PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Summary
I propose to redesign my online American Foreign Policy (U85 IA 535) course to emphasize collaborative active learning modeled on the Reacting to the Past\(^1\) curriculum, which integrates role-play and competitive game mechanics to inspire high levels of engagement and deep learning.

Purpose
By this summer, I will have taught 8 online courses over 5 years for Washington University. In that time, only one course achieved a level equivalent to the classroom experience, and that was due solely to an unusually enthusiastic group of students. The other seven classes all fell short due to one critical factor, student engagement. I have tried various methods to overcome this obstacle—frequent discussion board deadlines, multimedia, video lectures, simulations, group assignments, live chats, providing multiple forms of feedback, etc. Nothing has noticeably increased student engagement. My students tell me they do not enjoy the online experience as much as the classroom experience. There is no social interaction, and online discussions simply do not compensate for this. Logging into Blackboard is not something they look forward to, but a chore. So, they do not prioritize online class participation and just do the minimum required to achieve a desired grade.

The key to better learning and retention outcomes is improving student engagement, and I believe that can be achieved by embedding the entire course. Research tells us that active learning is the key to improving student engagement (see References in Addendum 3). To be frank, some active learning advocates have overhyped the evidence. Nonetheless, there is strong consensus on two points. First, active learning methods perform no worse than traditional methods of instruction on measures of student learning outcomes. So, it doesn’t hurt to try. Second, active learning methods perform better than traditional methods of instruction on measures of student engagement. Given that engagement is the primary obstacle, more active learning seems like something we should try.

I have increased student engagement in the classroom by incorporating active learning strategies along with traditional lecture. Online, however, this piecemeal approach has failed. Moreover, it is time intensive to develop. This grant would provide the support to devote time and resources necessary to pilot a complete redesign of my course and make active learning the primary means of instruction.

\(^1\) [https://reacting.barnard.edu](https://reacting.barnard.edu)
Proposed strategy

The proposed strategy is to embed my US Foreign Policy course in an extensive role-play simulation. The methodology is based on Reacting to the Past, a pedagogical approach pioneered in history classrooms in the 1990s and since expanded to classes from philosophy to chemistry. It is an approach with an extensive pedigree and well-documented effectiveness in increasing student engagement. The logic behind the strategy is relatively straightforward. Role-play encourages students to take ownership of their learning process, interact with one another, and consider the issues from diverse perspectives. The incorporation of simple game mechanics with defined “win” conditions further incentivizes students to remain actively engaged. Most importantly, the Reacting to the Past class is just more fun than an ordinary class, encouraging students to participate because the want to rather than coercing them with the threat of penalties.

Developing such a course would be a two-part process: designing the simulation itself and translating the simulation to the online environment. A well-designed course begins with identifying the specific learning objectives and working back to ensure that the class activities enable students to meet those objectives. In this case, the objectives would be embedded in the scenario, roles, and background materials distributed to the students. The same information that ordinarily would be presented through textbook readings and lectures is instead transmitted from student to student as they interact with one another in their roles. The second step is to make the best use of existing resources to maximize social interaction in the online environment (see Feasibility).