary evidence and supporting materials to engage students in one-day to, more typically, multi-week experiences to inspire deep explorations of assigned characters' worldviews and perspectives. The pedagogy leverages students' innate desires to win, as well as research, composition, debate, and collaborative work among peers, to compel them to grapple with the contingencies of the past and the complexities of human agency. Reacting to the Past is not "re-enacting"; games can depart from the historical record as students' actions—papers, speeches, strategies—determine game outcomes. RTTP's purposeful and creative design assists faculty as they seek to promote student participation, critical reflection, and meaningful engagement with course content.

The unique structure of the Reacting Consortium and the level of faculty and administrative support throughout the United States, as well as the enthusiasm among the RTTP community, are worthy of brief note. Since initial dissemination of the pedagogy in 2001, a thriving community of faculty game authors and implementers gather annually at a Summer Faculty Institute at Barnard College in June followed by a Game Development Conference in July (hosts have included small colleges and research universities). Winter of 2017 saw the first ever national RTTP conference at the University of Georgia where grant-funded faculty teams representing universities and colleges from across the United States gathered to explore curricular revisions through implementation of RTTP at their home institutions.

From regional weekend conferences throughout the United States to campus faculty development workshops, teaching presentations at national organizations including the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, recent sessions at South by Southwest (SXSW.edu), online resources at http://reacting.barnard.edu, a YouTube channel (http://youtube.com/user/RTTPOfficialVideos), a lively but controlled-access Faculty Lounge on Facebook, and an informative Twitter account @ReactingTTPast, the RTTP national community is well connected and growing. With historic and ongoing support from entities like the Carnegie

Corporation of New York, Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, Spencer Foundation, National Science Foundation, Teagle Foundation, and Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education of the US Department of Education, RTTP has evolved from Carnes' nascent idea that this teaching method could set "minds on fire" to a national movement of faculty embracing an active learning pedagogy with results they can see and hear well beyond their grade books or teaching evaluations (Carnes 2014a).

The excitement and growing national interest in RTTP are at least partially facilitated by anecdotal narratives of successful faculty practice shared via conferences and communities; however, the RTTP concept is built upon an exemplary theoretical and scholarly foundation, and RTTP's efficacy in practice is being examined and confirmed through emerging empirical inquiry. This book represents a significant leap forward regarding the latter. In truth, RTTP is a pedagogy of deep engagement designed to maximize student learning and leverage what we know, broadly, about how people learn. A phrase that is most often applied to RTTP is *active learning*.

Active Learning

Active learning, as a general collection of pedagogical approaches, by its very name, suggests there are alternative strategies that might be termed passive or traditional learning. The key differentiator is one of cognitive processing. You can often "spot" active learning strategies in classrooms if students "are forced to think about, reflect on, grapple with, explain, synthesize, support, and/or defend aspects of the content of the course" (Bowen and Watson 2017, p. 121). In other words, active learning means that students are required to engage in cognitive processing, and the best active learning strategies are structured in a way so that all the students in a class are compelled to be a part of the learning process. Therefore, a key trait of impactful active learning strategies is that it is difficult for students to opt out of participation. Alternatively, passive or traditional instruction provides numerous avenues and opportunities for students to disengage. It is easy to imagine how students might disconnect from class during lectures, demonstrations, or videos. In those settings, there are no social requirements or overt expectations that students pay attention, work with the course content, or do little more than not be disruptive. The goal in passive settings is often for a student to simply catch the content via note-taking. While note-taking can be useful to help students pay attention in class,