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Theology as “Reacting” Role-Play: 

The Reform of King Josiah Curriculum from the Reacting to the Past (RTTP) Consortium

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Abstract

This fall semester, four sections of THL226 Old Testament engaged in a 2.5 week role-playing game centered around the reform of King Josiah from 2 Kings 22-23. Students played out specific characters from the reform—priests, prophets, royal couriers, merchants, soldiers, and others—in debating and voting on the measures under consideration in 622 BCE Judah. The Josiah game curriculum develops out of a "Reacting to the Past" consortium of college educators who use this pedagogy to teach discipline-specific content while achieving other general education learning outcomes. By writing position papers, giving speeches, and collaborating with other "faction" members, students aim to persuade their peers to act and vote according to their specified victory objectives. In this way, students take on leadership roles in the classroom, exercise new-found critical thinking muscles, and produce course content with a new motivation—to win the game.

Methodology

Most RTTP games take about three weeks to play out. This includes time on the front end for students to research, and for the professor to teach about the context of the game; it includes time for the students to "play" the game by writing, speaking, and collaborating to accomplish their unique character role objectives; and it includes a day of "post-mortem" on the back end for discussion about how the game went, lessons learned, and what really happened. These games are student-led, and can be rigorous (or not) according to the intention of the professor.

Student Testimonials

Transferable Skills

"I am not the strongest leader ever; it just is not really in my current state. When I was given this job as the head leader in the game, I was very nervous. I was unsure how it was going to go. I had no background knowledge on Asaiah either. I learned that I CAN be a great leader in front of my peers when I relax and be confident. I actually enjoyed it in the end and am proud of myself for stepping out of my comfort zone."

"During the game there were a few times... I basically knew my own position and they [other students] were asking me questions about why my position was the way it was and I had to come up with stories and reasons as to why keeping the "high places" would help the economy and why it would help my inn... This showed me that I am better at thinking on my feet than I thought I was. This was something really cool for me to learn about myself."

"I was able to imagine how a prophet feels when giving a prophesy, because if it is false, they are killed... However, I learned to jump in order to succeed. I was able to do more throughout the game by taking risks and not being afraid of failing or losing."

Critical Reflections

Control: RTTP depends on giving students control of the context for an extended period of time. It feels risky as an instructor, and it is. The temptation always is to step into the scene and direct with a heavy hand; yet research shows that RTTP games are more effective when students have autonomy to correct each other and learn from their mistakes. Some students will do less work (= take a passive role) in the game, but there is pressure from their peers to pull their weight in order to achieve mutual objectives.

Carnes, Barnard College Professor of History and founder of the Reacting to the Past pedagogy. The "Reform of King Josiah" RTTP curriculum is only one of many that the consortium has developed. The pedagogy emerges out of the discipline of history, but there are relevant games for courses throughout the Arts and Sciences. For more information, visit http://reactingcmu.org or consult the RTTP Facebook "faculty lounge" for advice from faculty veterans. One can also peruse the book Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College, written by Mark Carnes, Barnard College Professor of History and founder of the Reacting to the Past pedagogy.