

Literature Review: Simulations, Role-Play and “Reacting to the Past”

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At Barnard College in the early 2000s, Mark Carnes was wrestling with a problem that seems as old as education itself: the lack of student engagement and participation in class activities. In 1877, Harvard University's Henry Adams recognized that students "could not be much stimulated by any inducements a teacher could suggest"<sup>1</sup>. With that in mind, Carnes set out to develop a set of cooperative simulations, known as *Reacting to the Past*, that would engage students in the content of a course on an emotional and behavioral level through cooperative role play to ameliorate this disengagement and improve student achievement. The academic literature on use of role play and simulation within the field of Social Studies education seems favorable with respect to Carnes' efforts and suggest that his *Reacting* simulations provide students the opportunity to be active learners and engage with the course content on a deep level.

Carnes rooted his work, in part, on the pedagogy of one of America's earliest educational reformers, John Dewey. In it, he internalized parts of Dewey's "pedagogy of play"<sup>2</sup>, concluding that students' natural predisposition towards play could be harnessed to create a liminal classroom. College students, too, could step outside their "real world" roles as college students into the historical roles in simulations that would engage them on a deep level as they adopted these new personas. Recognizing what Carnes believed were the shortcomings of Dewey's pedagogy, he introduced competition and "fantasy" to his stimulations to further enhance

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<sup>1</sup> Weidenfeld, Matthew, and Kenneth Fernandez. "Does *Reacting to the Past* Increase Student Engagement? An Empirical Evaluation of the Use of Historical Simulations in Teaching Political Theory." *Journal of Political Science Education* 13 (2016): 46.

<sup>2</sup> Carnes, Mark C. "Dewey's 'New Education' and an Alternative: *Reacting to the Past*." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 4 (2015): 583

engagement<sup>3</sup>. Carnes believed, as do many that have evaluated and/or used *RTTP*, that “an emotional classroom is a cognitively engaged classroom”<sup>4</sup>.

While the research linking *RTTP* with increased student engagement has been fairly well documented, data that shows the successful achievement of *content* objectives, information regarding key knowledge in a subject area, has been scant. It should be noted that one of the difficulties of assessing all three of these objectives longitudinally and across a large sample is the “Babel Problem”. Wright-Maley describes this as the lack of consistency of the use of the terms simulation, role play, games, and models to describe the pedagogic goals and activities in instructors’ classrooms. While it is recognized that elements of each of these practices may overlap, they have distinctly different educational outcomes and pedagogy in mind. Additionally this confusion is compounded regarding the term “simulation” because the term is treated, “as if it were clear to all who use it”<sup>5</sup>. In other words, frequently instructors compare, and occasionally measure, the successes and failures of activities that have different pedagogy and methodology, comparing proverbial “apples to oranges”. The *Reacting to the Past* classroom, then, can skirt some of these research pitfalls as they have consistent pedagogy and methodology... even if the content/concept objectives vary.

The *Reacting to the Past* classroom’s consistent pedagogy and methodology appear to be focused on the key element of increased student engagement in deep examination of historic, political, social, and religious concepts. Through the use of cooperative, yet competitive, games, students engage primarily in the academic tasks of reading complex primary and secondary texts, writing papers and speeches, giving speeches, and debating other students with an attempt to

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<sup>3</sup> Carnes, Mark C., 584

<sup>4</sup> Weidenfeld and Fernandez., 58

<sup>5</sup> Wright-Maley, Cory. “*Beyond the ‘Babel Problem’: Defining Simulations for the Social Studies.*” *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 39 (2015): 63

persuade other students in order to reach “victory objectives” and advance their character and faction’s objectives. Through these highly academic pursuits, students derive marked increases in academic skills, and emotional and behavioral outcomes.

One most significant benefits was in attendance. Few educators would disagree that increased attendance in class will lead to higher class achievement, no matter the level of education. It is difficult to imagine a scenario where decreased attendance would benefit the student and increase the achievement, both in content and disposition, regarding course outcomes. Some practitioners described perfect attendance when using the *RTTP* simulations. Gorton noted that attendance in his classes that did not use *RTTP* were as low as 50%, but increased to 95-100% with *RTTP*<sup>6</sup> and Tatlock and Reiter noted that the use of *Reacting* led to “nearly perfect” attendance<sup>7</sup>. The fact is, nearly all the literature that was reviewed led to the identification of significant increases in student attendance.

Along with increased attendance, many noted that increased preparedness accompanied this phenomenon. In this respect, students were more prepared for classroom activities with regard to reading completion, outside research and understanding of key concepts. Adam Porter shared that when he used the *Reacting* modules, student “attendance was better and they were more likely to have prepared the material and to participate”<sup>8</sup>. Porter was encouraged by his initial research into Carnes’ work and development of *RTTP* to find that Carnes had experienced what he did regarding attendance, preparation and performance<sup>9</sup>. Tracy Lightcap saw similar

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<sup>6</sup> Gorton, William and Havercroft, Jonathan “*Using Historical Simulations to Teach Political Theory*”, *Journal of Political Science Education*, (2012) 8:1, 56

<sup>7</sup> Tatlock, Julie C. & Reiter, Paula, “*Conflict and Engagement in “Reacting to the Past” Pedagogy*”, *Peace Review*, 30:1 (2018), 18

<sup>8</sup> Porter, Adam L.. “*Role-Playing and Religion: Using Games to Educate Millennials.*” *Teaching Theology & Religion*, (2008) 11, no. 4: 234

<sup>9</sup> Porter, 230

increases in out-of-class preparation. In her analysis, students needed to do significant amounts of preparation in order to be fully in character and be prepared for the debates that emerged in the course of the class activities. One student from her class commented, “It was really interesting, but it was really hard. I can remember staying up late to work with [one of her faction members] on arguments before class”<sup>10</sup>. In addition, students further prepared themselves by researching the opposition to prepare for the inevitable attacks made on their own faction’s position<sup>11</sup>. Weidenfeld and Fernandez noticed a similar themes from their students regarding preparation with one noted addition... the role anxiety played in encouraging students to be prepared for a setting of total emersion. One student commented, “ The preparation necessary to apply concepts to a political situation before a public audience for the purpose of persuasion — for example, using The Second Treatise to argue against independence — is tied to the nervousness experienced by students during class” and another remarked, “there was more pressure to know what you’re talking about inside and out”<sup>12</sup>. Olwell and Stevens reiterated one of the basic tenets of Carnes’ pedagogy of *RTTP*, that preparation, “both in-class and out-of-class student engagement are boosted by the method.... in order to succeed in their classroom goals”<sup>13</sup>. Again, most of the literature reviewed described similar improvements in preparation.

Another marked benefit to Carnes’ *Reacting* structure was a notable increase in student empathy. Several studies identified this trend. It seems logical that one would be more empathetic when assuming the role of another person in history and background, but Gorton and

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<sup>10</sup> Lightcap, Tracy. “*Creating Political Order: Maintaining Student Engagement through Reacting to the Past.*” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 1 (2009): 178

<sup>11</sup> Gorton and Havercroft, 53

<sup>12</sup> Weidenfeld and Fernandez, 55

<sup>13</sup> Olwell, Russell, and Azibo Stevens. “*I had to double check my thoughts”: How the Reacting to the Past Methodology Impacts First-Year College Student Engagement, Retention, and Historical Thinking.*” *History Teacher* (2015) 48, no. 3: 563

Havercroft explained the empathy generated here was far from the superficial variety. They identified that students went beyond understanding “what it was like to be...” sorts of role playing, as their empathy grew from understanding deep political abstractions that, “seem alien to our contemporary worldview”<sup>14</sup>. This brand of empathy helped provide relevance for these abstractions. I found this aspect of the experience intriguing, as it is a challenge that I am faced with regularly. I’ve found that having students analyze and engage with grand, abstract concepts of justice, democracy, freedom, and power present challenges that are extremely difficult to overcome at the high school level. Perhaps *RTTP* structures can help provide strategies and activities to address them more effectively. Lightcap’s evaluation surveys also found substantial increases, as reported by students, in empathy regarding diverse perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

While increased engagement, emotional or behavioral, provided marked increases in attendance, preparation, and empathy, the “active learning” associated with the *RTTP* simulations provided other benefits too. Gorton & Havercroft and Weidenfeld & Fernandez suggested increased self esteem in students in *RTTP* classrooms, Tatlock and Reiter noted a possible connection with marked improvements in public speaking, Olwell and Stevens saw increased cross-curricular connections, and Lightcap noted significant improvements in cooperative behavior. It would appear that, while research regarding simulations and *RTTP* classrooms is not complete, the preliminary research shows much promise with regard to the benefits of increased student achievement.

Throughout the literature, there were limitations regarding simulations and *Reacting to the Past* classrooms and the research surrounding it. While increased student engagement provided by *RTTP* provided for increased student preparation was evident, there was one notable

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<sup>14</sup> Gorton and Havercroft, 58

<sup>15</sup> Lightcap, 178

exception. According to Weidenfeld and Fernandez, when students were assigned one of the indeterminate roles (crowd, moderate), the simulation “offered a *disincentive* for increased preparation,” in that they felt that their job was to be a blank slate to be influenced or persuaded. Other students felt “that their voice may not matter in the outcome”<sup>16</sup>. I’ve noticed this myself in class simulations that I’ve conducted or observed. Juror roles in a court simulation, members of labor unions in a labor dispute/negotiations, the “commoner” in a Constitutional Ratification debate had less incentive to prepare, or prepare with sufficient depth, when presented with less responsibility in a debate, negotiation or compromise.

Another concern is that of class size and institutional type. Insufficient research has been presented to analyze the effectiveness of the impact of *RTTP* or similar strategies on student engagement in other levels of education other than the college/University level<sup>17</sup>. Post secondary education is, by its very nature, voluntary and has very real and personal financial stakes on the line. K-12 education is compulsory and subject to other conditions and factors that may limit the efficacy of simulations or may impact the dynamics of the structure and implementation of *RTTP*. Would these simulations require significant modification and would these modifications impact the outcomes? Without further piloting and analysis, these questions remain.

Class size in K-12 Social Studies courses is another consideration worthy of examination. According to Lightcap, “18 students is roughly the optimum size for *Reacting* games”<sup>18</sup>. It goes without saying that one would be hard pressed to find a core required course of that size at a public secondary school. While recognizing that several of the research studies and professors that implemented them noted that they had much larger courses at the post-secondary level

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<sup>16</sup> Weidenfeld and Fernandez, 58

<sup>17</sup> Weidenfeld and Fernandez, 59

<sup>18</sup> Lightcap, 176

(Havercroft reported successfully implementing RTTP to a class of 40) there are significant issues of diverse emotional development and maturity, motivation, in and out-of-school absenteeism, resources, curricular requirements, space and class length that may create problems of implementation with large class sizes. These issues must be overcome in order to create a consistent experience that is conducive to achieving the simulation's outcomes and objectives. Again, similar to the issue of institutional type, without additional piloting, analysis and research, the impact of class sizes on the effectiveness of *RTTP* is unknown.

Finally, while the research seems to indicate the positive impact of *RTTP* on student engagement, Weidenfeld and Hernandez suggested that their research regarding empirical measures of student engagement is fairly thin due to "limited sample size and because the concept of "engagement" used in the questionnaire is somewhat vague"<sup>19</sup>. This is not a unique condition to their study, and similar issues tended to pervade many of the studies on this subject.

Additionally, very little research has been presented regarding the impact of *Reacting* on improved content proficiency. In the studies reviewed, Gorton and Havercroft provided the only example of data analysis of this outcome. While they reported moderate success in this area<sup>20</sup>, their sample is too small to be conclusive and requires additional review and analysis to increase validity of their hypothesis. Still, their research provides an optimistic view of the potential in *Reacting* simulations.

While there are still concerns that need to be addressed, the benefits of the *Reacting* classroom seem to show promise. The use of these strategies do indeed increase student engagement in class activities, texts, and primary and secondary course materials. If one makes a logical assumption that this increase in engagement innately increases engagement with course

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<sup>19</sup> Weidenfeld and Fernandez, 54, 59

<sup>20</sup> Gorton and Havercroft, 55



content and skills, then the outcome is obvious: the use of role play and simulation in the classroom will lead to increased student achievement.

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