

UTILIZING GAME-BASED AMERICAN SIMULATION PEDAGOGY TO TEACH NORWEGIAN STUDENTS AMERICAN STUDIES

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Abstract: In Scandinavian countries, the teaching of American studies has traditionally taken place within the discipline of English. In recent years, English has moved away from the predominantly Anglo-American approach to include perspectives from a wider range of English-speaking countries. American studies is devoted less class time than it used to get, and consequently, new methods of teaching and learning need to be adopted. This article argues that the American immersion pedagogy *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP), an in-class game method that takes students to historical moments through characters acting out American historical twists, is an excellent high-impact teaching method. RTTP is a student-centered pedagogy that offers engagement and active learning of American history to Norwegian students. Through collected data from English students at the University of Agder, the article aims to discuss how this methodology can enhance learning and integration of American studies.

Keywords: simulation, *Reacting to the Past*, active learning, flipped classroom, American studies

In higher education in Norway, the instruction of American studies takes place within the subject of English. Historically, American studies has been one of the main pillars of the subject of English as most Norwegian universities and colleges have used an Anglo-American approach in scholarly instruction. However, English, both as a school subject and as a discipline, has changed immensely in recent decades and has become more interdisciplinary than ever before. With the vast diversity currently embedded into English, more and more material of sub-disciplines like grammar, literature, culture, society, phonetics, sociolinguistics, and history, to mention but a few, is being included in course outlines and curricula. Moreover, a larger spread of readings from other English-speaking countries than the US and the UK is, much more than before, also appended to the subject.

Hence, American studies receives less class time and instruction attention than before, leading instructors to contemplate new and innovative teaching and learning methods. As more content should be covered in reduced time, we argue that high-impact teaching and learning strategies should be adopted to a larger degree in the future than we as authors witness at the moment of writing. Still, too much instruction in the subject of English in Norwegian higher education occurs through the delivery-of-information mode that leaves students passive in their own learning.

Consequently, we contend in this article that the American immersion pedagogy of *Reacting to the Past* (RTTP) is a rewarding high-impact learning method to utilize in the teaching of American studies within the subject of English. Under the strained circumstances American studies and other fields of English find themselves in currently, active learning and student participation are called for to cover as much content as possible in an effective and shorter period of class time.¹

Reacting to the Past: High-Impact Teaching and Active Learning

RTTP is a student-centered pedagogy that offers engagement, participation, and active learning of history.² The in-class simulation method takes students to critical historical moments through characters who act out American historical twists in the classroom. The game pedagogy, through the allocated roles/characters, allows students to immerse themselves in these moments and critically debate questions and perspectives built into the different games. This pedagogy invites students into the historical moments and asks them to make a claim, to involve themselves deeply in the different perspectives. In doing so, the historical moments come to life and are more engaging as the pedagogy fosters students' deeper sense of commitment with historical events and the ethical questions associated with those moments.

The simulations vary in length and in the time required to complete them. The instructor's manual often provides multiple models for how the game play can happen. The games often start with an opening plenary session where the characters outline the issues under debate. The structure from then on can vary; characters may host a faction meeting with others who hold similar ideals, or there may be meetings between specific characters. The final session of the simulation usually ends in a vote, or votes, on the key issues at stake. The indeterminant characters have the power to sway the final result of the simulation, even though most RTTP simulations tend to be formed to favor the historical outcome. It is the following discussion, in what is referred to as the post-mortem, where students are able to extend their analysis to *why* and *how* the outcome of the simulation either varied from or mirrored the historical outcome. Throughout the simulation, teachers can integrate the main game questions in a multitude of ways, making it interdisciplinary, just like American studies.

The Benefits of Using *Reacting to the Past* in Teaching American Studies in Norway

In this section we will provide arguments for why RTTP is a suitable high-impact teaching method tailor-made to enhance the learning outcomes of American studies in more effective and concentrated ways. It is worth noting that this paper discusses the benefits of using RTTP and does not extensively focus on negative aspects. RTTP may not be the solution for all instructors as it can be seen as time-consuming in focusing on particular historical moments rather than giving a cursory review of American history. Moreover, RTTP may, from instructors' point of view, leave the learning to the students, making teachers redundant in the classroom.

However, with less class time on instructors' hands, teaching efficiency has become more of an issue in recent years. Still, too many instructors rely on information delivery through lecturing to a generation of students who seem unfit to depend on only this traditional form of learning. With an expanding subject like English, instructors' fears of giving up control in the auditorium, and a bias toward an attitude of teaching your own students in the way you as an instructor were taught, lead to a larger gap between students and teachers.

In fact, in a binary system of delivering and receiving information, students reproduce this information in the exam in some shape or form, but this "teaching-to-the-exam" format has limited usefulness for longer in-depth learning. Delivering information through the lecture format is a form of educational control where instructors impart information and students take notes and too frequently reproduce the notes at the exam. In such a system, instructors believe that learning has occurred if the grades are good. However, if grades are poor, teachers often blame students for not being up to standards and not mastering the higher education format rather than being self-reflective, evaluating their

own teaching methods. If the aim of education is to equip students with strategies to use and reuse their knowledge and skills, this one-sided learning has little merit and restricted effectiveness. Anecdotal conversations with students as well as more formal surveys in both the US and Norway show that students quickly forget most of what they learned after a lecture, and even more so after an examination.

Hence, we would argue, in the light of how English as a subject and American studies as a discipline develop, that adopting an innovative pedagogy like RTTP transcends students' perceptions of being recipients of instructors' selected information, often provided on the instructors' terms. RTTP offers a way for students to engage in multiple modalities of active learning and knowledge production, for example research, reading, writing, arguing and developing skill sets such as critical thinking, public speaking, and student collaboration learning. Moreover, RTTP challenges the typical transactional expositional approach to education by fostering personal and intellectual development in the creation of complex, reflective participation in cultural themes and issues rather than the mundane discourse often favored by American studies textbooks or antiquated forms of teaching.

The founder of RTTP—Mark Carnes of Barnard College, Columbia University—claims in his book *Minds of Fire* (2014) that disengaged students, poor retention, and poor academic performance made him bring gaming into the classroom.³ Carnes recognized student engagement with the "subversive play worlds" (gaming) and constructed a pedagogy that could actively engage the college community.⁴ As he notes, play is central to learning and learning often happens outside of classrooms, in residential halls, on sports teams, and through ensembles.⁵ Bringing back learning, as is Carnes's central argument for using a pedagogy like RTTP, is a building block in

the college community, and RTTP offers an opportunity to take this extended learning concept into the classroom.

It is precisely this argument and this emphasis on skills-based learning through playing that we promote to further utilize as an excellent learning strategy for the teaching of American studies in the future. Ultimately, American studies, as one of the traditional cornerstones of the subject of English, is under pressure from other area studies in the broadening subject. Thus, we believe that English as a subject finds itself in a time of transition where instructors and students alike will need to locate new high-impact practices of teaching and learning to facilitate education in American studies for future generations of students.

For the last several years, we have worked with bringing this high-impact learning strategy of the RTTP experience to Norwegian university and middle-school classrooms. In order to try to convince future teachers to introduce game playing in their own classrooms, we decided to place the pedagogy primarily in teacher training programs. Based on the surveys we have conducted after playing, student responses clearly indicate that they enjoyed that the lecture-controlled classroom was supplanted with a truly active learning space. In a postgame survey, thirty-five Norwegian students in two classes were asked how they experienced participating in RTTP and how their involvement differed from a typical Norwegian classroom.

Interestingly, each of the thirty-five responses highlighted an active learning component of the games to illustrate the differences between traditional classrooms and RTTP classrooms. This representative feedback illustrates how these future teachers perceived the game-playing experience: "I love how it promotes and requires active participation, discussion, critical thinking and argumentative skills on the fly. Compare

this to the 'typical' classroom where pupils are passive, and you get a whole different learning outcome."⁶ The emphasis on skills-based learning in this comment is important, as it illustrates the different types of learning present in an RTTP classroom.

By far the most intriguing data point of our surveys comes from the fall 2022 survey, where 100 percent of the students (seventeen) either agreed (18 percent; three students) or strongly agreed (82 percent; fourteen students) with the statement "[r]eacting encourages a sense of cooperation among students and fosters a 'learning community.'"⁷ This point emphasizes the communal nature of RTTP in the classroom and the interdependent nature of all students learning and participating so their faction will win the game. The result is that students master the content of the given classroom because they are responsible for their own learning and held accountable for that information by their peers—if you are not prepared for class, you let your side down, not the professor.

Moreover, RTTP also teaches students how to present the material through discussion, argumentation, speaking, and critical thinking. Another student noted, "[a]n RTTP classroom demands way more preparation, and we are much more responsible for our own learning. The game allows us to be creative and do something different" by tapping into student creativity in the active learning process.⁸ And in the field of active learning, Hagood, Watson and Williams note, "[a]ctive learning means that students are required to engage in cognitive processing, and the best active learning strategies are structured in a way so all students in a class are compelled to be part of the learning process. Therefore, a key trait of impactful active learning strategies is that it is difficult for all students to opt out of participation."⁹

Learning communities foster inspiration for group work, allowing students to discuss, engage, and together agree on ways forward while encouraging each other to perform at their best. When asked about positive game experiences, students noted, “I think the class had a lot of fun doing this, everyone had to engage in discussion, ask questions. This way everyone could be involved,” and “I learned a lot and I think it was fun. It also brought [me] closer to my fellow students.”¹⁰ As this feedback suggests, learning to work together also promotes yet another learning outcome, namely increased critical thinking skills. When asked in the survey what skills they adopted from playing, 95 percent identified critical thinking as a central skill.¹¹

After observing multiple university classes in American studies at Minnesota State University-Moorhead, Luther College, and the University of Agder, we claim that Norwegian students tend to be generally less prepared compared to American students when it comes to reading and interpreting primary texts. This is arguably the case in American studies, as topics in this field are usually reading-intensive. However, reading changed significantly in our RTTP classes. When asked in the survey if the game enhanced their abilities to understand the ideas and historical context presented in the game, 94 percent answered “yes.” At first, students struggled to learn the material required to play the game on their own but using it in the game helped them understand the material much more readily. Ultimately, this feedback suggested that reading about American immigration, slavery, the removal of Native Americans, and the Civil Rights Movement produced more holistic learning among students when placed in the context of a competitive RTTP game. Being able to utilize the knowledge in playing proved a wider purpose of reading the sources.¹²

Another important aspect of RTTP is the liberation of playing the game “as your character.” Understanding and arguing positions they might not support as their 2024 selves was much easier when students played characters in the game and understood the period from their character’s point of view. Some students reflected on how the game helped raise their understanding to a “new level” by giving them an opportunity to be part of history.¹³ Playing a game and the amusement of collaboration and being someone other than themselves shifts the focus away from instrumental learning to something that is fun to be part of. Students seem to forget that they are in a learning situation as they become immersed in their characters and their characters’ historical moments. To echo Carnes, “true learning happens when students are engaged and immersed in a game without realizing that learning is going on. That is when they learn the most.”¹⁴

As we have noted, critical thinking is central to RTTP and high-impact learning practices. The benefits of using role-playing to help students understand and reflect on the historical past and link those reflections to today’s world are perhaps best illustrated by this student response: “[i]t helped me to see that we somehow did the same to the Sami people as well. We forced them to change and move—forced them to be something they are not.”¹⁵ This student was part of the class who played the RTTP game *Red Clay, 1835: Cherokee Removal and the Meaning of Sovereignty*.¹⁶ This viewpoint underlines one of our desired goals for RTTP, namely that students realize that learning history, and more specifically in this context American history, is a dynamic process of acquiring insights into the past to better understand societies of today.

As we noted above, time is increasingly limited in Scandinavian American studies classrooms. The question really becomes how we can make certain that students learn the material we think

is important at a time when ideas about effective teaching and learning are changing. Teaching in a traditional lecture-based format can be problematic today as it is not clear if students are willing, or able, to learn from this fashion anymore. One of our missions with RTTP is to enlighten instructors on the huge gap that exists between what they believe constitutes learning and what actually does. Clearly, it is in this intersection that we vouch for RTTP as a good teaching tool for future instructors of American studies. Being willing to take a calculated risk by introducing simulation pedagogy will hopefully result in deepened learning and bring past events, decisions, and actions into current perspectives.

Notes

1. In conversations with colleagues around Norway over many years, it is still a widespread impression that lecture-based teaching is the dominating mode of instruction. This impression is also carried out by survey responses in 2019, 2022 and 2023.

2. RTTP is an American pedagogy that came out of Barnard College, Columbia University. Games are mostly written by American colleagues, but the authors of this article have developed a simulation game on Norwegian immigration to the American Midwest. For more information on RTTP, see <https://reactingconsortium.org/>.

3. Carnes, *Minds on Fire*.

4. Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 64.

5. Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 64.

6. Data from an in-class anonymous survey given autumn 2019.

7. Data from an in-class anonymous survey given autumn 2022.

8. Survey 2022.

9. Hagood et al., "Reacting to the Past," 3.

10. Data from an in-class anonymous survey given autumn 2023.

11. Surveys 2019, 2022, 2023.

12. Surveys 2019, 2022, 2023.

13. Survey 2023.

14. Carnes, lecture at the Annual Institute, RTTP, June 2017, Barnard College, New York.

15. Survey 2023.

16. Weaver and Weaver, *Red Clay*.

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