LEARNING FROM THE H.I.P.: ENGAGEMENT THROUGH REACTING TO THE PAST

Megan Bylsma

Red Deer College

Implementing curriculum that includes all students, that celebrates individual learners' needs, that fosters student responsibility, and that teaches skills that transcend discipline-specific outcomes is possible with a pedagogy that embraces immersion learning. Reacting to the Past is a High Impact Practice (H.I.P.) approach that uses elaborate, flexible, experiential role-immersion scenarios; all set in the past, these immersion scenarios assign the students historical roles that utilize knowledge of classic texts to respond to historical situations. Igniting a student's desire to embrace learning is a challenge in a society where what passes for learning is either rote and unchallenging, or unimportant and task specific. When teaching is approached as a universally designed concept that challenges current and past pedagogical traditions learning is transformed for all. Reacting to the Past is a pedagogical approach that can inspire students with a passion for learning.

In 2014, Dr. John Burney, a university history professor, left a comment in the feedback section of a *Chronicle of Higher Learning* article; in it he said, "In every faculty workshop I have conducted in the last 15 years faculty have voiced the same complaints - students are disengaged, they won't take responsibility for their learning, we want them to be more active in the classroom." And he's not wrong. In every department, in nearly every post-secondary institution around the continent it's a common refrain. To make this issue even more pressing, Kelly Hogan, of the University of North Carolina, found that the very things instructors do in the classroom, those traditional pedagogical approaches, create a chasm of perceived and applied ability between the students who are white and affluent and those who are not those things (Supiano, 2018). Classes even with the most dynamic and engaging lecturing professors still have problems with students who are not actively engaged and students who are actively left out of the proceedings (Supiano, 2018). This is systemic across all disciplines in post-secondary (Cuban, 1997). But, what if there was a pedagogy that could change that? What if there was a way to approach hands-on learning through universal designed approaches, so students had a way to gain success and remember content? What if there was a way to engage students, make them responsible for their learning, get them active in the classroom, and reach learners who are at risk of being excluded by more traditional educational approaches?

A teaching and learning approach that includes all students, not only meets but celebrates individual learners' needs, and teaches essential life-skills is possible with a pedagogy that embraces immersion learning. Reacting to the Past, also known as 'RTTP' or 'Reacting,' is a pedagogy that uses elaborate, experiential role-immersion scenarios (Reacting to the Past Consortium, 2019). As Katie Clary (2019) explained:

> RTTP began in history classes, but the pedagogy has spread across disciplines to encompass multiple fields of study including science, math, sociology, philosophy, and more recently – public history. RTTP games represent an advantageous

opportunity for … educators because the instruction style places students and audiences inside history and allows them to grapple with the complex politics of cultural heritage. (p. 2)

It is important to note that Reacting is not an 're-enactment' of the historical situation, but rather a 'reacting' to the pressures and events of the time while using the logic and beliefs of their assigned historical figure to understand how and why historical situations played out. RTTP immersions and the impacts of them are described by the Reacting to the Past Consortium (2019) as follows:

Class sessions are run entirely by students; instructors advise and guide students and grade their oral and written work. … Reacting roles, unlike those in a play, do not have a fixed script and outcome, so 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.

In these immersion scenarios there are always objectives that each student is required to achieve as their character. The students who have the fullest understanding of the texts, their assigned character, and the relationships their character had with the other historical figures in the immersion are the ones most likely to achieve their goals. In Reacting to the Past knowledge really does equal power.

Each Reacting module goes through five levels of peer review and beta-testing before it is published which results in immersion scenarios that are well constructed and highly adaptable to the needs of the course and class. Each instructor can adjust a scenario to the requirements of their specific students and to overcome some of the inherent pitfalls of active learning approaches. For example, Clary (2019) stated that a "potential issue for implementation of Reacting to the Past is working with students who have difficulties with public speaking or engaging with material in the classroom" (p. 7). The solution is to create adaptations to the class through "technological integration" (Clary, 2019, p.7). Other methods of involving those who are unable or reluctant to engage with the debate/speech-based approach can include: group speeches, partner systems, and other modifications that can be added to scenarios with little impact on the overall outcomes or the students' abilities to achieve learning objectives. Learners whose first language is not English often have a difficult time in passive learning classes, as the predominant method of content delivery is oral, requiring a high level of auditory comprehension (Sanders, 2001). In a RTTP class, ESL students can collaborate with other students, and speak in ways that they would not usually – thus giving them the opportunity to recognize that they are academically important and intellectually relevant in a manner that lecture classes could never achieve. While students with recognizable differences in their abilities are often used as examples of the positive impacts created by using the Reacting learning approach, students who do not have an easily identifiable difference in ability and who find most classes accessible can also succeed and learn life skills from a RTTP class. This is because at the heart of a Reacting scenario is competitive, interactive, and collaborative fun. Higbee (2009), who has studied the impacts of using role-immersion and gaming in the classroom, found that students often have no personal experience with how enjoyable the demanding work of learning can be. Higbee (2009) explained the philosophy and outcomes of a Reacting class in this way:

One premise of Reacting is that if we promote that kind of rigorous academic pleasure – something that is intellectually engaging and socially interactive – among our

undergraduates, they will do and learn more. Research shows that "students retain material longer if they have acquired it through their own mental effort". (p. 53).

The one element that impacts all students in post-secondary classes is the institutionalized boredom of a passive learning approach. Simply put, boredom is bad for a student's interest in learning, and without interest there is very little learning (Gregory, 1886). Sparking the learner's interest and self-motivation by active learning that is pleasurable and experiential is the key difference between a Reacting classroom and other active learning approaches.

Lecture based classes, due to their passive nature, reward a very specific kind of student, but passive learning combined with active learning can transform curriculum into something that allows all learners to take responsibility and succeed (Supiano, 2018). Lecture based classes make it easy for students to divide their attention between the speaker and the pull of their to-do lists, electronics, or colleagues around them, and divided attention creates ineffective learning and causes a significant loss of personal power (Burgess, 2012). Reacting immersions are the kind of curriculum that blends both passive and active, with an emphasis on the highly active for the inclusion of all.

Eastern Michigan University's Mark Higbee, upon implementing Reacting curriculum as a standard first year pedagogy in his History classes completed a series of studies on the effectiveness of the method (Higbee, 2009). With EMU, Higbee created a pilot project of multiple sections of first year students who had a part-traditional, part-RTTP blend of classes with the same instructor on the same topic. "Research findings on college student achievement indicate that regular class attendance is one of the best predictors of academic success. But 100-level college classes often have high rates of absenteeism" (Higbee, 2009, p. 56). In the pilot classes at EMU, Higbee (2009) found that on non-RTTP days students were "three and a half more times likely to skip class" (p. 56) and on traditional class days there were up to 7 out of 22 students missing, yet on Reacting days never more than 2 out of 22 students missed class . Higbee (2009) also reported that students who were in attendance during Reacting classes had a vested interest in the attendance of their peers and worked to keep track of their colleagues' whereabouts and wanted input on class attendance policies to encourage (or in some cases, force) attendance to all classes . The students in the EMU Reacting classes self-reported that they were more prepared for the RTTP classes by completing all pre-readings and assignments (coming prepared to over 90% of the classes) than when they attended the traditional classes; the sense of responsibility regarding their own learning was more concrete (Higbee, 2009). Students also reported increased levels of intellectual curiosity and exchange with their peers during the Reacting segments of class. 88% of students reported staying after class to have intellectual conversations regarding the concepts and principles relevant to the classwork (Higbee, 2009). Higbee (2009) felt that these post-class discussions worked as an antidote for two of the biggest issues on American campuses - "the lack of purposeful, self-directed student intellectual work, and the scarcity of peer experiences that are centered on learning rather than on various sorts of consumption" (p. 61).

History is the story of real people, with real lives and real beliefs, doing real things, but so often it seems to sound like a clean and tidy series of events that were orchestrated by some kind of meaning and the realness of the lived moment is often lost to the learners (and sometimes the instructors perhaps too); immersion learning creates the space to realize the human elements at play. Art history is a subject that is full of individuals acting upon their own convictions and working for and against the mainstream; with this dynamic play of personalities and interactions it is a subject that lends itself to learning through immersion. McKay, Nicolas, Proctor, and

Marlais (2018) have created a scenario set in Paris in the year 1888 and it culminates with students recreating the 1889 *Exposition Universelle de Paris* (1889 Paris World's Fair). In McKay's immersion, students are assigned the roles of real historical artists, critics, and dealers from the Paris art scene and in turn they 'become' these people. Once the immersion begins, students identify as their characters through the three to six weeks of the scenario. Students have character sheets that outline the basics of their character and their place in the art community. The character sheets also suggest reading sources, give hints about strategies to employ, and a list of individualized objectives they should work to achieve over the course of the immersion. There is an accompanying student manual that each student is required to read to understand the mechanics of the interactions in the immersion scenario. Each student is also assigned two speech opportunities and with those speeches an accompanying research paper. Through these research papers students are encouraged to get to know their characters as historical figures, but to dig deeper and more critically than they would normally in a traditional research paper. Understanding the relationships between their character and the others in the scenario is urged; focusing on what the artist, dealer, or critic held as philosophies and ideologies regarding art, patriotism, and other related topics is required. As students interact during the speeches and Exhibition planning sessions, they begin to experience the reality of their assigned artist's life. One of the major themes of student feedback across many studies of this teaching approach is that the artists, dealers, and critics represented became real people to the students and they feel a connection for a historical figure in a way they had never experienced before (Watson, 2015).

The mechanics of McKay's (2018) immersion, *Modernism vs. Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-89*, creates a reality of the power structures that would have existed in the Paris art world at the time and introduces students to concepts regarding the powers of advocacy, individual and sub-group agency, and societal constructs of privilege. The Academy holds the power at the beginning of the scenario and depending on the actions of those in the Academy it can maintain that power throughout the immersion. The immersion revolves around the tastes of the Academy, with both artists and critics subscribing to and supporting the values of the Academy or pushing back against Academy control and beliefs about art. Silently, the privileges of the Academy are reinforced; they are the purveyors and creators of mainstream tastes. McKay's immersion showcases how those privileges are rarely talked about and very difficult to overthrow. This significant and unacknowledged balance of power in favor towards the Academy becomes strikingly clear when the Avant-Garde artists try to advance their ideas and artwork. If the Avant-Garde artists have banded together and each have played their objectives well and with enough knowledge of the Parisian art world, they can sometimes find themselves in a position that is at least not completely disadvantaged, but rarely are they able to overcome, overthrow, or out-sell the Academy artists. It is not lost on students, once the immersion is complete, the arbitrary nature of their advantage or disadvantage, and that those who have power will try to keep it by any means.

While McKay's (2018) scenario focuses on historical characters who held differing views and beliefs, very few truly controversial or problematic situations develop in *Modernism vs Traditionalism*: however, some Reacting immersions do include problematic historical and controversial figures that require careful consideration on the part of the instructor before using the immersion in the classroom (Clary, 2019). For example, an immersion scenario set in the southern United States during the Civil War involves a political figure who was a vocal defender of slavery (Clary, 2019). Clary (2019) explained that the Reacting to the Past Consortium community is active in on-going support of instructors regarding "how to cast this role in a

diverse classroom and how to reign in over-enthusiastic students playing controversial roles" (p.7). Another potential issue can arise from immersion scenarios that explore contemporary histories: these scenarios can include figures that are still living (Clary, 2019). Instructors then must be able to direct students through the process of learning the skills needed to represent without engaging in slanderous or unfair behaviours. As history is a tapestry of beliefs, nations, and backgrounds another "potential pitfall of RTTP, is the depiction of people from a variety of ethnic or cultural groups or people with disabilities" (Clary, 2019, p.7). Clary (2019) stated, "Instructors must remind students at the beginning of the game about cultural appropriation and respectful portrayal of their characters" (p.7). Clary's solution to potential problems revolves around preparing students, and this pre-loading of skills before an immersion in a scenario is often the best way to gain positive results from hands-on learning.

Bok (2006) argued that for effective learning to take place "instructors need to create a process of active learning by posing problems, challenging student answers, and encouraging members of the class to apply the information and concepts in assigned readings to a variety of situations," (p. 117) and Reacting immersions do that . In McKay's (2018) scenario the means of maintaining or capturing more power is through understanding the primary texts and the world of art in Paris in the 1880s. Which means that if the students assigned to the Academy have not done their research and don't understand their position, wily Avant-Garde assigned students can use their more nuanced knowledge to manipulate the Academy characters for their own end. The students representing female characters find themselves thrown into a world where female-power is not readily recognized and each female figure must make a way in a male-dominated art world by using their knowledge of both their character and their historical colleagues. The inherit competition in the immersion allows students to experience a real feeling of the way the 1880s art world used power and authority and it also introduces them to artists that they would otherwise not have 'met' in a traditional lecture class due to time constraints and the relative narrowness of most survey textbooks. Each student comes to realize throughout the immersion that there is often not one 'right answer' to any situation, but that their knowledge of their research can be applied in multiple ways depending on the challenges presented by any given situation.

While the basis of assessment during an immersion is traditional research papers, oral presentations, and debates, (and these are the elements that are the core of the foundation of the immersion itself) the presentation of them makes them unique and flexible to the needs of the students and the instructor (Bylsma, 2018). As is the danger with any hands-on learning approach, some students may refuse to engage with the material or the learning method and this becomes obvious during times of assessment (Olwell & Stevens, 2015). Despite this potential area of concern, most immersion scenarios create the space for assessment opportunities that are impossible in more traditional settings and have greater potential to encourage friendly competition and engagement (Olwell & Stevens, 2015). For example, in McKay's (2018) *Modernism vs Traditionalism* immersion the module's 'final exam' is a rehosting of the 1889 Paris World's Fair. In this event students come together based on the alliances they have made through the previous sessions and collaborate to host booths and exhibitions of their character's art with the objective of 'selling' works to secret buyer characters who have come in as part of the viewing crowds. This event is often open to the public, or to other classes, faculty, and administration to attend, depending on the institution. As the class has no idea who the buyers are, they must talk, in character, to as many attendees as possible, persuasively explaining their art and why they make it. While students interact with each other and the public they are

participating in the module's final exam - an oral presentation with reaches beyond the walls of the classroom. However, unlike oral final exams in a more traditional setting, the students can easily forget the pressures of examination while they play with or against their friends and colleagues to garner public attention. Rather than giving their oral pitch to only the instructor or their classmates just once, they get the opportunity to talk over and over about their character, other characters, and their beliefs and art production, thereby having more opportunities to relax, remember, and embody their learning. It is not uncommon, during a Reacting final exam, that test scores are forgotten, laughter and antics abound, and resiliency and determination are rewarded (Bylsma, 2018).

Reacting to the Past is a way to engage students, make them responsible for their learning, get them active in the classroom, and can reach all learners. Active, immersive, experiential learning can meet many of the shortcomings showcased by traditional methods. Ultimately, RTTP harnesses the solemn power of playing a game (because all real learning begins as play) and the collegial competition that results. Igniting a student's desire to embrace learning is a challenge in a society where what passes for learning is either rote and unchallenging, or unimportant and task specific. When teaching is approached as a universally designed concept that requires a challenge to current and past pedagogical traditions learning is transformed for all.

REFERENCES

Bok, D. (2006). *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Burgess, D. (2012). *Teach like a pirate: Increase student engagement, boost your creativity, and transform your life as an educator.* San Diego: Dave Burgess Consulting, Inc.

Bylsma, M. (2018, April). Reacting to the Past: Contemporary students turned historic makers. *Teaching and Learning Symposium.* Talk presented at 2018 Teaching and Learning Symposium, Red Deer College.

Carnes, M.C. (2017, June). *Annual Conference Keynote Address.* Keynote Presentation at the Annual Reacting to the Past Consortium Conference, Barnard College.

Carnes, M. C. (2004). The liminal classroom. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from http://k12tech.pbworks.com/f/LiminalClassroom.pdf

Carnes, M. C. (2014). *Minds on fire: How role-immersion games transform college.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Carnes, M. C. (2012). Setting students' minds on fire. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/Setting-Students-Minds-on/126592

Clary, K. S. (2019). Reacting to the (public) past™: Innovations in public history pedagogy. *International Public History*, *2*(1), 1-7. Retrieved from https://reacting.barnard.edu/sites/default/files/inline-files/reactingtopublicpast.pdf

Cuban, L. (1997). Change without reform: The case of Stanford University School of Medicine, 1908-1990. *American Educational Research Journal, 34*(1), 83-122. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/1163343

Gregory, J. M. (1886). *The seven laws of teaching.* Ada, Michigan: Baker Publishing.

Higbee, M.D. (2009). How reacting to the past 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*(4), 41-74. Retrieved from https://commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=sotl

Bylsma (2020)

McKay, G. K., Proctor, N.W. & Marlais, M. A. (2018). *Modernism versus Traditionalism: Art in Paris, 1888-1889.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Olwell, R., & Stevens, A. (2015). "I had to double check my thoughts": How the Reacting to the Past methodology impacts first-year college student engagement, retention, and historical thinking. *The History Teacher, 48*(3), 561-572. Retrieved from http://www.societyforhistoryeducation.org/pdfs/M15_Olwell_and_Stevens.pdf

The Reacting to the Past Consortium. (2019). The concept. Retrieved from https://reacting.barnard.edu/

Reacting to the Past. (2019). Role-playing games for engaged learning. Retrieved from https://reacting.barnard.edu/

Supiano, B. (2018). Traditional teaching may deepen inequality. Can a different approach fix it? *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/Traditional-Teaching-May/243339