

# The Power of Play: Game Pedagogy and Engaged Learning

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## KEYWORDS

Game pedagogy

Content literacy

Critical thinking

Community

Board games

Simulation

## ABSTRACT

It is challenging to balance content delivery while also inspiring student engagement. This article discusses how instructors in secondary and higher education settings can equip students with content knowledge, improve critical reading and communications skills, and help them engage with one another by using story cubes and role-playing games. It also addresses the academic benefits of game pedagogies in liberal arts classrooms.

## The Power of Play: Game Pedagogy and Engaged Learning

Susan Epting and Amanda Hodges

1. Patrick Mullane, "Employers Want—and Will Pay for—Soft Skills: Are You Focusing on Them Enough?" *Forbes*, October 28, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/patrickmullane/2022/10/28/employers-wantand-will-pay-forsoft-skills-are-you-focusing-on-them-enough/>.
2. On plummeting attention, see Marianne Wolf, *Reader Come Home* (New York: Harper, 2018).
3. Peter Stearns, "A 'Crisis' of Student Anxiety? The Challenges to Student Mental Health Are Real: They Are Also Decades in the Making," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-crisis-of-student-anxiety>.

Whether in the K–12 setting or higher education, discourses of crisis have been on the rise for years. Students are overwhelmed and underprepared; the lines between "learner" and "consumer" continue to blur; and fewer people (be they politicians, administrators, parents, or students) understand the legacy and potential of the liberal arts. And, of course, changes in an evolving economy mean that employers are looking for graduates who demonstrate an increasingly rare set of skills: people who can quickly recognize and respond to patterns of data, write and speak with self-assured clarity, develop connections with colleagues and clients, problem solve, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Students have internalized much of this pressure. While the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many troubling patterns, many of us have lamented the decreasing pools of prior knowledge students bring with them to our campuses, the plummeting attention spans that make analysis of nuanced texts a struggle, and even the eerie quiet of a classroom when students would rather spend time on their phones than have conversations with the people beside them.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, anxiety and depression have increased exponentially among students.<sup>3</sup>

All these variables present faculty with a dilemma: How can we equip students with content knowledge, improve critical reading and communication skills, and help them engage with one another without feeling overwhelmed? For that matter, how do we interrupt the discourses of crisis so that students can rediscover the rewards of curiosity? For educators passionate about our disciplines, what approaches can we incorporate to promote meaningful engagement rather than a fixation on grades or, worse, utter apathy?

Those of us who have dedicated our professional lives to learning and sharing knowledge can find unengaged learners both baffling and exhausting. Simultaneously, there is an intuitive and well-founded resistance to the kind of slick, superficial "edutainment" practices that valorize style over substance and promote the idea that school should always be fun. While authentic learning brings all sorts of rewards, we all know that grappling with complex readings, plunging into radically different worldviews, and seeking out patterns and connections can be both difficult and frustrating until the epiphanies dawn.

In other words, the initial cynicism of our colleagues when they hear the term "game pedagogy" is understandable. Many of us may recall long ago schooldays when games were used as incentives for good behavior or for finishing our studies, so it can sound counterintuitive to incorporate game pedagogy into our classes when many of our students are missing assignments, ill-prepared, or struggling to connect. At the same time, students need the understandings and skills the liberal arts can provide more than ever.

Our personal teaching experiences span a variety of educational settings. One of us is an English professor at a small Lutheran college in South Carolina with a liberal arts tradition and a growing number of professional degree programs. The other entered a secondary teaching environment in the rural South after completing a PhD in history at the University of Pennsylvania and being a



professor for several years at a small liberal arts college. In each of these settings we have faced challenges that are microcosms for many of the tensions within education more generally. At the liberal arts college, 50 percent of students are Pell Grant eligible, 30 percent are people of color, 40 percent are first-generation college students, and over 50 percent are student-athletes. The institution prides itself on allowing students access to greater security and social mobility. The secondary school is an all-magnet public high school focusing on career pathways with at least 60 percent of students taking Advancement Placement (AP) exams and the vast majority attending two- or four-year institutions after graduation. In both educational settings, most students view college as preparation for the workplace or for future career goals, as a route to achieve a final goal and not a destination in and of itself. It is challenging to imagine students in either learning environment saying they plan to go to college or are currently attending college to learn; rather, the perceived value of the postsecondary experience is determined by what and where they believe it can get them, not the knowledge, attributes, and dispositions they attain. The skills they perceive to be applicable to their future careers are where the value is placed, not in philosophical or intangible concepts. In short, students fall short making connections between gaining knowledge (knowing) and gaining skills (doing); one cannot be done without the other.

Teaching students how to think like a historian means embracing the counterintuitive, taking a hiatus from the quest for nuance and complexity, and thinking about the instruction of history more like teaching a foreign language. As instructors, we start with the basics and with constant reminders to be patient; fluency in anything takes time and effort, but it also means that we have to sell the idea that historical thinking involves a set of skills that are transferable in ways that will help students reach their goals. The work of the historian is an internal process that cannot be observed by the outsider looking in. This is a major challenge. How could historical thinking be made visible to all students in a way that is interesting, accessible, and equitable? How could students with widely varying content literacy skills and basically no disciplinary literacy skills or historical background knowledge ever experience and appreciate what an academic historian does?

Over several years and in many settings, we have been able to use Rory's Story Cubes to effectively introduce the discipline of history to students. Through interpreting images and crafting a narrative from the cubes, students are able to experience encountering "facts" that are recognizable and familiar as well as the ways that familiarity or expertise affects the narratives they create. Rory's Story Cubes are six-sided dice with each side displaying an image similar to an emoji, stick figure, or clip art. They come in packs of nine cubes with such themes as films, myths and fables, and voyages. We keep the theme of the set hidden from students. It is part of their challenge to determine what the dice have in common and to give their dice set a theme.

To begin, we, as instructors, select a single cube and ask several students what they see. Generally, there will be some consensus on the image, but not all will agree. This naturally leads into a discussion about why we interpret the image differently. We all see the same image on the same die, yet we provide a variety of interpretations of what we see. This opening activity raises big, essential questions about history as a discipline. Namely, how can we look at the same fact or source and interpret it differently? What significance or level of importance do we impart to that image? Students are asked to consider what informed their interpretations. Some will

mention that they “know” what the image is; their “knowing” is always rooted in prior knowledge, something they have seen before, and familiarity with the theme of a particular dice set. Their “knowing” is unobservable. This provokes a conversation about how historians operate within a broader context of their own understanding of a subject, how expert conclusions differ from those of a novice or beginner, and what it means for a historian to “know” something.

In the next step, we distribute sets of story cubes to small groups of students. It is advantageous to have as many different themed sets as possible. To keep the sets unidentifiable, at least upon initial glance, we distribute the sets in dice trays so the original packaging gives no clues as to the themes of the sets. Students approach the sets without context, although some students determine the context relatively quickly. Students roll all nine cubes and create a narrative based on the images or “facts” displayed on the dice. For students who are able to determine the theme of the dice sets, they find their task of interpreting and creating a narrative to be much easier. This can open up dialogue on the role of expertise, which can lead to all sorts of discussions concerning the nature of information, knowing, and understanding. Students grasp that their interpretation of the cubes largely depends on their own experiences and prior knowledge, which helps them not just to know but to also understand that while the study of history as an academic discipline may be a solitary pursuit, reaching consensus regarding what we know and understand about the past benefits from a diverse body of informed participants. Interpretation is an individual pursuit; knowing is a collective one. As the students work with the dice, we frequently switch sets between groups. It is highly beneficial for students to experience interpreting the sets as experts, easily able to interpret the images versus not having a clue as to what the images symbolize. This gives more students opportunities to be experts and to experience for themselves how their minds operate when interpreting data from the standpoint of familiarity versus the challenges of making meaning out of the totally foreign. It is not unusual for students to believe that facts speak for themselves, but as they can see from interpreting the story cubes, the explanation must be explicit. How meaning is derived from our data cannot go unsaid; the dice need the narrator, the historian, to explain their significance.

The story cubes work well as an introductory activity to history and historical thinking, but as student learning evolves, historically based role-playing games, such as *Reacting to the Past*, can help students focus on applying rather than just analyzing primary sources, developing a more nuanced understanding of the material, and, just maybe, finding it relevant. Incorporating *The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C.E.* game book from *Reacting to the Past* series has allowed students to add to their cultural capital in numerous ways. According to social studies standards, students do not learn about the classical world; instead, history effectively begins in 1400. As they enter college, many are unfamiliar with how classical mythology, drama, and philosophy have shaped many facets of Western art and culture or how the trade routes, politics, and empires of the ancient world continue to cast long shadows. Likewise, many of these students are unsure they belong in higher education or are anxious to not appear ignorant or to offend peers or faculty; this can stifle discussion. Their eyes widen each fall as they realize we will be taking on names like Aeschylus, Euripides, Pericles, Plato, and Marcus Aurelius: that list can seem the worst of all worlds, intimidating and distant.

But from the first day when small groups craft stories with randomly assigned story cubes, we discuss the roles of narrative, context, and perspective both in scholarship and our day-to-day

4. Samuel Abrams, "Gen Z's Pragmatic Politics Could Be a Key to Ending Polarization," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-11-19/gen-z-politics-midterm-elections-voting>.

lives. In a midterm reflection, one student put it this way: "When we first met Clytemnestra in *The Oresteia*, I just thought she was bitter and took out her frustration with Agamemnon on the innocent Cassandra. I wanted her to pay for killing them. But when I thought about when we read about how Athenian women didn't have real legal rights and we talked about how nobody else would call Agamemnon out on killing their daughter, I realized this wasn't about her. It's about what happens when the rules don't apply to powerful people. And we still deal with that injustice, and we still label women who call it out."

After practicing these kinds of connections between the ancient world and modernity in the first months of the semester, students take on the roles of Crito, Thrasylbulus, and other citizens (or noncitizens) in ancient Athens in a weeks-long role-playing game set at the close of the Peloponnesian War. Each student receives a character packet with biographical background, personal and political objectives, and a detailed timeline for speeches, and there are core primary texts to shape the speeches and discussions to come. Because the game is divided into sessions that address individual topics, like expanding citizenship to slaves or immigrants or determining whether jurors and assemblymen should be compensated for their service, specific primary sources align with each topic.

With writers like Plato, Herodotus, and Thucydides, students find themselves wading through rich, nuanced texts. Within their groups or factions, students annotate these readings and consider how to use or challenge them as they prepare for each session. In preparing for the Trial of Socrates, one student reflected, "Whenever I was getting lost in Plato's *Apology*, I reminded myself that my character was one of Socrates's prosecutors, so I started looking for specific things I could use to accuse him of leading youth astray, and that helped me focus on why his methods made folks mad, especially after his students had caused so much trouble." In this way, the game allows students to recognize the importance of context, to draw from specific texts to shore up their characters' speeches, to think through ways their assigned figures define "justice" or the "common good" (even and especially when those definitions challenge their personal beliefs), to voice opinions—even contentious ones—with greater confidence, and to seek out areas of potential compromise.

The academic benefits of using games to find meanings in these texts would be enough to argue for their wider integration, but they are also invaluable tools that help students develop soft skills. The same class that musters a rote discussion after reading some myths can dazzle when those myths are the basis of a round of Superfight: The Mythology Deck as students fuse content, creativity, and connection. The role-playing game in particular pushes students to speak up, to think on their feet, and to remain true to their character's aims and agendas. For a generation that values consensus and eschews polarization, this might sound like a tough sell, but for years, our students have leaned into the experience.<sup>4</sup> As part of an activity autopsy, students write thank-you notes to the characters they portrayed. One student wrote, "My favorite thing I should thank you for is my new ability to call people out without backpedaling. Often in classes I hesitate to share my perspective because I'm afraid of being called nerdy, stupid, or useless. But you never backed down, and you inspired me to rock it!" Students who might have doubted whether or not they belonged in a college classroom (or even if it would do them any good) suddenly see themselves as capable of applying abstract concepts, of thinking contextually, and of assuming

positions of leadership.

Put simply, content-related games foster both learning and confidence, and those students carry those boons into other facets of their academic and personal lives. These implications matter because by the time students reach middle school, they have determined if they “like” or “hate” history without any notion that memorizing the past is not the same as studying it. Games allow students to approach nuanced content from a variety of perspectives and to gain a sense of agency with the material. Since students have almost no concept that academic historians engage in anything beyond caricatured antiquarianism, this approach encourages students to develop their own questions and insights. This type of inquiry contributes to students seeing the relevance of the historical discipline, historical thinking skills, and the need for attention to detail and context to the present and to the problem-solving abilities that can be useful, arguably essential, in their daily lives.

These observations are nothing new and the National Council of Social Studies Education and state standards for the instruction of history have adopted historical thinking skills as part of the curriculum; unfortunately, there is not much to help public school teachers with little training in the particulars of the historical discipline to wrap their own minds around how history is actually done, let alone how to teach students to do it. Even academic historians have a difficult time explaining their habits of mind and thought, approaches so long ingrained that they are innate, in ways that help students understand the basics of the discipline. Of course, it is no secret that social studies teachers in the K–12 environment are not typically the recipients of extensive disciplinary training in their subjects.

No matter the level or age of the students, games create relatively low-stake points of entry to a discipline that may otherwise seem staid, closed, and known. Students are able to appreciate that individuals in the past had the agency to navigate and that historical developments were not fixed in their courses or outcomes. This results in students beginning to recognize their own abilities and impacts as individuals who make decisions within our larger democratic society. As for instructors with the aim of encouraging authentic inquiry and exploration, we must be comfortable and committed to providing opportunities for students to “play” with the past and accept the fumbles and foibles that go along with it. While the endgame may not produce a perfect product, the experience provides a deeper appreciation of context, how the past is explored, excavated, and explicitly constructed.

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## HOW TO CITE

Epting, Susan, Amanda Hodges. "The Power of Play: Game Pedagogy and Engaged Learning." *Proceedings of the H-Net Teaching Conference* 1 (2023): 70–76. <https://doi.org/10.33823/phtc.v1i1.176>.

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