RPGs (Role-Playing Games) in the Classroom

Dr. Julia M Gossard
Assistant Prof of History & Distinguished Assistant Prof of Honors

JuliaMGossard.com
Twitter: @JMGossard
The Marquis de LaFayette (L) and Danton (R) passionately debate the role of government in individual French citizens’ lives while quoting Rousseau in the French Revolution role-play simulation.

Fall 2016
Reacting to the Past Pedagogy

- Historical role playing games organized by Barnard College
- College professors and high school teachers write games that focus on moments of *historical controversy*
- 13 published games; 5 pre-orders; 100+ in development
Reacting to the Past Pedagogy

- Students receive a character and complete all assignments “in-character”
- Student-led; student-centric; active learning
- Instructor becomes “Game Master” - advises and guides students but does not play active role
Reacting to the Past Pedagogy

“Game Theory” in curriculum
- Motivational power of play
- Increased student engagement & motivation
- Greater familiarity with facts
- Better skills: critical thinking; close reading; moral reasoning; leadership; analytic development

© Julia M Gossard (@jmgossard)
RTTP Learning Outcomes

1. Analysis of Primary Sources
2. Critical Thinking
3. Writing
4. Speaking
5. Leadership
6. Teamwork & Problem Solving
7. World Citizenship
My Learning Outcomes

- In addition to the stated RTTP learning outcomes:
  - Understand the **comparative dimensions** of the Revolutionary Era (French, American, & Haitian)
  - Revolutions **not inevitable**
    - Individual choices MATTRED to history
  - Become **reactive citizens**
    - Media literacy was/is a cornerstone to civics

In the background, students have created a new French government. Foreground, celebrating Danton’s (right) historical birthday. Fall 2016
Guiding Questions

1. Do the responsibilities of citizenship trump individual desires and goals?
2. Do represented officials really represent the interests of all?

Underlying these two questions was the need to help students develop their media literacy.
Do the responsibilities of citizenship trump individual goals and desires?

- Relationships to power (or lack thereof)
- Students learned to negotiate and compromise
- Lack of “fairness” or what defined fair, ethical, and moral
- Students without power remarked how frustrating it was not to have their voices heard and reflected on current race/gender/sex/class issues facing citizens
RACE

- Acute in Haitian Revolution mini-simulation
- Focused on race as a **social construction**, power dynamics, and **historical contingencies**

**Student evaluation:** “I never understood what people meant when they said race was a social construct, but now I get it that it means the meanings we put on someone [sic] skin color are arbitrary, not based in fact, but rather in personal gain and prejudice.”

© Julia M Gossard (@jmgossard)
Do represented officials really represent the interests of all?

Student evaluation: “I always feel like elected officials just do what they want and that’s their job. Who am I to question their decisions? They don’t have to listen to me unless they want to get elected. But, as we’ve been playing [The French Revolution] game, I’m realizing they DO have to listen to me. I’m a citizen. Isn’t that the point? Isn’t it their job to listen to me and do what citizens ask?”

Student evaluation: “The amount of gread [sic] I see in the French Revolutionary process makes me think about current gread [sic], especially lobbyists and others who are not working to help but rather are self interested parties. You see this really big in dairy lobbyists.”

© Julia M Gossard (@jmgossard)
Media Literacy

- Need media literacy to be informed citizens, evaluating biases and legitimacy in a variety of platforms
- SHEG’s recent study “Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Reasoning”
- Variety of 18th-century primary sources: newspapers, political cartoons, “grub street” literature, novels, letters

Patriot propaganda on the Boston Massacre published in Massachusetts newspapers

© Julia M Gossard (@jmgossard)