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### HOW REACTING TO THE PAST GAMES “MADE ME WANT TO COME TO CLASS AND LEARN”: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE REACTING PEDAGOGY AT EMU, 2007-08

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*Mark Higbee reports in his chapter on his use of an innovative pedagogy, *Reacting to the Past*, at Eastern Michigan University. The *Reacting* method was originally developed at Barnard College; Mark's chapter reveals the challenges of adapting this approach to a regional comprehensive university with a diverse student body. But more than that, Mark's chapter is about the opportunities associated with using this pedagogy here at EMU. The levels of student engagement produced through students' "playing" these elaborate games are quite impressive and, as Mark notes, very much needed in the EMU context.*

*One of the things I particularly like about this chapter is the wide range of evidence Mark uses. Like the historian he is, Mark weaves together different bits of data – his own observations, student surveys, written comments on course evaluations, quantitative data – to tell a compelling story of student learning. Mark has written a paper on student learning that will inform teachers of history, teachers of other subjects, and higher education administrators. He sketches out a model not just for teaching history, but for designing meaningful learning across the university curriculum. All that – and it also looks like a really fun time for the students!*

In this chapter I attempt three tasks. First, I introduce readers to the “Reacting to the Past” (RTTP) pedagogy of face-to-face, in-class, unscripted, lengthy, role-playing games for undergraduates, and describe my use of this pedagogy at Eastern Michigan University during the last two years. Second, I present data collected during the 2007-08 academic year on the method’s effectiveness among my students who played Reacting games in six different sections of four different EMU history courses.<sup>1</sup> During the last year, my use of the RTTP method at EMU constituted a pilot project to assess whether RTTP has promise for helping EMU students to learn more and to become more deeply engaged learners while in college.

Third, the paper presents conclusions derived from this pilot project. These conclusions, woven throughout the paper, can be summarized as follows: the collected data and my observations of student behavior and achievement in Reacting classes at EMU strongly suggest that the RTTP pedagogy can successfully enhance student learning among the diverse student population of my regional state university. Further, it appears that Reacting classes foster the development of social connections among EMU students. Many students praised the pedagogy for, among other things, allowing them to get to know all their classmates – which is an unusual experience for American undergraduates. Such social connections among students are highly correlated with retention and student success. “The student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin 1993, 398). Reacting’s role-playing games motivate students to invest substantial effort and time to achieving their “victory objectives” through research, persuasive writing, oral communication, strategizing, and teamwork.

During the piloting of the method at EMU, evidence accumulated that Reacting games promote higher academic achievement and deeper student engagement with the subject matter, with their classmates, and with their college education generally. Scholars elsewhere have also found the pedagogy to be effective at realizing course objectives, and, more broadly, for realizing the goals of an institution’s first year program (for example, Lightcap 2008). By inspiring students to engage their talents and best efforts across a spectrum of activities, all centered on active learning, the Reacting to the Past pedagogy can help “make learning visible.”<sup>2</sup>

### What is “Reacting to the Past”?

The Reacting method entails elaborately designed role playing games set in pivotal historical moments of clashing ideas and interests. Students are assigned distinctive roles and “victory objectives” that they pursue, in alliance with some students and in competition with others. The team or “faction” that wins a game is largely determined by which side is most effective at persuading a third group of students, the “indeterminates,” to support or identify with their faction’s goals. Indeterminates have their own objectives as well. Reacting games deal with the ideas and beliefs of the historical subjects; there are no battle reenactments in a RTTP game. Tension builds as a Reacting game progresses, and most students “respond with a surprising seriousness that lends additional credence to the games” (Lightcap 2008, 8). Students in a RTTP game typically become intensely motivated by the goal of “winning.”

By working in “factions,” the Reacting method gives students the active learning advantage of small group work in an intensely intellectual and competitive context in which each student is accountable to his or her peers. Indeed, Reacting students often care less about impressing the instructor or good grades than about being a contributing member of their faction. They want to win, by achieving their character’s “victory objectives.” This requires teamwork, persuasion, a mastery of complex written sources, a good comprehension of a complex moment in history, and effective written and oral communication. Reacting can be thought of as a method of active, small group learning that has been kicked up many levels of intensity. It is used by instructors from across the liberal arts and sciences, not just or even mainly by historians.

RTTP was invented at Barnard College a decade ago by Mark C. Carnes, who was discouraged by the low level of intellectual engagement his Barnard students showed in class and in their assignments (Courage 2004). The classic texts Carnes assigned did not come alive in the seminar room; everyone was bored. When he improvised a role playing game set in ancient Athens, the texts, the students, and the classroom came alive. The method has evolved, been refined, tested, and spread. Reacting games are now used at scores of colleges and

universities around the country. The games are published as books by Pearson Longman, ranging in size from 70 to 300 pages. Students purchase these game books, which include game rules, primary sources, brief role and faction descriptions, and a schedule for the play of the game. Many other games are being developed and are ready to be used as course packs.

Reacting games range across four continents and from Athens in 403 B.C.E. to Kansas and South Africa in the 1990s. They confront problems of religion, science, monarchy, nationalism, social revolutions, “the New Woman,” apartheid, and the historical agency of individuals’ moral choices. Focusing on the beliefs and interests of conflicting human beings, they require intense individual effort, teamwork, and competition. All entail two or more opposing factions; another, looser group of students, the indeterminates; and some plausible forum in which these parties could meet and debate and, maybe, forge compromises. Doing well in a game, and on a team of one’s peers, can be powerful motivators for undergraduates. The games’ activities are emotionally and intellectually engaging, and thus they are frequently memorable for students. College graduates typically have better recall of their extracurricular activities than academic work, precisely because the academic work is too often passive while the extracurricular activities are active (Bok 2006). Reacting appeals to students’ desire to be active rather than passive, and to their need for social interaction.

RTTP has been praised for its success at engaging students, and for promoting student skills in written and oral communication, teamwork, doing research and applying research findings to the tasks of persuading people to take specific actions or change their beliefs. The New York Times noted that “No one hides in a ‘Reacting to the Past’ seminar. The structure forces active participation” (Courage 2004). Two scientists at Elon University analyzed the impact of “The Trial of Galileo” game on student learning and found it to be significant in terms of astronomical knowledge and in non-class time devoted to the subject. The RTTP method was also shown to fulfill the goals for active student learning stated in the university’s mission statement (Crider and Squire 2008). Political scientist Tracy Lightcap observes that since “all students know that their positions will be publicly opposed by their faction’s opponents” during the play of the game, and that their achievements as students “will be partly determined by their

use of arguments from the classic readings” of the game book, students realize that they “must develop enough command of the material to stand their ground effectively on paper and in person. *The level of understanding reached as a consequence is well beyond what would normally be expected of freshmen students*” (2008, 9; italics added).

Moreover, Reacting, say its advocates, promotes student learning not just in one area of study, such as the historical conflict on which a game is based – but also with a variety of skills that are valuable across academic disciplines (Carnes 2004; 2005). These conclusions are supported by the findings of a Barnard psychologist who, while not a Reacting instructor, has examined Reacting extensively. Through his studies of students at three different institutions that use Reacting in first year seminars (FYS), Steven Stroessner found “a number of benefits associated with completion of a FYS utilizing” the Reacting method. And Reacting “was clearly popular, even for students who did not request the course or were originally hesitant once learning more about the nature of the course” (2006, 27).

Students from the first year seminar Reacting courses studied by Stroessner “praised the pedagogy for producing a level of motivation and involvement in the course material they had not anticipated”. Significantly, the method’s “effects were confirmed and extended in studies designed to compare students from ‘Re-Acting to the Past’ seminars with students from other seminars and over time” (2006, 27). Most important is Stroessner’s finding, reported in a forthcoming journal article, that:

participating in Reacting to the Past was associated with a number of psychological benefits and improvements in academic skills. Students enrolled in a FYS utilizing the role playing method showed elevated self-esteem, greater empathy with the needs and feelings of others, greater agreement with the belief that human characteristics are amenable to change across time and contexts, and improved rhetorical ability. Research has shown that each of these effects can provide immense benefits in both academic and social interactions (Stroessner 2008, 11).

While he found neither a positive nor negative impact on writ-

ing among Barnard students who had done Reacting compared to ones who had not, Stroessner cautioned that “any conclusions about the lack of effects for writing must be restricted to extemporaneous writing. In our assessment, students were asked to write spontaneously on a topic about which they presumably had given little thought.” Stroessner added that “it is our hope” that “typical academic writing” permits students to give more than a little thought to the topic being written about (2008, 10-11). Stroessner’s research on Reacting’s impact on students, funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), is the most extensive assessment done on the pedagogy to date.

Playing a series of Reacting games over the first year or two of college may foster other important skills – what Derek Bok in another context calls “habits of disciplined common sense” (2006, 69). These matter much in life, such as the ability to organize or lead diverse people in pursuit of common goals and the ability to use a variety of types of knowledge to analyze unfamiliar situations and problems. While he does not address the Reacting pedagogy directly, Bok observed that “If particular courses and activities can serve several purposes simultaneously, colleges are more likely to succeed in embracing a number of separate goals within a single four-year curriculum” (2006, 80). Stroessner’s findings, as well as the data collected to date on Reacting at EMU, suggest the pedagogy can do much to fulfill Bok’s ambition of one course advancing more than one vital purpose at a time.

RTTP games vary in length and complexity. Most take two to four weeks of class time to run, and all class time is occupied by the game while it is underway. The “in character” time in which a game is played is preceded by a few “set up” classes that include a review of the game booklet, some introductory lectures by the instructor on the historical and intellectual context of the game, discussion of game rules, and assignment of roles. When the game is concluded, a “post-mortem” is held, out of character, to analyze what happened in the game, and how that resembles actual events.

RTTP games cover a wide range of topics, from Athens in 403 B.C.E., to “Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor,” “The Trial of Galileo,” and “Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence, 1945.” Games can be “inserted” into an existing course (which requires considerable rearranging and condensing

of the course's traditional structure), as I have done at EMU. However, courses can be designed entirely around a series of Reacting games, as is done at various Honors Colleges and in First Year programs. To be effective, Reacting classes must have no more than about 25 students (unless the school has a host of teaching assistants), but require no special facilities or equipment. The ideal number is probably around 18-20 students.

Students may be as theatrical as they like while playing Reacting games, and such elements of play can help create the desired "liminal" space for a RTTP class (see Carnes 2004 and Carnes 2005, 9, for more on liminality and Reacting). But no theatrical element beyond public speaking "in character" is mandatory. Nor is there a "script" for students to follow – they navigate their own way, in the situation created by the interplay between the game's scenario and their own actions. Students produce written work, as well as speeches and other oral communications, all in the voices of their assigned historical characters. All of a student's work – oral and written – in a game should be aimed at shaping whether a student and her faction win or lose the game, by persuading others to adopt "your" point of view or at least part of it, or by complicating opponents' efforts to advance their goals.

The instructor assumes the role of "game master" and answers some questions, gives advice privately, and sometimes issues directions to the class, or makes unanticipated interventions, such as reading news bulletins, as called for in the instructor's manual for a given game. But the game should largely be run by members of the class acting in character and in pursuit of their victory objectives. The game master typically sits off to the side and watches; often, I have passed notes making suggestions to students. I have also engaged in other forms of "coaching", in private conversations and by email. I meet privately with factions as often as possible, especially with the indeterminates, to give advice.

More of this kind of coaching may be required at Eastern than at other schools with more advanced Reacting programs. As game master, I have at times had to assume a somewhat directional role, to keep the game moving and people focused on their victory objectives. The keys to a Reacting game, however, involve all players engaging in public speaking and writing (both "in character"), and the countless

private conversations and strategy sessions with classmates about the game. That is, one needs to understand one's character's role in the conflicts at hand, and must advance that character's goals. My roles as game master and sometimes coach have all been aimed at supporting those key activities.

A RTTP game can be chaotic and confusing, exciting and fun. Imagine being in a play with no director, no script, and no set conclusion – instead the cast confronts historical scenes and settings that involve intricate but conflicting ideas and goals. These conflicts have to be navigated by the actors, each pursuing their own objectives and agenda. The actors aim not to influence the emotions and views of an audience, but the actions and beliefs of other actors. Imagine further that this “play” is performed with the pretense that it is not a play, but an epic historical conflict with huge stakes for all participants – and an entirely uncertain outcome. Among the cast there are few or no members with acting experience; some initially profess a dread of public speaking.

Yet, from this chaos, can emerge great motivation, effort, and achievement. Mid-game, some students may start speaking of how it has “transformed” them, and many talk of the fun that they are having, even as they worry about the how the game is going and what they need to do. Late in the game, “play” starts to run routinely past the time “class” ends and nobody seems to notice until the instructor interrupts. Students then move out into the hall to analyze the just-concluded session and plan for the next.

At its best, a RTTP game feels real to the players; as one student, Justin Payne, describing his role in one Reacting game, told his classmates, “For a moment, I felt I was Ralph Abernathy” (2008, pers. comm.). Mr. Payne had experienced what among Reacting instructors is called a “liminal” moment forged by a game at its emotional peak (Carnes 2004), and he was recounting a moment in the game that had truly transfixed the whole class.

EMU students have played the published RTTP game, “The Trial of Anne Hutchinson: Liberty, Law, and Intolerance in Puritan New England” by Mark C. Carnes and Michael P. Winship, and two not-yet-published RTTP games: “Forest Diplomacy: War, Peace and Land on the Colonial Frontier, 1756-57” by Nicholas W. Proctor and “Greenwich Village 1913: Suffrage, Labor and the New Woman” by

Mary Jane Treacy. Both of these games are virtually ready for publication. In addition to these three well-tested, expertly developed RTTP games, my students have used my own prototype game, “Montgomery 1956: White Supremacy, Civil Rights,” and the “Bus Boycott: Martin Luther King Jr. and His Co-conspirators on Trial,” in the second half of the US history survey course, and in two courses on African American history. The Montgomery game has been effective, but it is far rougher in its current design than a polished RTTP game.<sup>3</sup>

### **Why I Tried Reacting: The Problem of Disengagement**

I became interested in the Reacting method by reading about it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Carnes 2004; Fogg 2001). Later, I attended a conference on Reacting sponsored by Michigan State University in April 2006, and was impressed by the pedagogical power the method demonstrated in compressed, two-day versions of Reacting games played by conference participants. (Reacting conferences involve game-playing, and are far more participatory and more collaborative and fun than any other academic conference I have ever attended.) Still, I wondered, would this intellectually rigorous pedagogy succeed at my regional state university, with a student profile more typical of the average American college student than of elite colleges and research universities where the method had developed?

For example, would it work at a school where so many students work long hours at low wage jobs while attending school full time, where so many students lack the analytical skills faculty hope students will possess before they start our classes, where many are commuter students, and where many students have serious family responsibilities that compete for study hours? Would it work at a school where students rarely discuss the intellectual content of their courses outside the classroom (and not often enough in the classroom)? Would a method well suited to Smith and Barnard colleges, and to honors programs at flagship state universities, work in the radically different context of my regional state university?

A useful question with which to begin is by wondering if EMU really is different from other Reacting schools. One way to compare EMU students to those at other institutions where Reacting is used is to look at ACT scores, as published by Petersons ([www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)).

com). Petersons gives ACTs by the “mid 50s range”, meaning the two scores between which the middle 50% of a school’s entering freshmen class fall. At EMU, the mid 50s ACT range is 18-24. At Barnard College, the “birthplace” of the Reacting method, the range is both much higher and narrower: 28-31. Smith College, Trinity College (Hartford), Pace University, and the University of Georgia all have strong Reacting offerings; their mid 50s ACT ranges are 25-30, 26-29, 20-26, and 25-29, respectively. A check of a dozen four year institutions – private and public – at which Reacting is used found that all but one of these institutions have ACT mid 50s scores that are notably above those for EMU. The exception? Bemidji State University in Minnesota, for which Petersons reports a mid 50s ACT range of 18-24 – identical with Eastern’s.

Bemidji State is a regional state university, similar to EMU, and it is one of just a few regional state universities where the RTTP method has been seriously pursued. Four Bemidji faculty members – from history, psychology, biology and philosophy - have created the wonderful Reacting game, “Charles Darwin, the Copley Model, and the Rise of Naturalism,” one of the new Reacting games that deal with science. While EMU is larger than Bemidji, as public regional universities, they are each the type of institution attended by most American undergraduates at four year schools.

Some institutional data describing problems in academic achievement at EMU may help illustrate the nature of its teaching environment. At Eastern, over one in four of our FTIAC (First Time in Any College) students is put on academic probation after one semester. That figure has been inching up since 2003. Further, EMU fails to retain about 26% of our FTIACs long enough for them even to start their second year, and “about 1/3 of all freshmen” at EMU “do not complete 24 credit hours in the first year” (Faculty Council 2008, second, third, and tenth slides). Of course, our best students are very good, and could thrive at any school; many of our students strive for and attain professional credentials, while also thirsting for knowledge. What sets EMU apart from the private colleges and research universities where Reacting is used is that Eastern has a broader range of students, measured by nearly any metric. Still, the data from the EMU piloting of Reacting, alongside the long-standing experience at other schools, suggest that the method can be effective in both contexts – the elite campus and the

regional state school. Nothing in the method is inherently elitist – but it is rigorous.

Neither attrition nor academic probation are unknown at more elite institutions, of course. But state regional universities have more severe problems in these areas, at least in scale, than do selective institutions. Less privileged students could benefit enormously from a pedagogy that produces more engaged student learners. Yet the constrained budgets, heavy teaching loads, and over-reliance on student credit hour production in decision-making at regional state schools may inhibit pedagogical innovation and curricular reform: These schools are so student-revenue dependent that any suggestion that there is a reason to teach smaller, not larger, sections, can easily be dismissed.

Despite my initial skepticism about using Reacting games at EMU, and the too frequent comments on my campus disparaging student-focused teaching, I was drawn to the method. Like many colleagues, I certainly realized that most students were visibly tuned out, no matter, it seemed, how effectively I might perform while lecturing. When I structured classes around discussing assigned readings, usually just 10-15% of the class entered the discussion with interest and relevant knowledge. Trying to get higher levels of participation was like trying to herd sleeping cats – neither pedagogically effective nor emotionally satisfying for anyone involved. While my dialogues with a few students in a class were often terrific, the majority remained wholly disengaged. I could readily shout out great lectures and profound questions, but, getting little response, I wondered: isn't it the faculty's responsibility to teach effectively to the full range of students in our courses?

The lecture method, according to the scholarly literature on student learning, seldom conveys much information to students that is long retained (Bok 2006). Yet, despite their boredom and disengagement, my students' gave me favorable teaching ratings. Apparently, most students just didn't expect to be very interested in class or their assignments. Time and again, I encountered students who appeared entirely oblivious to basic material I had lectured on a few weeks, or just a day, earlier. And these were "good" students – intelligent, but disengaged. How can we move the course forward if people don't grasp what we've covered? I thought that my students should want to learn

more, and I believed that faculty members like myself should be more effective at getting students to learn, but my teaching was hardly unsuccessful by the standards of academe.

Sadly, the reality at EMU and elsewhere is that “for most segments of the student community, academic life is tangential to or at odds with peer culture” – a conclusion that is “consistent with every major study of college life” (Nathan 2005, 99). Most students do not expect to be engaged by their classes; they endure their classes. The courses are the price they pay for other parts of the college experience and the credentials attending college may provide. One reason for this is that most students are bored by lectures, especially in introductory classes, and they find that they can succeed in classes without really learning the material. While lecturing bores students and fails to convey information effectively, most faculty members rely on lecturing as a near exclusive instructional approach.

But as bored as my students may have been in my traditional classes, the literature on student development and learning suggested that their disengagement was fairly typical (Bok 2006; “Declining by Degrees”; Tinto 1993). So at least it wasn’t just my fault! Like most faculty, I like good lectures, and can learn a lot from them, and can deliver them too. But what is the appropriate place of lectures in undergraduate education? As scholars I thought we should take the research seriously, and the research suggests we over-rely on lecturing, especially for first year students. So I sought, somehow, to get my students to learn more effectively—for their sake, and my own.

### **Using Reacting at EMU**

Consequently, in 2006-07, I used a couple of Reacting to the Past games in three sections of my U.S. history, 100-level survey classes. Students responded positively, and I secured departmental approval to offer the American history survey courses in sections with a cap of 25 students (half the usual size of our sections), in order to “pilot” the Reacting method at Eastern in 2007-08. The purpose was to assess systemically its effectiveness with Eastern students.

I taught two “Reacting” sections of the first half of the survey course in fall 2007 and two “Reacting” sections of the second half of the survey course in winter 2008. Each had a maximum enrollment

of 25 per section. Securing this unusually low cap was vital: since the RTTP pedagogy is based on regular and active participation of all students in the game, a Reacting class needs a smaller size than is the norm at EMU for 100-level courses. Larger sections can kill Reacting's central quality of a highly interactive classroom: too long a line at the podium or too crowded a room physically conveys the reality that it is not possible for each student to participate equally. But with 25 or fewer, everyone can actively participate.

In addition to those four pilot sections of the American history survey, in 2007-08, I used my prototype RTTP game on the Civil Rights movement, "Montgomery 1956", in two upper level courses: HIST 319: History of the Civil Rights Movement (fall 2007) and HIST 315: History of Black Americans (winter and spring terms of 2008). The Montgomery game was also the second game played in the last half of the American history survey. These three upper level sections already had a cap of 25 students, due to their heavy writing requirements.

Undergraduates are not used to having fun while doing demanding academic work. 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" (Bok 2006, 123). Since the Reacting pedagogy requires much effort, in a variety of capacities (e.g., speaking, writing, and teamwork), Reacting offers one strategy of meeting the call of Derek Bok and others for basic changes in undergraduate education, so that undergraduates acquire more skills and knowledge while in college (Bok 2006).

And, Reacting works! After I assigned roles for "Greenwich Village 1913," one first-year, second-semester student approached me privately and expressed worry about failing the game. His reasons were many: He could not speak before a group, wrote "terribly" and hated writing, he did not "understand history," and "I could never be a leader." In sum, he was afraid of the responsibility and work required by the game. However, by the time the game ended weeks later, this young man had written superb papers (in character), given passionate and effective speeches, and led his faction to near victory over almost impossible odds. When the game was over he told me that, while he

had worked harder than he ever had in his life and really missed all the “free time” that he had enjoyed his prior semester in college, he knew he had “done more” in this game than he had ever imagined doing before, in any context. He even admitted to being pleasantly surprised by how much he enjoyed the reading. While this is merely one student’s story, his experience of going from fear to pride in accomplishment within four weeks is not unique among EMU students.

### **How Typical Were the EMU Students Who Did Reacting?**

Were the students who took Reacting-infused courses with me since 2006 typical of EMU students? Or did they select these courses because they were attracted in advance to the idea of Reacting games? The answer is two-fold. First, approximately 165 of the approximately 235 EMU students who have played Reacting games did so in one half or the other of the two-semester American history survey (HIST 123 and 124: History of the United States to, and since, 1877). Aside from a very few who took both parts of the survey with me as Reacting classes in different semesters, few or none of the students registering for my sections of HIST 123 and 124 knew it was going to be a Reacting class before the first day. In particular, the bulk of students in these sections selected the class without knowing a thing about me; they just chose a section that fit their schedules. These sections, especially those offered in the fall term, were dominated by first year students, but each also contained smaller numbers of older and more advanced students, as is typical of 100-level EMU classes.

The second part of the answer pertains to two upper level courses in African American history in which I have used the home-grown Reacting game, “Montgomery 1956.” Approximately 70 students in two upper level courses, HIST 315 and 319, have played this game (along with others in HIST 124). These students appear representative of majors and minors in history and related programs of study. Each section appeared to be composed of much the same types of students who have taken these courses with me for over a decade. Many aspire to be public school teachers. They are not first year students, and for them, my reputation no doubt has some affect on whether or not they take these classes. Perhaps my African American history classes attract somewhat more intellectually or socially venturesome students than

the average at EMU. Even if this were the case, I do not believe it is true to any greater extent than when compared to other courses that primarily attract majors and minors in history and the social sciences.

Therefore, it appears that my students in Reacting classes to date are fairly typical of EMU undergraduates overall. Unless data suggesting otherwise emerges in the future, it seems reasonable to conclude that the experience of the 235 students who participated in Reacting games so far is a reasonable representation of how larger numbers of EMU students would respond to the method. However, there may be increasing differences in the future between EMU students who take history courses versus those who do not, as the university's new general education program, which requires no history courses, is phased in; freshmen starting in fall 2007 were the first for whom the new general education plan applies. But nationwide, scientists, philosophers, and political scientists are as likely as historians to be using the Reacting method on their campuses, and that may be true at EMU in the future.

### **EMU Students and Reacting to the Past: An Assessment**

In this section, I present an array of data that speak to the experience of my students using Reacting to the Past, and to Reacting's impact upon them. I first present data on student attendance. Following this, I discuss two surveys that were filled out by 61 students in my winter 2008 RTTP courses, analyze student writing for Reacting assignments, compared to non-Reacting assignments. I also examine the written comments that students have made about Reacting on questionnaires that accompany two of the games used in the American history course and on their official EMU course rating forms.

#### *Attendance and Reacting Classes*

Reacting instructors consistently but informally report, at conferences sponsored by the Reacting to the Past consortium, that students in their RTTP classes miss far fewer class sessions than is typical in comparable classes. My casual observations of attendance in my 10 RTTP sections suggest much better attendance than is typical of many intro level courses. Seeking data that would support or contradict my impression of improved attendance, during winter 2008 I did a semester-long "headcount" of students in one Reacting section of

HIST 124. This headcount found that students were three and a half times more likely to skip class on a non-game playing day. For this section, on non-game days, an average of 7 out of 22 students were absent; on “game” days, an average of just 2 students missed class. Attendance was not formally factored into grades, and I did not tell students I was doing a headcount. Yet students in this class were somehow much more motivated to attend on game days than on what they call “regular” or “just notes” days. The semester had just slightly more game than non-game days, counting set-up and post-mortem as game days.

Furthermore, nearly every student who missed even one Reacting game day in my classes during the past two years has informed me in advance that he/she would be absent, and explained why. In contrast, during nineteen years of undergraduate teaching, at four institutions, I have never, outside of these Reacting classes, had more than a tiny fraction of absent students inform me in advance or explain why they were absent, even if I have stated such notice to be a requirement of the course. For my Reacting classes, I have not told students they need to contact me about missing classes, but they do so anyway. These class attendance data suggest that the Reacting games significantly alter students’ expectations of their own behavior by forging among students a new sense of responsibility for “their” class.

Not only do students miss few Reacting class meetings, – many students make a point of arriving at class early, ready to start work (or “play”) as early as possible. Once, five minutes ahead of the start of class, I witnessed one woman rush into the room, sit down with her fellow faction members, and apologize to them for being “late.” They briefed her on some tactical issues. Numerous students meet with fellow faction members hours in advance, to “prep” as a team for the game. When the class period is over, many students frequently had to be ushered out of the classroom, to allow the next class to use the room.

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 (Nathan 2005). RTTP faculty members at other schools informally report that their Reacting classes often get extraordinarily high attendance, some with 100% of the students at 100% of the classes.

Students in EMU's Reacting classes have frequently mentioned the games as a reason for coming to class.

Beyond this, many students in RTTP classes, aware of the negative impact on the game of not having all your teammates present, complain about absent classmates in their faction. Indeed, I have been implored by a few students to "force" those supposed scofflaws to show up, by imposing severe penalties (failing the course for missing one session has been suggested), no matter what the reason for the absence. Never outside of a RTTP class have I seen such concern by students for their classmates' attendance (or their study habits, for that matter). Despite such pleadings, I impose no particular punishment for missing class – but if you are absent on a day a vote is taken, or when your character should have petitioned for membership in the Boston Church of 1637, little can be done. In a Reacting game, as in sports, the game moves forward and only those present and "in the game" can contribute to a given "play." I do allow absent students to hand in papers late, but even so their faction is at a disadvantage when the character's paper is too late to have helped shape the dynamic of the game.

#### *Surveys of Students in My Three Winter 2008 RTTP Courses*

The two surveys reproduced in Tables 2-1 and 2-2 were administered in class on the same day as the University's official student ratings of the course and instructor, while I was out of the room. The resulting data from respondents in two sections of HIST 124 and one section of 315 are reported separately first and then aggregated in Table 2-1. They are aggregated only in Table 2-2. For the three classes, there were a combined 61 respondents. These three courses each had between 22-25 students at the end of the term. A few students were absent on the (non-game) day that the surveys were administered. Not all students answered each question; all percentages are based on the number of students who answered each question. Taken as a whole, these two surveys indicate a much higher level of engagement by these 61 respondents than is typical of most Eastern students.

The first survey asked direct questions about students' experience with the RTTP games they had played. The second survey asked no questions about RTTP directly, but instead posed questions that can assess student engagement in any history course, or even in

**Table 2-1: Survey on Students' Self-reported Experience with Reacting at EMU ( $n=61$ )**

<b>1. Were the two games an advantage or disadvantage compared to "normal" classes?</b>	<b>Advantage</b>	<b>Disadvantage</b>	<b>Both</b>
HIST 123 10 AM	16	3	3
HIST 124 11 AM	15	1	2
HIST 315	17	2	2
<b>Total</b>	48 (79%)	6 (10%)	7 (11%)
<b>2. Did you learn more through the games?</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
HIST 123 10 AM		15	5
HIST 124 11 AM		12	3
HIST 315		19	2
<b>Total</b>		46 (82%)	10 (18%)
<b>3. Did you do more work for the game than you would have done otherwise?</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
HIST 123 10 AM		17	4
HIST 124 11 AM		11	3
HIST 315		12	4
<b>Total</b>		40 (78%)	11 (22%)
<b>4. Would you recommend friends take classes with Reacting Games?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Depends</b>
HIST 123 10 AM	17	2	3
HIST 124 11 AM	15	2	1
HIST 315	18	0	3
<b>Total</b>	50 (82%)	4 (7%)	7 (11%)

virtually any college course. Russell Olwell helped me construct these surveys; their purpose was to gather information on students' general response to their Reacting classes and to collect data that may help assess whether Reacting works as a pedagogy that promotes students' ability to acquire knowledge and skills and to apply them to problem-solving. Derek Bok argues that "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" (2006, 117). The responses of EMU students in Reacting classes recorded on these surveys appear to indicate that the EMU Reacting classes fulfilled Bok's requirements.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2-2: Indicators of Student Engagement in Combined RTTP classes at EMU (*n=61*)**

<b>Student Behavior in HIST 123/124/315 Classes</b>	<b>More than 3 Times</b>	<b>1-3 Times</b>	<b>Never</b>
1. Asked questions in class	35 (57%)	25 (41%)	1 (2%)
2. Contributed to class discussions	39 (63%)	20 (33%)	2 (3%)
3. Prepared more than one draft of a paper	12 (23%)	31 (60%)	9 (17%)
4. Worked on a project that required using information from more than one source	27 (44%)	32 (52%)	2(3%)
5. Worked on a project that required using primary documents	21 (34%)	38 (62%)	1(2%)
6. Included conflicting perspectives in class discussions or writing assignments	15 (25%)	39 (65%)	6 (10%)
7. Came to class without completing reading or assignments	7 (12%)	42 (70%)	11 (18%)
8. Worked with other students on a project during class	27 (44%)	28 (46%)	6 (10%)
9. Worked with other students on a project outside class	14 (23%)	31 (51%)	16 (26%)
10. Stayed late after class to discuss issues from class with classmates	19 (31%)	35 (57%)	7 (11%)
11. Talked to the professor about class materials or assignments during class	14 (23%)	39 (65%)	7 (12%)
12. Talked to the professor about class materials or assignments after class	12 (20%)	39 (64%)	10 (16%)

Vincent Tinto stresses that “the more students are involved in the social and intellectual life of a college, the more frequently they make contact with faculty and other students about learning issues, especially outside the class, the more students are likely to learn” (1993, 69). Participating in class discussions, discussing academic work with peers outside of class, conversations with faculty members, and time devoted to academic work, are all indicators of student engagement and correlate with more effective learning. The EMU survey data suggest that Reacting produces high levels of student engagement in all these areas. A few examples follow. Question 2 of Table 2-2 shows that 63% of respondents said they had contributed to class discussions more than three times, and 33% said they had done so one to three times. Two students indicated “never.” These self-reported numbers are consistent with my observations of much heightened levels of class

participation in Reacting classes. (In contrast, in some EMU “seminars” and in most introductory and upper level lecture courses, the majority of students do not participate in class discussion even once, all semester.)<sup>5</sup>

Question 7 on the same survey found that 70% admitted to coming to the class “without completing reading or assignments” one to three times. This means that about seven in ten students in these classes asserted that they came to no more than three of approximately 42 class meetings without being prepared for class – which, if accurate, is an astonishingly high level of preparedness, compared to undergraduate norms. Even if inflated somewhat, these numbers are still impressive (Nathan 2005).

On questions 11 and 12, approximately 65% of respondents said they had talked to the professor in class and outside of class “about class material or assignments” one to three times; an additional 20% said they had done so more than three times. Table 2-1 shows that 82% of respondents believed that they had learned “more through the games.” These examples, and the other questions on the surveys, strongly suggest that at EMU, Reacting classes have produced higher levels of engagement than is the norm. In the future, I hope to do a revised version of these surveys in both Reacting and non-Reacting control classes.

A curious abnormality is evident in responses to two questions. On Question 9, 23% of respondents said they had worked with other students on a project “outside of class” more than 3 times, and another 51% said they had 1-3 times. That seems like a high level of out of class small group work, even though 26%, or 16 students, said they never did such group work outside of class. But of the 16 students who, in reply to Question 9, indicated that they had “Never” worked with classmates outside of class for a project, all but 5 also indicated, in reply to the next question, that they had stayed late after class to discuss issues from class with classmates; four said they had done so more than three times, and seven said they had between one and three times. Were those post-class discussions “work” for the class, or social interactions? They certainly demonstrate student engagement with the course. When students are doing intellectual work outside of class, but do not recognize it as homework, what is it? Learning.

I observed dozens of these post-class discussions; most of

them lasted 20 or 30 minutes and involved as many as 4-10 students by the time the hallway discussions finally broke up. These were usually more students at the beginning than at the end. Frequently there were two or more such hallway conversations going on simultaneously. All the post-class discussions among Reacting students that I observed centered around analyzing the intellectual problems posed by the game, such as strategies, historical evidence, rhetorical styles, research options, and the strengths and weaknesses of other players. Yet these eleven students who said they had “Never” worked with classmates on class work outside of class, while also reporting staying after class, appear to have regarded such discussions as social, not academic. (In retrospect, it is clear that the wording of this question was flawed, as it does not address time communicating online with classmates about class work, which for many students was considerable. Despite this, the responses and post-class behavior of students do suggest high levels of engagement by students, both with their peers, the course objectives, and the games.)

The EMU survey data suggest that EMU Reacting students were so seriously engaged with the learning objectives of the course (which were wrapped up in the RTTP games) that most of them voluntarily and enthusiastically participated in intellectual discussions outside of class: 88% of my winter 2008 students reported staying after class to converse intellectually with their peers (Table 2-2, Question 10). This is a rare choice for American college students at nearly any university (Nathan 2005). I further submit that my students found these talks among themselves to be personally meaningful and socially bonding. These post-class conversations about the “game” thus address two of the biggest problems in American undergraduate education today: 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.

While the problem of students under-preparing for class is widely lamented among faculty members, more than a few of my Reacting students told me, in tones of mixed exasperation and bragging, that they had spent more hours preparing their oral and written “in character” work in a week than they had devoted to all their other classes combined for a month. Indeed, on Question 3 of the survey, 78% of respondents said they had done more work through the

games than they would have expected in a non-Reacting class. About 82% reported learning more because they had played Reacting games, and the same number said they would recommend Reacting classes to friends (Table 2-1).

These survey data suggest that students in Reacting classes are well aware of their responsibility to their teammates. For each day of a Reacting game, there is an unlimited amount of preparation that one can do outside of class, and a wide range of in-class game activities that can be initiated in pursuit of one's "victory objectives." At the first Reacting to the Past conference I attended, I heard that students in RTTP courses quickly come to see the "instant dividends" that go to the best prepared players in the game. The EMU data and my experiences teaching Reacting support that observation; students do the homework for Reacting because they can use it right away. So, too, are the disadvantages of not being prepared immediately noticeable.

#### *Writing in Reacting Courses at EMU*

In all my classes, writing is a major part of student assessment and their grades; however, the types of writing are different in non-RTTP classes. My impression is that my students have done better writing "in character" for my HIST 123/124 courses than the same students do for their "traditional" history essays in the same classes. I have found that EMU students tend to write with more detail, better rhetoric, stronger analysis, and more sophisticated use of historical evidence for a Reacting assignment than for "regular" not-in-character papers. But these are impressionistic conclusions, based on my 14 years of teaching at EMU, and on the approximately 235 students who've done at least one Reacting game at EMU. No one else has read all these papers, and these conclusions are not (yet) derived from a formal rubric with measurable indices of student writing, followed over a long period of time.

But I do know something about what is the normal range of student writing in 100 level EMU history classes, as well as in my two regularly offered 300 level courses in African American history. If the Reacting method inspires students to make greater effort to write well, this results probably less from the instructor's conduct than from students' desire to live up to the needs of the team, or "faction," that they are part of in a Reacting game. A student may write a paper for

her professor; in a Reacting class, she may write a polemical essay or newspaper article, or sermon or speech, in the character of, say, Margaret Sanger or Benjamin Franklin or a Puritan minister. This writing is written less for the professor than to influence other players in the game; the student who is Sanger seeks to save women's lives and to advance her goals in the game. The student who is Franklin wishes to displace the Penn family's hold on the colony of Pennsylvania, and to carry out an aggressive foreign policy against the French and Indians on the frontier. Such large objectives engender passions that are more engaging, and perhaps more conducive to good writing, for many students than just writing a paper for the professor.

In the future, I hope to more systematically assess student writing done for their Reacting games. A different but related matter to investigate is that there may be an unanticipated carryover from Reacting games to non-game writing assignments, at least in the same course. For the Spring (May-June) 2008 semester, I taught HIST 315 and used both the Montgomery game and a new Reacting game, called "Boston 1965," which I am creating as a "short" Reacting game (one week) for use in my Civil Rights Movement course. It is highly experimental. The game centers on allegations of systemic racism in the Boston school system of the 1960s; its text is Jonathan Kozol's classic memoir, *Death at an Early Age* (1967). In addition to the "in character" writing and public speaking for the "Boston 1965" game, students were also assigned a regular academic essay on Kozol's book, requiring them to assess the relevance of that text to the overarching themes of the whole semester. This assignment was typical of the type of broad essay I have assigned in the course for years. To do well, students must display both a mastery of a given set of information and an ability to relate that information to broader themes of the course.

Quite unexpectedly, in late June 2008, I found the resulting essays to be the strongest set of essays I have ever received for the course, which I've taught at EMU since 1994. I awarded 17 papers grades in the A-/A/A+ range, five in the B-/B/B+ range, and one C+. (One student did not hand in the assignment and got an incomplete for the term.) Astonished at the ratio of 17:1 for the A range papers compared to C range papers, I read the stack a third time. (Normally I read papers twice and assign grades on the second reading.) This third reading satisfied me that I had fairly graded the papers: They were ex-

ceptionally good. But I wondered, why were they so good? Did the short, experimental “Boston 1965” Reacting game force or encourage students to read the book more closely? Did it motivate them to write more thoughtfully?

Curious about this, after submitting semester grades, I emailed the class and asked for comments on this point. Although only four of 22 students responded, all said that the game had encouraged them to approach the Kozol book more seriously. As one student, Charles Carson, wrote, “I do believe that playing the ‘game’ enhanced our ‘reverence’ for the material. I think that it made doing a good job on the written report mandatory, so to speak” (2008, pers. comm.). Similarly, Keith Shulaw observed that “I do think the game may have helped with the final paper,” since while playing “Boston 1965” and researching their roles, “everyone was looking back through the book so often that we gained a greater understanding of the book” and of its relationship to the broad themes of the course (2008, pers. comm.). The Boston game – which occupied just three class sessions and needs design improvements – appears to have spurred a higher quality of writing, even on non-game formal essays, than is usual in this 300 level history class.

Overall conclusions about RTTP’s impact on student writing at EMU must remain somewhat preliminary at this time, but the available evidence is promising. Certainly, for an instructor like myself who has long been frustrated by students’ seemingly indifferent approach to their assignments, seeing a student speak seriously of a particular pedagogy that has “enhanced our ‘reverence’ for the material” assigned is encouraging.

### *Students’ Written and Oral Comments on Reacting at EMU*

Many Reacting games include surveys for students to fill out after completing the game. The four-page questionnaire my students did this semester at the conclusion of “Greenwich Village 1913” produced too many revealing comments to assess fully here, but I will quote a few representative samples. One student, in response to the question, “What did you like best about the experience of the GV 1913 game?” wrote that “I loved the competition and having a leadership role.” The same student said she would recommend a class using the same game to students who “want a class that makes them think rath-

er than memorize info and regurgitate it on a test.” When asked if the game ever made you feel “uncomfortable,” another student wrote “No!” and explained: “Everyone was in character, so I never felt like it was me who was talking, plus I really knew my stuff.” Her comment reflects what Carnes has called “escaping from oneself” in a Reacting game: “Reacting frees students from the constraints of self by assigning them roles – and thus identities – of a very different nature: they become oligarchs in ancient Athens, or Confucian literati in Ming China. Many students are liberated by this assumption of an alternative identity” (2005, 6-7).

Another student assessed the experience as follows:

Instead of just opening a history book and studying it, we got a first hand experience of what it was like. We got to relive history even if it was a 50 minute class. I like it a lot but at times my character confused me, [since] I didn't know her exact beliefs at times. I don't think any changes should be made because it was actually really fun and educational.

Significantly, this student reports being “confused” by his character’s beliefs and goals, but is opposed to “any changes” – such as not doing Reacting – because the game was “fun and educational.” This student appears to possess the courage required to confront confusion – which is a requirement for any learner who wishes to successfully learn something new.

The handwritten comments made by students on the official university course/instructor rating forms indicated an enthusiastic response to RTTP games. A total of twenty-six handwritten responses were given in my HIST 123 sections during fall 2007 to the “What did you like most about this instructor and course” question on the EMU course rating form. Twenty-four of these 26 respondents clearly indicated that they liked the RTTP games. The other two comments may or may not have been directed at RTTP. Other students skipped this question. These forms show, overall, a very high level of enthusiasm and interest in Reacting games. One student’s observation on the student rating form for a winter 2008 section sums up the enthusiasm of many student comments on the method at EMU: “Reacting games are the true way to learn history!”<sup>6</sup>

A few sample comments from the fall 2007 student ratings forms for my Reacting sections follow. "I liked the games," wrote one student, because they "made me actually learn more." One opined that "The class was much more engaging and [more] involved than other history courses I've had." Another student wrote, "I enjoyed the activities, it was easier to be motivated to come to class knowing I was not going to be bored." One observed that "I like how I learned more about the subjects from playing a game than I would have had it been a normal lecture class." Another student enthused that the RTTP games "made me want to come to class and learn."

Near the end of the fall 2007 term, during the post-mortem session after the end of our second game, "Forest Diplomacy," one student said that this was "my only class I am comfortable going to, because I know everyone here." Her comment was immediately echoed by her classmates, for whom the consensus was that in most of their classes, they usually knew few classmates at all and typically knew no one really well. Significantly, these fall semester sections of HIST 123 were largely (but not exclusively) filled with first year students, for whom the need to develop social ties and a collegiate lifestyle that will lead to a successful college experience is especially acute. While in some ways this discussion was "off topic" in a post-mortem discussion of a game set on the eve of the Seven Years War, it did reveal much of the emotional appeal of Reacting and hence about the sources of its effectiveness.

Nearly all of the critical comments about Reacting made on the official ratings form for my fall 2007 RTTP sections were focused on making the game experience better, rather than criticizing the RTTP games as a whole. One student wrote, "I disliked how long some of the games went on – I think there should be a tighter schedule." Another suggested, "Maybe try different games," and one student wished we had played a "Civil War game." Another wrote that during the "Forest Diplomacy" game, "I felt most of the other students either did not understand what was required or did not care, so it was difficult for me to fulfill my" victory objectives. Her complaint was that her experience of the game suffered because her classmates didn't put as much into it as she did. Others complained that, "We did not have enough time with the games" and many complained that non-game days were dull compared to the game days.

Reflecting the fact that these were “regular” courses into which Reacting had been inserted, a handful of students complained about what was not covered in lecture in order to do the Reacting games. (My Reacting classes to date have been approximately half RTTP, half lecture.) A few pointedly said they enjoyed my lectures and would have liked more of them.

During the same week that these formal ratings were completed, two students who were nearing graduation told me privately that the games did less for them at that point in their education than they would have years earlier. These two students appreciated Reacting as innovative teaching, but one said its high demands in time and effort hindered her work for other classes; she specifically praised the pedagogy for building social ties among students, but said that at this point in her life that meant less to her than its extra work load cost her.

Some students expressed anxiety about facing unpredictability. This is a genuinely demanding aspect of a Reacting game: it is not meant to be routine or predictable. Reacting deliberately lacks the familiar routine and rhythm of a lecture course. Yet life itself is unpredictable, and if a bit – or even a lot – of unpredictability in the classroom is the price to be paid for improved learning outcomes, the bargain seems pedagogically worthwhile.

In sum, while there were criticisms made of the method by EMU students during the last two years, the overall response by students who have played one or two games in a course is highly enthusiastic. It also appears that most of the issues EMU Reacting veterans have complained about would be solved by having a series of stand-alone Reacting courses, designed for first and second year students.

RTTP at EMU did not reach all my students during this pilot year. Each section had a few drops early on – this is the norm for EMU classes of all types. And a very few students who persisted through the semester failed the term. Some – perhaps a half dozen out of approximately 235 – clearly failed to engage with their role or the game itself in any meaningful way. But these same students also failed to engage with the “traditional” components of the course. The pedagogy did not reach this very small number of students; nor, however, is there any evidence that the pedagogy was adverse to them. Further, much evidence suggests that the pedagogy deeply engaged the large majority of students in Reacting classes offered in the past two years at EMU.

### Reacting's Promise for EMU: Strong Learning Communities

RTTP cannot be everything and will not reach every student. But it appears entirely capable of doing quite a lot for a large number of EMU students. At Eastern, and across the nation, first year college students typically go through their day, their week, their entire first year, without getting to know many classmates, without engaging intellectually with fellow students or faculty members, without getting to know even one professor well, without really experiencing genuine enjoyment in a course; college is for many a lonely experience (Nathan 2005).

This loneliness and lack of intellectual engagement, and the starvation for college fun that is more meaningful than parties and drinking and more stimulating than watching TV with a few friends, are closely tied to why students drop out of, or fail college. As Vincent Tinto has written in his book on student attrition, "The academic difficulties, social isolation, and sheer sense of bewilderment" of students' transition to college life contribute significantly to student attrition (1993, 46). Rebekah Nathan observed, "Most professors and administrators overestimate the role that academics plays in student culture, and as a result they magnify the impact of teachers and classes on student life and decisions" (2005, 140). Indeed, during the transition to college, students turn more to peers than to faculty members or university staff.

Many students survive these difficulties, but many do not and fail to graduate. Even larger numbers fail to learn as much as they could while in college, even if they do ultimately graduate. Retention and less than optimal learning are, I submit, real issues on my campus and most others, too. Peer relations are central to what students learn, to what they don't learn, and to what contributes to students' leaving college without a degree (or, in some cases, even without many credits). In their study of *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini concluded that "peers constitute [a] powerful socializing agent in shaping persistence and degree completion." Yet "the precise nature of the peer influence remains ambiguous" (2005, 418). Some peer influences benefit, and others hinder, students' academic achievement and degree completion.

Reacting may have the potential to greatly enlarge the role of intellectual issues among undergraduates during non-class hours, and to deepen their intellectual engagement with coursework as well, if Reacting classes were widely offered. Reacting games, with their small group interaction, lively peer interactions, teamwork, elements of play and the acquisition of game roles, entice students to invest time and effort in “playing” the game. They become emotionally as well as intellectually invested in the game – in doing the work.<sup>7</sup> Emotional investment in an activity increases effort devoted to it. Reacting games usually create high levels of emotional involvement.

Most of my Reacting students worked very hard, played hard, and achieved a lot. The games at times are bewildering, no doubt, but that bewilderment was shared. It was something that EMU students came to see themselves as conquering together, as classmates and as “factions,” in order to achieve their “victory objectives” – to win and be a valued member of the faction.

I have seen the Reacting method successfully break down the isolation that so many undergrads feel in their college courses and on campus generally. The isolation that so many students have on campus is not the result of long hours spent studying in isolation from other students: “43% of freshmen reported spending between one to ten hours per seven day week preparing for class” (Nathan 2005, 32-3). From what my Reacting students tell me, most of them spent much more than 10 hours a week during RTTP games preparing for class, and some factions’ strategy meetings outside of class lasted nearly that long. Nearly 77% of respondents said that Reacting games were an “advantage” compared to “normal classes” and two-thirds of respondents said they had done more work in the Reacting class than they would have otherwise (Table 2-1, Questions 1 & 3).

Clearly, the Reacting pedagogy and its intellectual rigor can promote improved academic achievement and valuable social connections among classmates. Anything that can so positively influence students in two vital realms of college life, academic achievement and social development, is well worth pursuing aggressively at regional state universities like Eastern Michigan.

The games require work (written, oral, and organizational) on an order far above what many students are accustomed to. Reacting also entails uncertainty as students are compelled to venture into un-

known territory. In these games, students may rule empires and decide the fate of nations – while also “running” the class (Carnes 2005). All this is unfamiliar territory. So is the requirement of self-directed learning. People often fear the unknown. Yet by venturing into what is unknown, human beings learn. Students somehow seem to grasp this intuitively, and they are drawn to excitement, which is why their overall response to Reacting is so enthusiastic.

What’s striking to me is how many students come to a RTTP class smiling and engage classmates in conversation as soon as they arrive, about the game (or curriculum) or other topics. Many deliberately arrive early, and many of them stay after class and talk. They get lunch together, and “shoot emails” to their group constantly. They leave class late, talking about what they did and saw in class. Some may get angry when they are losing; but these angry students will likely come back for the next session of the game well-prepared with brilliantly effective speeches and devious proposals to divide their opponents and turn the tables in the game. And then afterwards, members of two sides will compare notes and laugh in the hallway for half an hour. Reacting games are serious, but Reacting students are not grim.

The winter 2008 surveys, and students’ other comments, show that EMU students’ responses to Reacting are overwhelmingly positive. This is true elsewhere too: “Most students who take Reacting,” Mark Carnes observes, “say that it is their most powerful learning experience in college.” Carnes also notes that the term “learning communities” has become “so common that often administrators forget how rarely it is achieved. Reacting builds strong learning communities” (2005, 1-2).

The data from other schools that have used Reacting, along with evidence of Reacting’s efficacy with Eastern students derived by piloting the pedagogy in my own classes, make a compelling case: for EMU, Reacting offers a strategy that could reduce student isolation, create strong learning communities, enhance learning, and improve retention. It has the potential of doing so through the use of intellectually demanding games in a series of undergraduate classes, taken by students during their first two years in college. That, however, is a vision for the future at my regional state university, a vision of the possible based on the goal of achieving more (Hutchings 2000). One of the things the Reacting to the Past method teaches is that people can

shape the world in which they live, and thus affect their future.

The future of this campus, and of other regional state universities, is of course unknown at present. However, this much is clear now: The several hundred EMU students who have “played” Reacting to the Past games to date have already demonstrated that this pedagogy allowed them to build positive social ties with their peers while also devoting extraordinary efforts to the academic work required for their Reacting classes. For these EMU students, intellectual work was made pleasurable and sociable. Their learning was made visible by reacting to the past.

### Notes

1. Most data presented in this paper were collected during my pilot use of Reacting in EMU classes capped at 25 students in 2007-08. In the previous school year, I used Reacting in a few classes, but without a lower cap. I collected little systemic information on the method's effectiveness until the 2nd year. Altogether, in those 2 academic years, I have had approximately 235 students play Reacting games in ten sections (and four courses); over two-thirds of these students were during 2007-08.
2. Interested readers can find much information on Reacting method at [www.barnard.columbia.edu/reacting](http://www.barnard.columbia.edu/reacting).
3. Creating an effective Reacting game is a lengthy process that entails game design issues, questions of scholarly emphasis and pedagogical goals, and trial and error in the classroom. The Montgomery game is far from polished. Consequently, I fear that my data on student responses to RTTP as a method may reflect the fact that most of the students in my 2007-08 Reacting classes have played the not-yet ready for prime time “Montgomery 1956” game. But students have responded enthusiastically to the game and encouraged me to develop a cycle of Reacting games on the civil

rights movement. Despite these fears, the underdeveloped nature of the Montgomery game does not appear to have diminished the students' enthusiasm for the method. Significantly, the Montgomery game was used in both my 300-level African American classes and in two sections of HIST 124.

4. My piloting of RTTP at EMU and the present assessment of those classes constitute one modest effort to respond to what Bok has identified as "a need for each institution to conduct its own carefully constructed studies to determine the effects of active, problem-based teaching on its students" (Bok 2006, 117fn).
5. See Nathan 2005, esp. pages 94-5, for an insightful discussion of why participating in class discussion is so atypical, and unappealing, for most students in most courses.
6. I should add here that Reacting can be used in many fields besides history, and that there are many ways, not just one "true way," to learn history. But this student's pleasure in the Reacting method cannot be minimized.
7. Even the intense competition between factions helped cement friendships, much like opposing athletes who develop respect for one another on the field may bond as friends off the field. Since no Reacting game lasts all term, the field of play changes within a RTTP class: the classmate who was your rival in one game may be your closest ally in the next.

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