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“Reacting to the Past:” How to Use and Assess Role Playing Games in American History

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| QEP Evidence and Argument (E&A) Project for Charrette | |
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Project Title.

“Reacting to the Past.” How to Use and Assess Role Playing Games in American History

Project Objective(s). Briefly describe the intent of the project.

Objectives:
This project seeks to implement role playing games into American History courses to help students develop an in-depth understanding of a significant historical event. In working through this project, I am hoping to develop some assessment tools and rubrics to help me: 1) demonstrate how RPGs can meet WKU’s QEP guidelines and outcomes; 2) create useable measures to critically assess student learning outcomes in relation to the assigned activities and classroom performance and; 3) provide important feedback to students in relation to both their written assignments and oral presentations. Eventually, my goal is to design my own game that will meet the requirements of one of the upper division colonnade courses at WKU.

Project Description. Briefly describe intended activities, targeted courses/programs, and LIST PROJECT LEARNING OUTCOMES.

Background Information and Targeted Courses
Reacting to the Past is a series of games developed by Mark Carnes at Harvard University that are designed to encourage students to get excited about history and to help them develop important academic skills such as reading and thinking critically, conducting historical research, and public speaking. (More information on this can be found at <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>) Reacting to the Past games can either be played over the course of an entire semester or condensed into mini games to allow students to explore an important historical moment or figure in great detail. My goal is to implement Reacting to the Past into my American history courses-- mini games for my survey courses and a full semester game for an upper division topics course.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will understand how to use historical evidence to construct an argument that they will present in both written and oral formats.
2. Students will develop their writing and critical thinking skills through a series of classroom debates, discussions, and round tables.
3. Students will understand how the intersection of various historical phenomena especially, but not limited to, race, class, and gender, influenced the outcome of major historical events.
4. Students will develop an understanding of how people in the past, especially those who were often excluded from formal politics, played a critical role in the shaping the outcome of major historical events.
5. Students will develop their ability to critically assess an argument and identify its strengths and weaknesses and respond/challenge an argument using their own historical knowledge.
6. Students will be able to apply their skills in using evidence to construct arguments to persuade their fellow classmates to support their perspectives and thus win the game.

Intended Activities

Each role in Reacting to the Past has its own unique set of papers to compose and objectives to fulfill. For example, in the game *Patriots, Loyalists, and Revolution in New York City, 1775-1776* Joseph Bartlett, a slave, has specific objectives to meet to be considered victorious. His primary objective is of course personal freedom and there are multiple ways he can achieve this—Congressional Act, being purchased and given freedom, or running away. His other objectives include joining a mob and participating loudly in all political matters. Additionally, Bartlett needs to forge important relationships with ideas (John Locke’s principles for instance), with texts, with other slaves, and with other people involved in the Revolution. Bartlett must also produce multiple pieces of writing related to his position including a position paper petitioning Provincial Congress to implement immediate and universal emancipation for all slaves. Finally, Bartlett will need prepared remarks to present his case whenever possible and must be prepared at all times to disabuse white colonialists of the notion that slavery was a good thing.

To help keep track of students’ prepared statements and to ensure they are actively engaging with the materials, I will be adapting Linda Barry’s “journal” technique that she describes in her work *Syllabus*. Essentially, students will be required to keep weekly records of their research and writing as well as make notes to themselves during the discussions so they can fulfill their objectives. I have used this technique in other classes as a scaffolding exercise for final research papers. (Please see the attached materials for samples. Note: I would use these in a semester-long class but could adapt them to mini games as well.)

Relationship of the project to E&A objectives and student learning outcomes. What specific E&A priorities are addressed?

Gather Sound and Relevant Evidence to Address an Issue: this is the crux of Reacting to the Past. Students need to be able to read critically and draw information from not only assigned readings but also from the game book and the classroom oral presentations. They cannot meet their objectives in the goal if they don’t do this.

Analyze and Synthesize Evidence: Students cannot successfully participate in Reacting to the Past by merely reading from assigned texts and documents. They need to sift through significant amounts of material, find patterns and connections, and tailor it to fit the views and attitudes of their historic figures. They need to be able to blend viewpoints together to create their own unique argument.

Articulate a Logical and Supported Argument Based on Analysis: This objective manifests itself in multiple fashions in the Reacting to the Past Teaching model. First, students need to orally present their position from a variety of angles and justify it with concrete historical evidence. Second, students need to compose various types of argumentative papers throughout the semester drawing on their assigned readings to persuade their opponents or those who were neutral to support their cause.

If this project/assignment/assessment has been used in the past, what are the strengths and weaknesses? If it has not been used and is in development, what are anticipated strengths and weaknesses?

While the format of the RPG is not new, it is new to me. I am currently developing two mini games for a 200-level American History survey course at the Glasgow Campus. The strengths of this, I think, are that it presents information in a new fashion, students are immersed with specific material, and they have very specific objectives to achieve. In addition, I think that it forces students to understand both argument and

evidence. The weaknesses are less to do with pedagogical concerns and more to do with practical classroom management ones. Introverted students will need to be given carefully selected roles and made to feel safe and included and not overwhelmed. Student attendance and preparation is critical. Finally, it will be critical that I make sure students understand the nuances of evidence and argument before we begin, otherwise it will be nothing more than a shouting match.

How will this project be assessed? Include any rubrics if available.

This is my challenge. Obviously, students' written assignments will be graded using the standard protocol of all my courses:

Logical Argument?

Quality of Analysis—requisite number of sources, scholarly works, not too much reliance on one source, explains quotes, demonstrates how information provided is relevant to the thesis

Paragraph Structure—topic sentence, evidence, explanation, transition

Introduction and Conclusion

Spelling and Grammar

Footnotes and Citations

My problem is how do I successfully assess the quality of their oral presentations including—not simply repeating the same tired argument repeatedly, classroom deportment, the level of analysis, their rebuttals to their fellow students.

Impressions Count

Part One

Create a chart comparing and contrasting the major characters you have met so far. Include a brief biographical sketch, some notes on their character—did you like them? Were they suspicious? Can they help you achieve your objectives? Do they have a checkered past? Etc. Anything that you think you might need to remember or be aware of is fair game.

As always, keep track of your readings by taking notes. Feel free to use this journal for brainstorming, plotting, and so on. (Keep it academic folks.)

Part Two

Draw a box and divide it into four squares and number them. (See below) Answer the questions listed in each square. Be sure to include documentation.

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| <p>1. What is your main goal for this week?</p> | <p>2. Outline the most important points of your argument.</p> |
| <p>3. What evidence are you planning on using?</p> | <p>4. Interact with another character and have them sign in the box below. Ask them a question that you think is important for you to know the answer to. (Be sure to summarize your interaction.)</p> |

Things are Getting Hotter

- 1.** Be sure to take notes during class. Remember to pay attention to things like body language, conversations among other characters, questions people are asking you, and how people respond to one another.
- 2.** After class is over, summarize the key points made by your opposition. Analytically think about how you and your allies responded. Were there arguments that you could have made but didn't? What evidence do you think you need to review?

Strategy

We are halfway through the game. Objectively analyze the following:

- 1) Your side's likelihood of winning
- 2) How close you are to fulfilling your objectives
- 3) What you need to do to strengthen your overall argument and win support
- 4) Who you think your biggest competitor is—find the fatal flaw in her/his argument and use your evidence to verbally slay them

Historic Knowledge

Based on your experiences thus far, how have your views and attitudes towards the American Revolution changed? Why? How did the game influence your perceptions?

Sample Essay Assignment

As a slave, your goal is to gain freedom not just for yourself, but for all black Americans in the colonies. Write an essay that does the following: 1) that argues clearly and objectively why freedom is important; 2) defines freedom what freedom entails; 2) identifies potential allies and assesses the likelihood of them to help you achieve your goals; 3) identifies those who will oppose your initiative; 4) outlines the benefits of a free population for society as a whole.

Specifications

1. Essays need to be a minimum of 5-7 typed, double-spaced pages in length.
2. Please use only Times New Roman 12-point font.
3. Essays need to incorporate at least 3 primary sources and 3 secondary sources.
4. Students should offer a sense of the historical context of the issue and demonstrate a clear understanding of the relevant issues.
5. Essays need to address all four elements identified above.
6. Essays should have a clear and concise thesis statement that is proven using academic historical evidence and primary sources.
7. Students should be prepared to present these arguments and ideas in the game at the appropriate moment.