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The Liminal Classroom

By MARK C. CARNES

Teachers often forget successful classes but find their failures indelibly imprinted in their minds. I clearly recall one first-year seminar from nine years ago, on masterpieces of the human imagination.

"What," I asked, "are we to make of Plato's attempts to define justice?" A chill descended. Noses burrowed into *The Republic*. One student hesitantly volunteered a comment; another offered a passing observation. Something resembling a discussion followed, but most of the remarks betrayed the superficiality of the students' engagement.

They were eager to discuss their favorite movies and books, censorship, or the problem of date rape, but they shrank from the seeming irrelevance of Plato to their lives. Often the brightest students were the most subdued. Their occasional remarks showed intelligence and sophistication, yet every gesture and tone of voice conveyed boredom.

The more I thought about that failed seminar, the more I realized that it had not been very different from other discussions of classic texts that I had led at Barnard and Columbia. I could recall particular sessions when a student's insight blazed into real illumination and rekindled my own enthusiasm; in the better classes a steady, intelligent patter made the time pass quickly. But those were exceptions. And when I confessed my sense of failure to colleagues, most recounted similar frustrations.

What was wrong?

Early the following semester I met individually with students from that seminar. They were initially surprised by my sense of its inadequacy, but as we talked they opened up. They explained that what I had taken to be sullenness on their part was actually a manifestation of deep anxiety. They knew that my knowledge of the texts exceeded their own; they chafed at being obliged to reveal the insufficiency of their understanding.

Another revelation followed. If students were uncomfortable with me, they were even more worried about their peers' reactions. Their sophisticated disinterest masked a fear of saying something foolish, inappropriate, or -- even worse -- revealing about their fragile sense of self. The more I pushed them to the brink of otherness -- other ideas, cultures, and societies -- the more they clung to familiarity or simply clammed up.

Students were also put off by the purely cerebral character of the undertaking. They regarded classic texts as abstract mental games: intellectual hurdles to be cleared, rather like math or language requirements, before they could dash off to the courses whose relevance to their lives was obvious. They had little sense that the ideas behind the texts had been forged in the heat of human passions. They knew that Socrates had been put

to death for his views, but that appalling fact merely proved how distant his world was from their own.

I concluded that if my role as mentor impeded my students' engagement with the texts, it should be minimized. If students' insecurity hampered their ability to engage fully with otherness, they should assume an alternative identity. If students regarded important texts as vague and abstract, they should examine the texts within the context of the impassioned debates and dramas from which they had emerged.

Instead of teacher-generated discussions, I decided that the class would play games, each set in an intellectually charged moment in history. Because I didn't want students to behave like callow novices, inferior to a grand inquisitor, I would have them assume the roles of powerful adults: mighty emperors, influential scholars, religious zealots. I would become mere tutor or scribe.

I started designing games during the summer of 1996. At the first meeting of my freshman seminar that fall, I explained excitedly that the class would not entail mere discussion; students would instead re-create the intellectual world of the past by playing three open-ended games. Diana, seated immediately opposite me, tilted her head and fixed me with cool blue eyes: "If the first game doesn't work, will you stick with the others?"

I didn't know what to say. "Of course it will work," I babbled.

In the next class I gave some background on Plato's *Republic* and distributed the rules and roles. For the next two sessions the defenders and prosecutors of Socrates met separately, preparing their arguments. Then the trial began and lasted for six classes. From the start, the sessions were brisk and enthusiastic. Each side scrutinized the other's indictments and petitions outside of class and attempted to blast them apart in class. The debates became heated; the judges who conducted the trial were hard pressed to maintain order. The students were engaged. I was happy.

I had done nothing new. Role-playing games have long been a staple of higher education. Many classes have done "trials" of Socrates. And for decades political scientists and scholars of foreign affairs have exploited game theory and its various applications ("It is 1962. You are the president, and you have just learned that the Soviets have introduced medium-range missiles into Cuba. ... "). The idea is that students will take the skills they have learned in class and go back to the past to fix it, rather like Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court. My students were doing something similar.

What happened several weeks later *was* new.

It occurred during the second game, set in the Forbidden City in Beijing in the late 16th century. I had assigned *The Analects* of Confucius, which provided the philosophical basis for each student's role in a dispute over succession between the Wanli emperor of the Ming dynasty and his top Confucian advisers. The emperor would win if he could prevent a majority of the members of the Hanlin Academy -- the top bureaucrats -- from publishing criticisms of his decision to name his third son as heir and successor.

The dispute may seem trivial, but the elevation of a younger son over an older one was an apparent violation of Confucian principles. The real struggle between Confucian purists and the emperor's faction persisted for decades, culminating in the suspicious death of the emperor's successor and the fatal weakening of the Ming

dynasty. The game examined only the origins of the dispute.

The first public session began with Purvi as emperor and Fiza as first minister. Students tittered at being addressed as "Emperor" or "Academician," and Confucian critics of the emperor accused Purvi of running amok among the concubines, thereby generating (literally) the succession crisis. The class was lighthearted and fun, but afterward Purvi and Fiza pounced on me in the hallway and poured out their frustrations.

"Nobody is taking this seriously," Fiza complained. "It's all just a joke."

I thought for a moment. "Confucius believed that ritual could teach behavior. He said that if you perform mourning rituals, you are more likely to feel grief; if you bow to a superior, you are more likely to feel a sense of deference. Maybe you should try that."

"You mean, make them bow to Purvi?" Fiza asked. "You'd let me do that?"

"Sure," I said, without giving it much thought. "Why not? Purvi's the emperor. Just make sure it's based on Ming rules."

When the next class began, Purvi was missing from the chair at the head of the table. Fiza rose and walked to the podium in a stately gait that was only slightly hampered by her unlaced, hightop sneakers. She read from a notecard: "The emperor was displeased by your behavior at the last session"

"She's one to talk, impregnating all those concubines!" someone shouted.

The class erupted in laughter. Fiza suppressed a smile. "I was displeased, too" -- now her tone grew serious -- "and we're not going to allow it." She looked up. "I mean it, you guys. It's not going to happen again. For centuries Hanlin scholars behaved according to certain rituals when they were around the emperor. We're going to do that, too. When the emperor enters, everyone will stand and bow. When you sit, you will sit straight. You can't cross your legs, either. You won't make jokes or have any side talks. You will speak only when I invite you to. If you fail to do these things -- if you fail to treat the emperor with respect -- you'll be expelled or silenced. Maybe even executed. And remember: Your grade depends on class participation."

"She can't do that!" Diana snapped. "She can't silence us!" She looked at me.

I hesitated. Then I drew on that deep reservoir of feigned self-assurance that sustains professors in moments of perplexity. "Sure she can," I said. "She's the emperor's top minister."

A few moments later, Purvi entered the room. Fiza stood, as did those of the emperor's faction. The others, still in their seats, looked at each other and then at Diana.

Slowly, mindful that all eyes were upon her, Diana stood. "I don't want my grade to suffer," she muttered. The others stood, too. Purvi sat, and Fiza invited everyone else to be seated.

Soon after the debate began, one of the emperor's critics made a joke. Fiza cut her off. "You can't do that. I'm not kidding. The next person who does will be out of the room."

Her voice was firm. More glances in my direction. I pretended to write in my notebook.

The tone of the class gradually shifted. Students began to mirror Fiza's seriousness. Critics of the emperor lowered their voices and couched their barbs in flowery metaphors. Confucian precepts that I had formerly had to pull out of students as if I were using tweezers now poured out in a torrent. Shy students spoke. The debate, though conducted nearly in whispers, acquired a strange, sharp edge.

I watched in amazement. No class I had ever taught had even vaguely resembled this one.

Someone piped up, "Does anyone realize that class was supposed to end seven minutes ago?"

Heads jerked toward the clock. We looked at one another in mute and slightly embarrassed wonderment, like when the lights come on after a movie. We had become lost in some sort of no man's land between past and present.

That something profound had occurred was indicated by a shift in grammar. Unconsciously students had applied male pronouns to each other, and they had used the present tense about historical events. They had slipped into a new identity and a present different from that of the classroom. In that imaginatively charged space, 16 young women had breathed life into an ancient text.

That class marked the beginning of a program I call Reacting to the Past. Fiza had pushed my game format into the world of liminality -- that threshold region where the normal rules of society are suspended or subverted. Liminal settings are characterized by uncertainty and emotional intensity, by the inversion of status and social hierarchies, and by imaginative expressiveness.

Religious rites often function in a liminal way, leading us into a sacred world where the truths of the spirit prevail over the rational values of everyday life. Theater is a liminal experience, though one that has been scripted (literally) by others. Sports are liminal in that the rules of the game transcend those of society, thereby allowing aggression and physical contact between strangers.

Scholars of liminality contend that much of the significant imaginative work of every society is expressed through its liminal institutions. By allowing people to escape from the rigidity of social structures and the rules of daily existence, liminality gives them the freedom to invent new solutions to old problems, or to regard familiar things in new ways.

But during the past century and a half, academic leaders have purged higher education of much of its liminality. The medieval university encompassed both liminal and academic worlds, with the church occupying a dominant position within the academic quadrangle. Now, however, we have separated religion from the curriculum, or insisted that it be taught as an academic endeavor without reference to belief; and we have curtailed or driven from campus the initiatory rites and hazing rituals of fraternities, sororities, and similar student groups, as well we should.

Because people crave the exhilaration and emotional release of liminality, however, it cannot be eliminated. Some find it in the vicarious magic of novels, movies, and plays; some in rock concerts, where waves of

sound obliterate the real world and raunchy lyrics undermine its staid conventions. Still others indulge in drinking binges, replete with their own subversive rites and dramas. And while the academic world has abandoned liminality, except as a subject of scholarly study, popular culture has harnessed it to the consumer engine that drives so much of modern life. Hollywood takes us to imaginary pasts and futures; SUV's and cosmetics make us invincible and irresistible. In the process, however, liminality has lost much of its intellectual depth.

My original Athens game contained some features conducive to liminality: It had dramatic tension and elevated the role of students, a status inversion. But Fiza had gone much further. By evoking the emotional tenor of the past and replicating its details, and by asserting student power over our imaginary realm, she had transformed the classroom into a liminal setting.

And that setting triggered a powerful emotional response. Students wanted more class time to explore the issues. They spent countless hours outside of class meeting in factions and cajoling the undecided. They worked harder on papers and submitted more of them. I learned that I could make the games and roles far more demanding.

Other faculty members visited that and subsequent courses, adopted *Reacting to the Past*, and reported experiences like mine. Now some 50 professors from a dozen colleges and universities are using *Reacting*, with new games and versions of the old ones that have been improved and expanded by scholarly specialists. Two faculty members reported perfect attendance, for the entire semester. Many students -- and some professors -- say that *Reacting* has been among their most exciting learning experiences.

My goal has been to liberate students from the constraints of their own sense of self, while imposing the social and political rules of the past and binding students temporarily to particular ideological viewpoints. Students learn history by following the rules of the game, and they teach each other the ideological underpinnings of the past by working through its great intellectual contests.

Reacting to the Past enlists the emotional appeal and imaginative power of liminality for intellectual purposes. It will never replace all conventional college courses, nor should it. The Socratic method is far more effective at teaching critical and analytical skills. Students also need quiet time to study and think on their own. But by applying liminality to academic pursuits, *Reacting to the Past* complements and extends traditional pedagogies.

Some educators believe that in the classroom of the future the professor will command an entire phalanx of high-tech gizmos. Others think that the classroom will no longer exist: Students will log onto the Internet from home. But the future of higher education may be different. The appeal of gizmos may wane, and the virtual community of the Internet may prove to be less satisfying than people in the flesh.

Most college students will continue to learn critical and analytical skills in lectures and seminars, but many will also draw intellectual and emotional sustenance from the liminal classroom, where the real world will fade and time will come to a stop.

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GAMES THAT REACT TO THE PAST

More information about Reacting to the Past, including a streaming video of an actual class using one of the games, can be found online (at <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting>). Administrators and faculty members can learn about the program by attending conferences at which participants play abbreviated versions of the games. During the 2004-5 academic year, conferences will be held in Connecticut, Georgia, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, and Texas. Some money is available to help pay the costs of attending a conference; inquiries should be sent to reacting@barnard.edu

Reacting now includes the following games:

The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C. (written with Josiah Ober, professor of classics, Princeton University)

Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor (written with Daniel K. Gardner, professor of history, Smith College)

The Trial of Anne Hutchinson (written with Michael P. Winship, professor of history, University of Georgia)

Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791 (written with Gary Kates, professor of history, Pomona College)

The Trial of Galileo (written with Frederick Purnell Jr., professor of philosophy, Queens College, City University of New York)

Defining a Nation: Gandhi's India on the Eve of Independence, 1945

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In other words, a classroom should exist as a liminal space which lies beyond the taken-for-granted normality of everyday experiences wherein there is a reformulation of the learner's meaning frame (Schwartzman, 2010) and a friction is created in the learner's subjectivity. Many studies have successfully deployed the theory of liminality to reimagine classrooms and education as fluid sites which allow students to question their subjectivity and replenish it with new perspectives and learnings. Within this liminal space, the learner approaches the concept and engages with it fully. The threshold experience itself is not unlike an adolescent state where the learner oscillates between child-like ways of thinking and newer, adult ways of thinking punctuated by feelings of frustration, moments of clarity, and confusion.

Should intelligent design be taught in the science classroom? B. Displays an understanding of NOMA Fails to understand NOMA. In outlining the features of the liminal classroom, Conroy is quick to point out that contemporary educational policy is at odds with this approach. Like many critics, Conroy regrets the educational implications. BOOK REVIEWS 381. and market justifications that accompany the movement toward standards and benchmarks, trends that Conroy claims "return education into a race-course, the teachers into horse trainers and children into steeple chasers" (2004, p. 40). This set of printable Latin vocabulary posters includes: - The Classroom - Animals - The Beach - The Park - The Farm - The City Each print shows a cute depiction of a the scenes with some of the main vocabulary around the edges. This item is a printable instant download with the files in PDF file format.