

Reacting to the Past: an innovation in education that develops critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork skills

In May 2013, the first Reacting to the Past (RTTP) workshop was held outside the US at Sophia University. The event was part of the ongoing efforts made through the education innovation grant project conducted by Profs. Bettina Gramlich-Oka, Jim McKinley, and Mathew Thompson. With the help from the Tokyo chapter of the Japan Association for Language Teaching, three RTTP experts were brought to Sophia to help run the workshop: Prof. Nicholas Proctor (Simpson College, Iowa – Chair of the Reacting to the Past Editorial Board), Prof. Stephanie Jass (Adrian College, Michigan – *RTTP* pioneer), and Prof. John Moser (Ashland University, Ohio – *RTTP* materials creator).



Bringing RTTP to Japan is an important initiative. Maintaining relevance and inspiring students to learn are ongoing struggles for educators anywhere. In our increasingly globalized, internationalized, and technologically advanced educational contexts, teachers are now more innovative than ever, getting students to engage, think critically, lead, problem-solve, and otherwise become more independent individuals.

RTTP is an educational approach that uses content to get students to engage in debates, research and prepare papers and speeches, in a way that allows students to develop critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork skills. These skills match up with the three core skills for working adults promoted by the Ministry of Economy, Trade & Industry (METI). The idea is that these skills are what the world is looking for from university graduates. The 3 skills (called in Japanese *Shakaijin Kisoryoku* 社会人基礎力) are:

- 1) Action: the ability to move forward and stay engaged, to get up when you fall down. This includes taking initiative, motivating others, and achieving goals.

2) Thinking: the ability to question and think problems through. This includes identifying problems, planning, and creative thinking.

3) Teamwork: the ability to work with other people in pursuit of a common goal. This includes communication, listening, flexibility, awareness, cooperation, and stress control (Reed, 2010).

RTTP was developed by academics looking to improve these skills at Barnard College (Columbia University) in New York, and quickly spread to more than 300 colleges and universities. Students participate in roles with detailed character descriptions based on real historical figures. Through the game format, they give speeches and participate in debates based on actual historical events. It is an opportunity for students to be at the center of the action, have fun, and potentially rewrite history!

In the workshop held May 11-12, 2013 at Sophia, three RTTP games were run, with one of our three RTTP experts from the US either leading or assisting on each game. Prof. Moser led his own game in development, “Japan, the West, and the Road to World War, 1940-41”. Prof. Jass led the popular game, “Greenwich Village, 1913: Suffrage, Labor, and the New Woman” (created by Mary Jane Treacy). Prof. Proctor helped Prof. Gramlich-Oka run the “Legacy of the 47 Ronin” game, which is the game being developed by Profs. Thompson and Gramlich-Oka, and research assistant Darla Cornett. Following are the letters received from the three RTTP experts after their experience with the education innovation grant team in the workshop at Sophia.

From Prof. Proctor:

Thank you very much for inviting me and my colleagues, professors John Moser and Stephanie Jass, to the JALT Reacting to the Past conference at Sophia University. We were all very excited to have the opportunity to teach faculty from different schools, colleges, and universities in Japan about the Reacting to the Past series (or RTTP). Although some experimentation with RTTP has been done outside of North America (primarily in Switzerland, Australia, and Taiwan), this was the first major conference outside of the United States. We were honored to be a part of it.

As you know, RTTP is a series of historical role-playing games that are designed to teach a variety of skills in addition to immersing students in particular historical moments. Instructors are able to modify the games to address their particular

learning objectives. Some focus the games on developing student skills in problem-solving, creativity, and innovation. Others concentrate upon leadership and team-building.

Given that most of the instructors attending the conference regularly teach courses to English language learners, they were generally most excited about focusing the games on reading, writing, and speaking. This came up in the questions that were raised during the plenary sessions as well as in conversations that I had with individual attendees. They were excited that Professor Jim McKinley has blazed a path in the use of RTTP in speech and rhetoric courses.

During the conference, I assisted Professor Bettina Gramlich-Oka in running a game based on the story of the 47 Rōnin. This is the first game in the series to be developed by faculty at a Japanese university, it is pioneering work. Since the game is being developed at Sophia, the developers are well positioned to consider the possibility of writing the game in both English and Japanese. I think the game is a great addition to the series. Aware that the game was at a relatively early stage of development, participants offered helpful advice and commentary throughout the two days of the conference. The subject makes the game a natural fit for Japanese schools; I think it would work well at schools in the US as well.

Overall, conference attendees were very enthusiastic about RTTP. Throughout the conference they were animated, energetic, and fully engaged. They asked good questions and played their roles with verve. A number of participants expressed a desire to return to their institutions to consult with colleagues about using RTTP on their home campuses. I think the use of RTTP in Japan will greatly expand as a result of the conference.

Throughout the conference, participants raised a number of questions about the use of RTTP with Japanese students. Overall, they were optimistic about the possibility of using the games in their own classes because it has worked so well at Sofia. They are eager to try RTTP at their own institutions. This experimentation is typical of the ways in which RTTP has expanded in the US, where it is now in use at over 300 different colleges and universities.

Initially, it was thought that RTTP would only work in small seminars at elite universities. Then it was tried at other four-year schools, where it worked. Then it was tried at state universities; it worked there too. Two-year colleges, commuter colleges, and colleges with high proportions of immigrants, English language learners, and non-traditional aged students all presented challenges, but in every case dedicated faculty who know their students well have found ways to make RTTP work on their campuses. RTTP can be adapted to fit their strengths and

weaknesses of a wide variety of students. The expansion of RTTP has been successful because the games are sufficiently robust to allow a lot of modification. Sophia faculty members have excellent ideas about how to modify the games to fit their classes, and they shared these with their colleagues from other institutions.

Consequently, I see the faculty members at Sophia who have used the games as uniquely positioned to serve as leaders for the adaptation of the games to East Asian students. I believe East Asia is the next big frontier for the adoption and adaptation of RTTP, and I think Sophia University is uniquely positioned to serve as a leader in this effort.

Ideally, as chair of the Reacting to the Past Editorial Board and a member of the Reacting Consortium Board, I would like to see Sophia University develop into the East Asian hub for RTTP. The significant experience several Sophia faculty members have developed using the games in their classes, attending RTTP conferences, writing games, and now organizing an RTTP conference, gives Sophia an enormous advantage over other universities in East Asia. With your permission, I will offer this opinion to the rest of the Reacting Consortium Board at our annual meeting in New York City in June 2013.

In June, I will be travelling to China with a group of faculty from US universities as part of an effort by the Society for Values in Higher Education to spread innovative pedagogies to Chinese universities. About half of the program will be devoted to RTTP. We will be presenting to universities in Guangdong, Wuhan, Shanghai, and Xi'an. I am interested to see how the challenges in adapting RTTP to work with Chinese students resemble those in Japan. I expect that there are significant similarities, and I look forward to sharing my findings with my colleagues at Sophia.

In conclusion, thank you very much for the hospitality and generosity that you extended to my colleagues and me during our brief stay in Tokyo. I hope this conference marks the beginning of Sophia's role as the center of RTTP in East Asia. I look forward to working with you on the 47 Rōnin and other games, on seeing you at RTTP conferences, and on planning future regional conferences at Sophia University.

Yours most sincerely,
Prof. Nicolas W. Proctor
Simpson College History Department
Reacting to the Past Editorial Board, chair

From Prof. Jass:

Two weeks after my wonderful trip to Tokyo to lead a Reacting to the Past game at Sophia University, I'm still marveling at how well it went. None of us in attendance were sure how it might go, trying RTTP with such a diverse group of instructors and students, but any trepidation we might have had was soon dispelled once our games started.

I led the Greenwich Village, 1913 game, which may have seemed a bit of an odd choice for a game played in Japan. But I chose it not only because the subject matter is familiar to me (and I've led it before), but because I wanted new players to experience a different kind of Reacting game – one that is not about warring groups or totally divided factions, and requires players to do work outside of the game to gain influence and power.

The players responded to the game much like players in America do: they were initially confused and nervous, but took the plunge and started swimming. And that's how it is for our students playing RTTP, too – they feel underprepared and scared, but with faculty encouragement (and prodding!) they eventually jump in and figure out what they're doing.

Our game – played entirely in English – went very well, which was an impressive feat considering the varying levels of language proficiency in the room. Only two players had RTTP experience going in: one a professor, another a student. It was very encouraging to see that the student – the only non-faculty member in the game – was the most prepared player and did an excellent job presenting her character. Her knowledge and assuredness impressed everyone in the room. (This happens at Reacting workshops everywhere; invited RTTP students come ready to play, and are usually the best players in the game!)

The level of engagement of everyone playing made it clear to me that Reacting has a real future in Japan. Just as not all games are appropriate for all classes in America, I think that Japanese students will likely respond best to games that are chosen with them in mind. In America, American students, particularly first-year students, often find it easier if a game has a direct connection to them or their lives: geographically, thematically, or chronologically. I'm sure the same will be true of Japanese students. A game that deals with a Japanese topic or takes place in the modern age will likely be simpler for them to tackle, especially if it's to be taught in English.

Going forward, I think the success of RTTP in any non-English speaking classroom will require some efforts to translate at least some of the existing game materials OR to develop new games with bilingualism in mind. I am very excited at the prospect

of faculty using RTTP as a tool for developing second language skills, and think that the Sophia faculty (as well as some of the other institutions represented at the conference) are pioneering that effort wonderfully. RTTP may have been around for fifteen years, but in many ways it is still a nascent method, and it has been fascinating to see the creative ways that various practitioners are using it to teach a host of skills and ideas. It's not a panacea; not every class should incorporate Reacting unless it fulfills the course's objectives, but I think it has great promise to get Japanese students dynamically engaged in speaking English.

I must graciously thank my hosts, Jim McKinley and Bettina Gramlich-Oka, for inviting my American colleagues and me to Tokyo to take part in this very exciting experiment. From my perspective, it was a rousing success, and I hope I can take part in it again!

Sincerely,
Stephanie Jass
Assoc. Prof. of History
Director of CORE (1st year curriculum)
Adrian College

From Prof. Moser:

What a treat it was to be able to help bring Reacting to the Past to a new audience in Japan! It was a particular thrill for me, as the author of the first Reacting game-in-development set in Japan (although not, I'm happy to say, the only one) to have the opportunity to run my game, "Japan, the West, and the Road to World War, 1940-41," at Sophia University.

As you know, the Reacting to the Past series attempts to introduce students to important texts, and pivotal moments in history, through the use of role-playing games. Players take on the roles of actual participants in great events, and each is equipped with a set of concrete victory objectives. They may pursue these goals through a variety of means—both fair and foul—but the real emphasis in the games is on persuasion, using classic texts to frame their arguments.

"Japan, the West, and the Road to World War" begins in the summer of 1940, in the wake of Germany's spectacular victories over France and the Low Countries. By this time Japan had for nearly three years been mired in a seemingly unending war against China, and regarded German success as an opportunity for a fundamental reordering of East Asia. With France and the Netherlands occupied, and Britain preoccupied with home defense, many in the Japanese army and navy—as well

as civilian ultranationalists—believed that the time had come to create a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere,” in which Europe’s colonies would be “liberated” (in other words, placed under Japanese rule), and the area’s resources could be committed toward winning a final victory over China.

In the game we played at Sophia we had a fairly small group—probably a few less people than would have made for an ideal experience—but I still think it went quite well. Surely most of the participants brought energy and enthusiasm to their roles. The members of the Army faction were, as they should be, dedicated to victory in China. The Navy was equally dedicated to the “strike south”—the drive to occupy Southeast Asia—while keeping a watchful eye on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The zaibatsu (there was only one in this particular game) defended the interests of his corporation while showing a proper willingness to defer to the demands of the military when it became necessary. The members of the Imperial Court were careful to make their feelings known without associating the Emperor too closely with any particular option. Meanwhile the ultranationalists—an underground faction consisting of the game’s sole bureaucrat and a member of the Imperial Court—plotted behind the scenes to silence those voices opposed to an aggressive policy abroad.

I have been asked to comment on the challenges that might be faced in using *Reacting to the Past* games in Japan. Having seen my game in action at Sophia, I think the greatest of these might be encouraging native Japanese students to break out of the confines of their culture. The emphasis on politeness and quiet diligence could make it difficult for them to take on forceful roles. The problem was less obvious in my game—which, after all, is set in Tokyo—but even in this case the quietest participants were Japanese natives. I wonder if a game such as, say, *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France* might prove even more challenging.

This caveat notwithstanding, I regard my experience in Japan as entirely successful. My game received some valuable play testing, as well as feedback from the participants. As for the participants, they seemed genuinely to enjoy the game, and to appreciate the effectiveness of *Reacting to the Past* as a teaching tool.

Once again, I would very much like to thank Sophia University, JALT, and especially Jim McKinley and Bettina Gramlich-Oka for having me out, and giving me an opportunity to run my game in Tokyo. It was truly the experience of a lifetime.

Sincerely,
John Moser
Professor of History
Ashland University

Looking to the future:

The first workshop was a success and has established Sophia University as the home for RTTP in East Asia. Prof. Proctor reported back after his time working with academics in China on RTTP initiatives there and they were pleased to learn that Sophia was established as the East Asia hub.

Sophia will host another workshop March 15, 2014, at which two games will be played. The Education Innovation Grant team is very pleased with the developments of the project and continues to work on developing the Legacy of the 47 Ronin game, as well as a second Japanese history game.

Reference:

Reed, W. (2010). The Blueprint of 21st Century Employability. *Daijob HR Club*. Retrieved from <http://hrclub.daijob.com/hrclub/?p=815>