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## Reacting to the Past as Education for Leadership

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## Reacting to the Past as Education for Leadership

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editor for their helpful comments. I also owe a special thanks to all my students who have participated in Reacting games over the years.

# REACTING TO THE PAST AS EDUCATION FOR LEADERSHIP

by JAVIER HIDALGO, University of Richmond

Many universities aim to teach leadership. One survey of university mission statements found that, out of the 312 institutions in the sample, 101 university mission statements mentioned the development of leadership skills.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a growing number of universities have established leadership studies programs.<sup>2</sup> But how can universities and leadership studies programs in particular effectively teach leadership skills? Dean Elmuti, William Minnis, and Michael Abebe maintain that courses on leadership tend to focus “more on theoretical and conceptual training.”<sup>3</sup> These courses may teach students about theories of leadership, group dynamics, the qualities of particular leaders, and other bodies of knowledge about leadership. But it is less

1 Meacham and Gaff, “Learning Goals in Mission Statements,” 9.

2 Guthrie, Teig, and Hu, “Academic Leadership Programs.”

3 Elmuti, Minnis, and Abebe, “Does Education Have a Role,” 1025.

clear how leadership courses can develop students’ leadership skills, as there is likely a gap between acquiring information and knowledge about leadership and cultivating the skills that are necessary to practice leadership. Moreover, studies of undergraduate leadership courses suggest that the most common instructional approaches in these courses are discussion and lecturing.<sup>4</sup> However, some scholars argue that other pedagogies, such as role-playing and simulations, are more effective at inculcating leadership skills and dispositions.<sup>5</sup>

In this reflective essay, I explore how one form of role-playing called Reacting to the Past can promote students’ leadership skills and deepen their

4 Jenkins, “Exploring Signature Pedagogies.”

5 Some of the scholars who have argued that role-playing is a useful way to promote leadership skills include: Allen, “Simulations as a Source of Learning”; Sogunro, “Efficacy of Role-Playing Pedagogy”; Dopelt et al., “Simulation as a Key Training Method.”

## ABSTRACT:

How can courses on leadership effectively cultivate students’ leadership skills? This reflective essay explores how one form of role-playing called Reacting to the Past can promote students’ leadership skills and deepen their understanding of leadership. Reacting to the Past is a series of immersive role-playing simulations that are set at key moments in history and that require students to play the part of historical actors over the course of several weeks. I argue that Reacting to the Past encourages students to practice leadership skills in an authentic context, improves students’ understanding of leadership by allowing them to observe and participate in leadership processes firsthand, and has other important benefits for leadership education. Moreover, this essay also provides guidance on how to incorporate Reacting to the Past into courses on leadership and discusses strategies for addressing common problems that instructors confront when using this pedagogy.

understanding of leadership.<sup>6</sup> *Reacting to the Past* is a series of immersive role-playing simulations. *Reacting* “games” are set at key moments in history, and they require students to play the part of historical actors over the course of several weeks. While scholars of leadership education have examined the potential of role-playing for fostering leadership skills, the literature on leadership education has largely neglected to address how *Reacting to the Past* in particular can achieve this aim.<sup>7</sup> I argue that *Reacting to the Past* is a powerful pedagogy for teaching leadership. More specifically, I make the case that *Reacting to the Past* encourages students to practice leadership skills in an authentic context, deepens students’ understanding of leadership by allowing them to observe and participate in leadership processes firsthand, and has other important benefits for leadership education. In making this argument, I draw on both my own experiences with using *Reacting to the Past* in courses on leadership and the past research on this topic. Furthermore, my goal is not only to make the case for using *Reacting*

6 Reflective essays in the scholarship of teaching and learning aim to convey an instructor’s experiences and observations about teaching in a more informal way than in, say, a scientific study. In defending a reflective approach to the scholarship of teaching and learning, Alison Cook-Sather, Sophia Abbot, and Peter Felten write that: “Because it invites those writing about their work to do so in a relatively informal and conversational way—to include in-process musings, unproven hunches, and still-forming hypotheses—reflective writing is well suited to capture the surprises, insights, questions, uncertainties, and other lived aspects of the study of teaching and learning in ways that traditional scholarly writing cannot.” This essay aims to capture some of the hunches and insights that I have encountered in teaching *Reacting to the Past* in leadership courses. See Cook-Sather, Abbot, and Felten, “Legitimizing Reflective Writing,” 15.

7 The major exception to this generalization is Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, chapter 9. In this chapter, Carnes argues that *Reacting* can help teach leadership skills relating to teamwork. My goal in this essay is to further clarify and explore the benefits of *Reacting* for leadership pedagogy. In particular, I focus on how *Reacting* can be explicitly incorporated into courses on leadership, which is not a topic that Carnes addresses.

simulations in leadership education. I also aim to provide some guidance to instructors on how to use this pedagogy.<sup>8</sup>

In the next section, I clarify *Reacting to the Past* in greater detail and explain how this pedagogy can fit into a course on leadership. Then I argue that *Reacting to the Past* promotes key leadership skills, an understanding of leadership processes, and other learning goals that are relevant to leadership. Finally I consider objections and challenges to using *Reacting* in leadership courses before concluding.

## Reacting to the Past and Leadership Courses

### *What is Reacting to the Past?*

*Reacting to the Past* was pioneered by Mark Carnes during the 1990s at Barnard College. Carnes created *Reacting* because he was dissatisfied with his classes. He found that the students in his classes were disengaged and the class discussions were listless. After one lackluster class, Carnes interviewed students about why they were disengaged. To his surprise, several students told Carnes that they liked the class—in fact, it was one of their favorites. Carnes responded: “You were bored! I was bored! You could feel the boredom in the room!” One of Carnes’s students thought for a moment and said: “Well, yes. But all classes are sorta boring. Yours was less boring than most.”<sup>9</sup>

This state of affairs was intolerable to Carnes. So he decided to innovate. He created historical role-playing games for use in his classes. These games are set in a specific historical context, such as ancient Athens or Ming China. In these simulations,

8 My focus in this essay is on undergraduate leadership studies courses. However, some instructors have used *Reacting to the Past* in master’s programs, and my argument may be applicable to these settings as well.

9 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 19.

students assume the role of historical actors, write papers and speeches from the perspective of their roles, and compete for victory over the course of several weeks. Carnes and other instructors found that this pedagogy dramatically increased student engagement. Later, these instructors transformed the initial experiments into elaborate games with dozens of roles and complex plot arcs, and Reacting spread to hundreds of colleges and universities. Reflecting on the success of Reacting, Carnes reports: "Nearly everywhere, the results have been much the same. Students work harder than anyone can recall. Students rarely miss class and faculty look forward to it. No one calls these classes 'sorta boring.'"<sup>10</sup>

Most Reacting games take approximately four or five weeks to complete, and they have three phases: the setup, the game, and the debriefing. During the setup phase, students read about the historical background of the game as well as primary texts relevant to the game's themes. For instance, students playing a game set in ancient Athens read Plato's *Republic*, while students participating in a game about Ming China study Confucius's *Analects*. The setup phase usually involves standard in-class pedagogies. Instructors lecture about the material, students discuss and debate the readings, and so on.

During the setup sessions, instructors assign students roles in the game. In most games, the roles represent real people, and moreover, they are often leaders in their societies. Here is an illustration. One Reacting game is *Defining a Nation* and is set in 1945 in British India.<sup>11</sup> This game is about the end of British rule in India, the creation of a new Indian constitution, and the possible partition of India and Pakistan. The major roles in *Defining a Nation* include the governor general of India, Ma-

hatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mohammad Ali Jinnah.<sup>12</sup> As this example illustrates, many roles in Reacting games are influential leaders, although the roles can also include obscure figures and ordinary people. Role sheets inform students about their role's background, describe required assignments, and specify victory objectives. Victory objectives are goals that players must achieve before the game is over. Many instructors award extra credit to students who achieve their victory objectives.

After the setup session is complete, the game begins and students assume ownership of the class while the professor focuses on managing the game. Most Reacting games require students to write and give speeches during the initial phase of gameplay. Consider one popular Reacting game: *Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 BCE*.<sup>13</sup> *Threshold of Democracy* is set in ancient Athens, and players are members of the Athenian Assembly. They are also divided into democratic and elitist factions. During the first two sessions, some students give speeches defending democracy, and they may argue for an expansion of democratic rights to immigrants and, more radically still, women. Other players make the case for restricting the franchise or creating elite institutions that constrain democratic rule. Speeches serve several different functions in Reacting games. Speeches introduce the perspectives of the different roles to the rest of the class. After listening to the speeches, students often have a better sense of what each player wants or values. This knowledge can facilitate bargaining and negotiations in future gameplay.

Speeches can also persuade. To explain why this is important, it will be useful to introduce an-

10 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*, 35.

11 Embree and Carnes, *Defining a Nation*.

12 In fact, Gandhi is played by two players. These players represent two aspects of Gandhi's complex personality and ideology.

13 Ober, Norman, and Carnes, *Threshold of Democracy*.

other key feature of Reacting games: the distinction between determinate and indeterminate roles. Some roles have determinate or set victory objectives. These players must either achieve these objectives or lose the game. But other students play “indeterminates.” Indeterminates are roles that have the freedom to select their own victory objectives, to some degree. While indeterminate players usually have certain victory conditions that they seek to achieve, they can vote as they wish on a range of issues that the class confronts during the game. Reacting games are designed such that determinate players can usually only achieve victory by persuading some indeterminate players to support them. So determinate players must convince indeterminate players to vote for their proposals. And, on occasion, a powerful speech can persuade indeterminate players, especially if this speech appeals to the values and goals of these indeterminates.

After students give speeches, the gameplay becomes more fluid. Students often need to vote on key questions or proposals, and the class sessions are devoted to debating, negotiating, and voting on these proposals. Take *Threshold of Democracy* again. In each session, players must decide some law or policy issue that confronts the Athenian Assembly. These include the scope of democratic rights in Athens, whether to pay jurors and members of the Assembly for their service, and whether to reestablish an Athenian empire. In each session, members of the Assembly debate one or more of these issues, and they cast votes to determine which group of players is victorious. Class sessions can be lively and raucous affairs. Students often clap, shout, heckle, or protest during class.

Most Reacting games culminate in a crisis or consequential decision that determines, to a large extent, who wins and who loses the game. In

*Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*, students play members of the National Assembly during the French Revolution.<sup>14</sup> During the first few sessions, students debate the constitution of France, the status of property rights, slavery in the colonies, and more. But during the last session, students must contend with an invasion of Prussian and Austrian troops. The session is fast paced, as the invading army advances toward Paris every few minutes and students must quickly decide whether to flee, marshal an army to meet the invaders, or pursue some other option. On some occasions, final game sessions end when the instructor rolls a die, which may be modified to take into account the students' actions during the game, to determine the outcome of the crisis. Powerful emotions are often on display as the game ends. Students sometimes burst into tears, high-five, and hug each other during the final moments.

The final component of Reacting games is the debriefing. In this phase, students abandon their roles, reflect on the game, and learn about what actually happened during the historical period in question. Note that, since students have agency in their roles, the outcomes of games can deviate substantially from actual historical outcomes. Thus the debriefing period can help students understand why history differed from the outcome of the game.<sup>15</sup> It is also common for instructors to show documentaries or movies about the time period and students can express their experience with playing their roles. Instructors usually determine which students won

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14 Popiel and Carnes, *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France*.

15 An instructor can also use debriefings to discuss the fundamental indeterminacy of historical outcomes and how alternative historical outcomes could have come about. In fact, Reacting simulations can help students understand the contingency of history since the games often arrive at conclusions that are counterfactual.



or lost the game and let students know whether they have achieved their victory objectives.

### *Using Reacting Courses on Leadership*

My use of Reacting in my courses informs my argument in the remainder of this essay. I have used Reacting in a variety of different courses, including a first-year writing seminar, an introduction to political theory, a course on leadership and the humanities, and a course on leadership in international contexts. My discussion focuses on my use of Reacting in courses on leadership, particularly the course on leadership in international contexts, as I have used Reacting in this course for the longest period of time.

My course on leadership in international contexts incorporates elements of both international relations and comparative politics. The course aims to study international diplomacy and other leadership processes. But the course also tries to acquaint students with different cultures, particularly cultures many of my students are unfamiliar with, and how cultural traditions influence leadership. These are obviously expansive learning outcomes. However, the goal of the class is not for students to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of international leadership. The more modest aim of the course is to introduce students to topics related to international leadership.

My course on leadership in international contexts is an “all-Reacting” course. That is, students play Reacting games from the first week of the course to the final exam session. During the first session, I introduce the novel approach of the course and assign roles for the first game: *Eyeball to Eyeball, 1962*, a Reacting game on the Cuban Missile Crisis that, unlike typical games, we can complete

in one session.<sup>16</sup> This game serves several purposes. First, *Eyeball to Eyeball* introduces students to Reacting to the Past. Second, this game acquaints students with major themes in the course and some of the skills that the course seeks to develop, such as negotiation and teamwork. Moreover, *Eyeball to Eyeball* is an enjoyable and fast-paced game that helps students see the value of historical simulations for studying leadership.

Next, we begin our first typical Reacting game: *Europe on the Brink, 1914*.<sup>17</sup> This game is about diplomatic events that led to the outbreak of the World War I. This simulation helps students learn about realism, liberalism, and nationalism in international relations as well as diplomacy. I also find that *Europe on the Brink* is a valuable way of analyzing a monumental leadership failure—in fact, understanding leadership failures is one major element of the course. The third simulation is *Defining a Nation*, which I have already mentioned. In this simulation, students engage with ideas and issues relating to Hinduism, Islam, colonialism, civil war, and constitutional design. This game usually culminates in the partition of British India into India and Pakistan, and this partition is accompanied by widespread violence. The final simulation in the course is *The Needs of Others: Human Rights, International Organizations, and Intervention in Rwanda, 1994*, a game about international diplomacy and the Rwandan genocide.<sup>18</sup> Most students play ambassadors to the United Nations and one student serves as chairperson of the Security Council, and the players must decide whether to intervene in Rwanda to prevent ethnic violence. This simulation introduces students to the politics of humanitarian intervention, leadership in international institutions,

16 Kimball and Redding, *Eyeball to Eyeball*.

17 Moser, *Europe on the Brink*.

18 McFall, *Needs of Others*.

and the philosophical foundations of global moral responsibilities.

I have also experimented with using Reacting games in another leadership course. This is a course on leadership and the humanities. The goal of this course is to introduce students to humanistic perspectives on leadership. The course is interdisciplinary and seeks to draw on a wide range of humanistic disciplines, such as religion, history, art, and philosophy, to understand leadership. Reacting simulations are relevant to this course because Reacting incorporates most of the humanities. As part of Reacting simulations, students may be required to read poetry, history, political theory, philosophy, and religious texts. One game I have used in this course is *Machiavelli and the Florentine Republic, 1494–1512*.<sup>19</sup> In the setup for this game, students read about this history of Italy and the Renaissance, and they delve deeply into Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*. But during the game, students must engage with, or even produce, Renaissance art, and they read religious texts relating to Savonarola's influence in Florence. As this example illustrates, Reacting games can touch on a variety of humanistic disciplines, and for this reason, they seem suited for a course on leadership and the humanities. However, as I discuss later, instructors should make the connections between Reacting games and leadership studies explicit.

## An Argument for Using Reacting to the Past in Leadership Courses

One reason for using Reacting to the Past in leadership courses is that this pedagogy can help cultivate valuable leadership skills. Before I explain why this is the case, let me comment on the nature

of leadership skills. The value of particular leadership skills depends on context.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the leadership skills that are useful in politics may differ from those that are important in business. Nonetheless, scholars of leadership suggest that certain skills tend to be valuable to leaders in a variety of different contexts.<sup>21</sup> Most agree that interpersonal skills are key. This is because leadership involves social influence and, moreover, interpersonal skills facilitate this influence.

In an article on leadership skills, Michael Mumford and his coauthors note: "Leaders must not only be able to formulate a plan that works within the context of the organization, they must also be able to implement this plan within a distinctly social context, marshaling support, communicating a vision, guiding subordinates, and motivating others. Thus, leaders must also be able to understand and work with others—another point which underscores the need for social skills."<sup>22</sup> Good leaders need to influence others to achieve shared goals. But to influence groups effectively, leaders must often have a repertoire of interpersonal skills and dispositions, such as the ability to communicate effectively, empathize and understand the perspectives of others, negotiate and compromise, and more.

Reacting to the Past can help foster the interpersonal skills that good leadership often requires. I will start with effective communication. In many courses, students produce assignments solely for the instructor to evaluate. Students often write papers that only their professors ever read. This is not the

20 Mumford, Campion, and Morgeson, "Leadership Skills Strataplex."

21 For overviews of the different skills that are useful to leaders, see Kalargyrou, Pescosolido, and Kalargiros, "Leadership Skills in Management Education"; Channing, "How Can Leadership Be Taught?"

22 Mumford et al., "Leadership Skills for a Changing World," 19.

19 Wright, *Machiavelli and the Florentine Republic, 1494–1512*.



case in courses that use Reacting. Instead, most student work is public. As part of Reacting games, students must write and give speeches, and the goal of these speeches is to persuade, motivate, and communicate shared interests and values. In my courses, we spend at least one session on learning the principles of effective public speaking and practicing these principles before a game begins. This approach is common in Reacting courses. Furthermore, students share their papers with the whole class, and other students are expected to read and reference these papers. The social nature of Reacting assignments and the intentional focus on public communication could help build students' skills in these areas.

In fact, some research supports the conclusion that Reacting inculcates "rhetorical skills." In one study, a team of researchers evaluated the oral communication skills of students who had participated in a Reacting first-year seminar and those who enrolled in first-year seminars that did not use Reacting.<sup>23</sup> Subjects gave an oral presentation about a controversial social issue, and raters evaluated the quality of the presentation. The researchers found that Reacting students gave more effective rhetorical presentations compared with students from control seminars and that students in Reacting courses improved over the course of the semester. The study also found that students in Reacting courses improved their writing skills, although they did not improve more than the control.

Students report that participating in Reacting games helps them hone their written and oral communication skills. In one study, researchers examined students' perceptions of their oral communication skills in general education courses in the humanities that used Reacting and those that did

not. About 90 percent of Reacting students reported that "the class helped them become a better and more confident public speaker" versus 65 percent of students in control courses.<sup>24</sup> In end-of-the-semester course evaluations, my students comment that their experience with Reacting improved their oral and written communication skills. One student said: "I've not only learned about important topics, but I've gained valuable life skills through this class, such as effective communication, public speaking, and how to work with others." Another noted that "I feel like a more confident writer and speaker after having taken this class." I can vividly remember cases where students were hesitant to speak in discussions during standard courses, but who then came alive during Reacting games. One of my students had a speech impediment and he rarely talked in class. But in his role as an Islamic cleric, this student turned into a powerful speaker who gave fiery defenses of a theocratic Pakistan. The subversive and radical nature of this student's role seems to have motivated him to participate in a vigorous way.

Next, consider the impact of Reacting on other interpersonal skills, such as the ability to negotiate, compromise, and work in teams. Students in Reacting games must work effectively with others in order to achieve their objectives. For one thing, many students operate in "factions" that share common victory objectives. These students must coordinate to achieve their shared goals. In addition, different factions must sometimes cooperate with one another to secure a compromise victory.

I have observed compromise and negotiations between factions while my students were playing *Threshold of Democracy*, the game that is set in Athens. In this game, there are four factions. Two factions endorse democratic institutions and

23 Stroessner, Beckerman, and Whittaker, "All the World's a Stage?"

24 Bernstein et al., "What Happens after Reacting?" 147.

principles to some degree, while the other two factions are more oligarchical and elitist. Nonetheless, sometimes a more elitist faction will cooperate with a democratic one to secure partial victories for each faction. In other games, such as the games set during the French Revolution and Indian independence, players work together to craft a constitution, and this requires extensive bargaining and cooperation between players with incompatible aims. In these and other ways, Reacting simulations permit students to practice teamwork and negotiation. Several of my students commented that a course with Reacting taught “us the difficulties of compromise and negotiation” and that they “enjoyed the persuasion that was necessary to succeed” in the simulations.

Surveys of students find that a much larger proportion of students in Reacting courses agree that these courses help them build teamwork skills when compared to control groups in other courses.<sup>25</sup>

Reacting might encourage beneficial leadership dispositions as well. Take empathy. Most scholars of leadership agree that empathy and perspective taking are valuable dispositions for leaders. Effective leaders must manage the emotions of their followers and understand their needs, values, and interests. Otherwise, it may be difficult for leaders to motivate their followers to achieve shared ends. Empathy, the ability to comprehend another’s feelings and experience them oneself, and perspective taking help leaders succeed in these tasks.<sup>26</sup> A growing body of evidence also indicates that followers judge empa-

thetic leaders to be more effective.<sup>27</sup>

But how might Reacting facilitate empathy and perspective-taking? Remember that success in a Reacting game often requires persuasion, compromise, and bargaining. To do well on these tasks, students need to listen carefully to and understand the perspectives of other players. So it is possible that participating in Reacting could improve empathy and perspective taking. In their study of Reacting

*“I’ve gained valuable life skills through this class, such as effective communication, public speaking, and how to work with others.”*

courses, Steven Stroessner, Laurie Beckerman, and Alexis Whittaker use the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale, a self-reported measure of a person’s ability to vicariously experience the emotions of others, and conclude that students in the Reacting seminars showed a small increase in emotional empathy when compared with the beginning

of the semester.<sup>28</sup>

Participation in Reacting games might promote perspective-taking in another way. Consider that, when playing Reacting games, students take on roles and these roles often have radically different values than they do. A student might need to adopt the role of an Islamic cleric, a conservative monarchist, a Communist revolutionary, a proponent of social Darwinism and militarism, a member of the Black Panthers, or a Hindu nationalist. Many students reject the values and ideas of these roles. But students must adopt the perspective of their role when writing papers, making speeches, and pursuing their victory objectives. In the process, students

27 Sadri, Weber, and Gentry, “Empathic Emotion.”

28 Stroessner, Beckerman, and Whittaker, “All the World’s a Stage?” However, another study does not find this effect. See Bledsoe and Richardson, “Impact of Reacting to the Past.” Other authors have also emphasized how Reacting can improve empathy and perspective taking. But my goal here is to connect this finding to leadership education.

25 Bernstein et al., “What Happens after Reacting?”; Bledsoe and Richardson, “Impact of Reacting to the Past.”

26 Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth, “Empathy.”

may come to understand a perspective that is dramatically distinct from their own. This could have the effect of improving a student's ability to understand different perspectives in general. One of my students noted along these lines that, after playing Reacting games, "you begin to appreciate humans for who they are, different perspectives, as well as different people of different backgrounds."

In their evaluations of my courses that use Reacting, students frequently cite the active learning elements of the course as especially helpful for their learning. The following student comments are illustrative:

- The active learning component made all the difference. If [the name of the instructor] were simply lecturing and telling us all of the content, I would have forgotten it all. But truly being immersed in the time period made the history so much more memorable.
- I have learned so much about negotiation, diplomacy, world history, and the challenges of leadership thanks to the unique design of the class, which encourages active participation and student-led learning in a high-energy environment.
- The way the class was shaped helped us apply all we have learned in the [leadership program] to our roles. I really got into all my roles and really enjoyed doing research and preparing for the class.

As these student comments suggest, Reacting is a powerful active learning pedagogy. Students practice leadership skills in a Reacting simulation and can apply what they have learned about leadership to their behavior in the games. This kind of active learning is likely to be more effective at improving leadership skills than more passive forms of learn-

ing, such as listening to lectures.<sup>29</sup>

But Reacting has other benefits for the study of leadership. Participation in a Reacting game gives students the opportunity to observe leadership processes firsthand. One of my students made the following comment about a class that uses Reacting games: "What I especially liked about this course was that it was not simply a theoretical analysis of leadership but it actually simulated leadership situations. We were able to witness firsthand the pressures of leadership and the constraints of cooperation. We were able to see the influence of charisma, influence, persuasion, and rhetorical abilities on the actions of other players in the simulations." This comment suggests that there is a difference between, say, reading an abstract analysis of leadership processes and directly observing a leadership process unfold. To use an analogy, consider the difference between reading a play and acting in one. In comparison to merely reading a play, acting in one might allow you to gain a more vivid appreciation of the themes, dynamics, and message of the play. The same point plausibly applies to leadership. Directly observing and participating in a leadership process can provide students with a deeper understanding of how these processes function and the different factors that influence them.

A final benefit of Reacting that is worth mentioning is the advantage of this pedagogy for learning about historical leaders. As I mentioned earlier, students who play Reacting games can assume the roles of important leaders. Games include important leaders that are often mentioned in courses about leadership, such as Mahatma Gand-

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<sup>29</sup> There is now a large amount of evidence that active learning improves learning outcomes over more passive forms of instruction. For evidence of the efficacy of active learning and how this evidence is relevant to Reacting, see Hagood, Watson, and Williams, "Reacting to the Past."

hi, Henry Kissinger, Alexander Hamilton, Joseph Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill.<sup>30</sup> In playing these roles over several weeks, students likely gain a much deeper understanding of the character, motivations, and ideas of these leaders than they would normally achieve. A student in my class observed that, even though they already knew a lot about the historical leaders in the simulations, “I found myself learning more than I ever could have through a book by immersing myself in the decision making of these leaders.” It is also possible to discuss the biographies and decisions of major leaders in the setup and debriefing of each game. Moreover, certain games require students to read influential theorists of leadership as well. One example is the game *Machiavelli and the Florentine Republic*, in which students read Machiavelli’s major works on political leadership and learn how to apply them to the volatile political landscape of Renaissance Florence. In these ways, instructors can use *Reacting to the Past* to study major leaders and theorists of leadership as well.

Before concluding this section, I would like to reflect on why *Reacting* could potentially be more effective at enhancing leadership skills than alternative pedagogies. Daniel Jenkins collected data on instructional strategies in leadership programs and found that the most common pedagogies were lectures and class discussion.<sup>31</sup> Role-playing and simu-

<sup>30</sup> *Reacting* games are about history, and thus the roles usually represent historical leaders. As a result, there are sometimes few female leaders in *Reacting* games, as there were few women leaders during the periods in which these games take place. Nonetheless, there are female roles in virtually every *Reacting* game, and students who play these roles can become leaders. For example, women were disenfranchised and excluded from power in ancient Athens. But there were exceptions. Women could sometimes serve in powerful religious roles, and one role in *Threshold of Democracy* is a priestess who can exert considerable influence in the game.

<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, “Exploring Signature Pedagogies”; Jenkins, “Comparing Instructional and Assessment Strategy Use.”

lations were much rarer and only a small percentage of instructors used them. Lecturing and class discussion can be valuable pedagogies, and courses that use *Reacting* also employ these methods of instruction during the setup and debriefing phases of the games. Nonetheless, common instructional techniques in leadership programs may be less useful for developing leadership skills than role-playing and simulations.

Common sense and decades of research on skill formation find that to improve your performance at some task, you must practice this task, receive feedback on mistakes, and refine your performance in light of this feedback.<sup>32</sup> For example, an athlete or musician must practice the skills that they want to improve, listen to critical feedback from a coach or teacher, and incorporate this feedback into their practice. The same lessons apply to leadership skills as well. But it is uncertain to what extent lecture and discussion allow students to practice leadership skills in this way. David Rosch and Daniel Jenkins argue that standard pedagogies in leadership programs do not “require students to intentionally experiment with the behaviors required for effective leadership, nor receive feedback regarding the effectiveness of those behaviors.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet role-playing and simulations, such as *Reacting to the Past*, can fill this gap in leadership pedagogy. In *Reacting* games, students experiment with leadership behaviors and they receive feedback on those behaviors from the other students and the instructor. If a student’s leadership is ineffective, then other students will resist this student’s goals, refuse to compromise with him or her, and the student in question will be more likely to lose the game.

<sup>32</sup> Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer, “Role of Deliberate Practice.”

<sup>33</sup> Rosch and Jenkins, “What Do We Know about Formal Leadership Courses and Their Effects?” 35.

Furthermore, the instructor can also give students feedback on the effectiveness of their public speaking, class participation, and strategies in the game.

Here is an illustration. Several years ago, my students were playing *The Needs of Others*, the game about international diplomacy and the Rwandan genocide. In this game, one student serves as chairperson of the United Nations Security Council. This student must manage discussion and organize votes while attempting to achieve his or her own objectives. In this class, the chairperson was the ambassador from New Zealand, and her goal was to have the Security Council authorize intervention in Rwanda to end ethnic violence. However, this student's tactics were ineffective. She often cut off the speeches of other ambassadors, only called on her allies to speak, and sidelined discussion. I suspect that she thought that these tactics would facilitate intervention in Rwanda by suppressing the factions that opposed her aims.

But this student's tactics backfired. The other ambassadors protested and refused to tolerate the chairperson's decisions, and indeterminate players began to align with the anti-intervention camp. This was a distressing dynamic for the student who was serving as chairperson, and I met with her during office hours to discuss the situation. During this meeting, I gave her some frank advice about her management of the Security Council meetings, and we discussed some ways to improve her approach. The next session went more smoothly, the revolt among the ambassadors subsided, and the chairperson made progress on advancing her agenda. This is one of many possible examples that illustrate how Reacting games allow students to practice leadership behavior and receive feedback on these behaviors from other students and the instructor.

To sum up, there is a reasonable argument

for using Reacting in certain leadership courses, particularly courses that focus on the development of leadership skills, such as public communication, teamwork, and negotiation. This is so because Reacting allows students to practice these skills and receive feedback on their performance in an authentic setting. Reacting can also help students understand leadership processes by allowing them to observe these processes firsthand. Finally, Reacting can convey knowledge about important leaders, and leadership challenges and failures in history. Nonetheless, Reacting has limitations and instructors who use this pedagogy are likely to confront certain challenges.

## Limitations, Challenges, and Problems

In this section, I describe some challenges that I have encountered while using Reacting to the Past, and I suggest some strategies for addressing them. Some of these challenges are specific to leadership courses, while others are more general problems with using Reacting to the Past.

### *Adapting Reacting to Leadership Courses*

Reacting to the Past was created primarily by historians for use in history courses. But soon after it was created, instructors began to adapt Reacting to other disciplines as well, such as political science, philosophy, art, and literature. While Reacting is useful in a variety of different disciplines, adapting Reacting to new contexts does require care. I recommend several modifications to Reacting to make it more suitable to courses on leadership.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Instructors across disciplines often use Reacting for many of the same fundamental purposes: to improve oral communication and writing skills, learn more about the specific subject matter of the game, and so on. However, my advice here aims to clarify how an instructor can connect Reacting games to the



First, an instructor who uses Reacting in a leadership course should consider assigning supplementary readings that connect the topic of the Reacting game to leadership. For example, an instructor might assign Thad Williamson's "The Good Society and the Good Soul: Plato's *Republic* on Leadership" during the setup of the game set in ancient Athens, or Robert McManus and Gama Perruci's chapter "Leadership in a Confucian Cultural Context" if the course is using the game set in the Ming imperial court where Confucianism was the dominant ideology.<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, an instructor can explain the connection between leadership and the game during a lecture or discussion. I find that many students understand the relevance of the games to leadership. But unless an instructor makes the connection between the game and leadership explicit, there is a risk that some students will struggle to see how the game advances their understanding of leadership.

Second, I use the debriefing session to discuss leadership. We discuss which students emerged as influential leaders in the game and consider the different factors that explain the leadership processes that we observed, such as charisma, persuasion, manipulation, and luck. The debriefing session is another opportunity for an instructor to assign a reading on leadership if appropriate. Third, instructors might wish to assign a reflection paper at the end of the game asking students to reflect on what they learned about leadership from the game. Among other possibilities, this reflection paper could ask students to apply theories of leadership to the processes that they observed in the simulation, analyze how leadership influenced the outcome, or describe

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study of leadership. Instructors in other disciplines may not emphasize this connection to the same degree.

35 Williamson, "Good Society"; McManus and Perruci, *Understanding Leadership*, chapter 12.

which leadership behaviors in the game were most effective.

Which kinds of leadership courses should use Reacting to the Past? Reacting tends to be suitable for leadership courses that are more humanistic in nature, such as courses that focus on history, religion, philosophy, or art. An instructor who wants to run a Reacting game in a course on any of these topics will find multiple relevant games that he or she could use. It is also worth noting that instructors have used Reacting games in courses on public health, science and leadership, and political science. But Reacting is inappropriate for certain courses and learning objectives. Since Reacting involves past historical events, it will be less useful in classes that seek to impart current scientific or empirical information. For example, Reacting is unlikely to be a good fit for a course that emphasizes recent findings in, say, social psychology and their relationship to leadership.

### *Costs to the Instructor*

In surveys and interviews with leadership educators, Daniel Jenkins finds that most of these instructors avoid role-playing games and simulations. Why? Jenkins writes: "Simulation, role-play, and games were avoided due to the often overly complicated preparation and/or facilitation required to use them."<sup>36</sup> In other words, instructors refrained from using simulations because they are hard to prepare and use. While Jenkins refrains from elaborating further, it is plausible that preparing games and simulations takes more time and effort than traditional pedagogies. And if simulations require more time and effort, then it may be too costly for instructors to use them.

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36 Jenkins, "What the Best Leadership Educators Do," 48.



Do these concerns also apply to Reacting to the Past? In my experience, Reacting does take more time and effort than lecturing or conducting an unstructured discussion. Several factors increase the workload for instructors. For one thing, Reacting is writing intensive. Students usually write two papers in every Reacting game. So if an instructor is running an all-Reacting course, this instructor might need to grade five or six essays per student. While Reacting papers tend to be short, this amount of grading is a significant time commitment. Many students also need advice and guidance on how to understand their roles and achieve their objectives. For these and other reasons, Reacting is a “high-touch” pedagogy.

While Reacting can increase the workload of instructors, there are countervailing benefits to using Reacting. Reacting is often more enjoyable than other forms of teaching. Simply put, Reacting is a lot of fun. The student engagement that Reacting often generates is contagious, and like my students, I become emotionally invested in the games. So while Reacting can be more work, I find that I am more motivated to devote time to courses that use Reacting. I am hardly alone in this opinion. Professors who use Reacting frequently comment on how much fun they are having and how some of their most rewarding teaching experiences involve Reacting games. The superior student engagement that Reacting creates can compensate for the increased workload of this pedagogy.

Furthermore, instructors who want to use Reacting have many resources at their disposal. Many instructors at a diverse range of institutions have developed and refined this pedagogy over time. The designers of Reacting games also write instructors manuals that explain how to prepare for each game in detail. In addition, it is relatively easy

to seek guidance from more experienced Reacting instructors. For example, there is an active Facebook group of Reacting instructors who are willing to share their experience and advice. Finally, a non-profit organization, the Reacting Consortium, helps train faculty members to use Reacting. The Reacting Consortium hosts workshops and conferences in which instructors learn about and take part in Reacting games throughout the year. All of these resources reduce the costs to instructors of experimenting with this novel pedagogy.<sup>37</sup>

### *Student Enrollment, Class Size, and Resistance*

One major challenge of using Reacting is class size. Reacting games only function when a certain critical number of students enrolls in a class, and they become unwieldy when the class becomes too big. Most Reacting games require about fifteen students to work. On one hand, if there are fewer than fifteen students, then games often become less lively and more predictable. The reason is that there will be fewer indeterminate players, which in turn reduces the opportunities for alliances, negotiation, and shifting loyalties. On the other hand, it is challenging to run Reacting games in courses that have more than, say, fifty students. When enrollment is this large, the complexity of the games becomes difficult to manage, although some instructors have successfully run Reacting simulations in courses with over a hundred students. Thus enrollment

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<sup>37</sup> The number of resources available to instructors is one key advantage of Reacting over other kinds of simulations and role-playing. My experience is that there are often fewer resources and guidance for other kinds of simulation or role-playing pedagogies in comparison with Reacting. This might make it harder for instructors to use non-Reacting simulations in leadership courses. Nonetheless, it is likely that other kinds of role-playing can cultivate leadership skills just as well as Reacting does.

imposes constraints on when instructors can use Reacting effectively.<sup>38</sup>

I teach at a liberal arts institution with small class sizes that usually range from about sixteen to twenty-four students. However, in rare cases, enrollment in my courses can dip below fifteen students. So when my courses use Reacting games, I confront the risk that too few students will enroll. But there are several strategies that can help instructors run Reacting games in small classes. First, I invite other faculty members to play guest roles in small classes. Guests usually play indeterminates and can inject a surprise element into the game. Second, an instructor can assign students two roles, especially if these two roles belong to the same faction. Instructors in small classes can also incorporate non-player characters (NPCs) into the games and use modified die rolls to determine their decisions.<sup>39</sup> While these strategies mitigate the problem of small classes, it remains the case that it is more challenging to use Reacting simulations in this context.

Finally, I want to comment on student resistance and dissatisfaction. Reacting is a novel pedagogy and students frequently resist new ap-

proaches to learning, particularly one that requires active learning and considerable work. In fact, some instructors do report that students resist Reacting games and are dissatisfied with courses that use them. But here is my experience. Most students enjoy Reacting and see its value after they have had a chance to play a full game. Yet students are often nervous about Reacting games before they have experienced this pedagogy. To alleviate their anxiety, I pursue several tactics. I allow students to view past student evaluations in the courses where I have used Reacting. Students can see that most past comments about Reacting simulations are positive and appreciative. In addition, I created a document that answers questions that students frequently ask about this approach to learning and distribute it on the first day of class. Finally, I run a short, one-session Reacting game during the first week of class. This short game gives students an understanding of how Reacting games function and their value, and this defuses students' concerns.<sup>40</sup>

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38 It is also worth noting that Reacting has been used at hundreds of different educational institutions, including large public universities, community colleges, high schools, and even prisons. This suggests that Reacting is a flexible pedagogy that instructors can adapt for different contexts. But, of course, instructors should consider modifying the readings and schedule of assignments in order to accommodate the needs, interests, and capabilities of the students that they serve. The instructor manuals for Reacting games often give advice and guides for how to adapt the games for different groups. For guidance on using Reacting in large classes in the context of a public university, see Watson and Moskal, "Scaling a Reacting Game." For a description of using Reacting in a prison, see Blatt, "'Subversive Play' in Prison."

39 Another possibility that some Reacting instructors are currently exploring is using artificial intelligence. These instructors are using large-language models to create characters that can participate, if only in a limited way, in the games. It remains to be seen whether this is an effective strategy for addressing low-enrollment courses.

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40 One other worry about using Reacting is that students must assume the roles of historical actors and historical actors sometimes endorsed positions that most of us now find to be abhorrent. Requiring students to espouse offensive ideologies seems problematic. While this is a complex issue, here are some initial responses to this concern. Many instructors who use Reacting believe that it is important for students to understand the beliefs of people in the past, including the beliefs that are offensive to us now, and Reacting helps instructors achieve this learning outcome. For this reason, it seems like a mistake to curate Reacting games so that no players endorse objectionable views. Nonetheless, it is important that instructors take special care to prepare students for roles that endorse positions on race, sex, and other matters that could deeply offend students. First, I make sure to ask students for their permission before I assign them roles that will require sensitivity and restraint. If students do not want to play a role that endorses views that they find to be offensive, then I respect their decision. Second, I emphasize the importance of taking the feelings and perspectives of one's fellow classmates into consideration before a game begins, especially if the game involves controversial content. The Reacting community has also created extensive resources, such as guides and workshops, for addressing student and faculty discomfort with the games,

## Conclusion

In this reflective essay, I have argued that Reacting to the Past is an engaging and effective way of teaching leadership. My argument for this conclusion rests on past research on Reacting and my experience with using this pedagogy in courses on leadership. But future research can shed further light on the role of Reacting to the Past in leadership education. For example, research on role-playing in leadership education often uses surveys, interviews, and focus groups to study how simulations impact students' understanding of leadership and leadership skills.<sup>41</sup> To my knowledge, no researchers have conducted surveys or interviews that explicitly ask students about how Reacting has influenced their perceptions and understanding of leadership. More ambitiously, it may even be possible to measure whether exposure to Reacting positively affects leadership skills using intersubjective ratings.<sup>42</sup> Thus additional research can help clarify the potential of Reacting for teaching leadership. But in light of the existing evidence for Reacting, educators have good reason to consider adopting this pedagogy in courses on leadership.

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which are available at the Reacting Consortium website.

41 For an example, see Dopelt et al., "Simulation as a Key Training Method."

42 This is the methodology adapted in: Stroessner, Beckerman, and Whittaker, "All the World's a Stage? Consequences of a Role-Playing Pedagogy on Psychological Factors and Writing and Rhetorical Skill in College Undergraduates." However, it may be possible to examine a wide range of leadership behaviors and skills than the authors of this study considered.

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