Teaching Philosophy With Role Immersion: A Training Conference

Abstract
Teaching Political Philosophy With Role-Immersion is a conference to train philosophy instructors in the use of role-immersion pedagogy. Role-immersion games see students adopt the role of a character, from whose point of view they give speeches, write essays and work with and against other players. Commerically available games are designed for use in history classrooms. This conference will feature Justice: The Game, which to our knowledge is the first role-immersion game designed for use in (political) philosophy classes. Players play the roles of members of a national assembly, each of whom seeks to pass resolutions inspired by a reading in political philosophy. Philosophers whose work informs the game include Elizabeth Anderson, Ronald Dworkin, Chandran Kukathas, Will Kymlicka, Martha Nussbaum, Susan Moller Okin, John Rawls and K.C. Tan. Conference attendees will play the complete game over the course of two days, after which they will be able to run it in their own classrooms.

Basic Information
Project Coordinator(s)
Andy Lamey

Steering Committee
- Paul Hadjipieris, Education Specialist, Engaged Teaching Hub, University of California, San Diego
- Monte Johnson, Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego

Funding Amount Requested
$3,235

Expected Project Completion Date
June 2023

Project Description
Role-immersion is a form of active learning that sees students adopt the roles of assigned characters. When a class is in game mode, class sessions are run by students. They organize class activities, such as votes and the order of speeches, while the instructor functions as an observer who takes notes and is available to resolve procedural and other questions as they arise.

Role-immersion has been popularized by the Reacting to the Past series of games, which are now used at over 300 schools across the U.S., primarily to teach history. Philosophy instructors do occasionally use Reacting games, most commonly in classes on Ancient or Early Modern philosophy. But not only are Reacting games most suited to classes in the history of philosophy,
even then they need to be adapted to enhance a typical philosophy class, which can be time consuming. Existing training conferences run by the Reacting to the Past Consortium teach instructors how to use their games “out of the box,” and do not cover modifying them to teach philosophy.

Justice: The Game is a new role-immersion game created by the project co-ordinator. It incorporates active learning elements found in existing role-immersion games, but is specifically designed to teach political philosophy. The roles that students play are based on contemporary political philosophers rather than, as in Reacting, historical personalities. Each student plays the role of a member of a national assembly whose game objectives are based on a class reading. For example, some players work together in factions, united by a common philosophy such as libertarianism, liberalism or utilitarianism, while others play non-aligned characters known as indeterminates. Sample indeterminate roles include those seeking to advance policy objectives inspired by Elizabeth Anderson, K.C. Tan and Susan Moller Okin, among other contemporary philosophers.

The core of the game involves players seeking to form alliances, the most effective of which include both faction members and indeterminates, to pass resolutions that support their various victory objectives, and which are inevitably at odds with the victory objectives of other players. Many of the resolutions in the game touch on immigration, indigenous rights and other issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Further details of the game are outlined in Martin, Lamey and Draper (2020) (co-authored by the project coordinator and two graduate students).

Students are deliberately not graded on whether they achieve their victory objectives, as this is not within their control. The competitive nature of the game however commonly sees students become highly engaged, often communicating extensively with each other outside of class, forming strong social bonds with one another and, in some cases, even asking if class can start early to allow for more game play. Students exposed to role-immersion pedagogy often seek out further classes that employ the method, which can be an especially attractive feature in departments seeking to increase enrolments or the number of philosophy majors. Further benefits of the pedagogy that have been documented in peer-reviewed research are described below.

Instructors who become proficient in role-immersion often find it less time consuming than traditional teaching methods. However, precisely because most philosophy instructors are unfamiliar with role-immersion, learning the pedagogy can be daunting. The best way to learn the game, which is designed to fill four to six class sessions, is to play it. This conference will allow 26 attendees to play the entire game over two days at the University of San Diego (UCSD) in June 2022. Attendance will be open to philosophy faculty and graduate students from any school.

In addition to playing the game, attendees will hear a presentation from university and community college faculty in the San Diego region who have successfully used role-immersion in their philosophy classes. The conference will also provide an opportunity for instructors interested in role-immersion to network and discuss the creation of new games to teach different areas of philosophy, beyond its political branch. Attendees will be gauged on their level of interest in making
the conference an annual event or creating a new organization devoted to fostering the use of role-immersion in undergraduate philosophy teaching.

The project co-ordinator will survey attendees at the end of the conference to obtain feedback on what worked and what could be improved. Participants will be contacted again a year after the conference to determine how many participants subsequently use role-immersion in their classes.

The project coordinator is an experienced user of role-immersion games in philosophy classrooms. He has previously organized two similar conferences, held at UCSD in 2017 and 2018, at which faculty and graduate students from universities and community colleges learned how to use role-immersion pedagogy. Those conferences were supported by the Reacting to the Past Consortium, which does not support training conferences that use games in subjects outside of history.

References


Project Impact

The educational value of role-immersion games has been extensively documented. The most systematic study is likely that of Stroessner, Beckerman and Whittaker (2009). It compared the educational outcomes for first-year seminar students taught with role-immersion to those of students who took a traditional first-year seminar. Students who learned through role-immersion exhibited higher self-esteem, empathy and other positive traits at the end of semester than students who took regular seminars. Stroessner et al. additionally found that students taught with role-immersion demonstrated the same level of writing proficiency as did students taught conventionally. Other encouraging findings are suggested by Higbee (2009), which cites positive effects of role-immersion on student attendance and participation, and by Lightcap (2009), which analyzes students’ positive evaluations of classes that used role-immersion. Davison and Goldhaber (2007) document especially positive effects on the class integration of students for whom English is a second language.

Instructors who use role-immersion commonly describe its effect on their classes as transformative. As Larry Carver, Director of the Liberal Arts Honors Programs at the University of Texas at Austin has observed, “I have never seen students this engaged. They write more than the assignments require; everyone, shy or not, participates vigorously in the debates. They read important texts with real understanding, making complex arguments and ideas their own” (Reacting to the Past Consortium 2021). Many of these benefits are due to the social nature of role-immersion games, which require students to work together to achieve well-defined goals.

To date these benefits have been far more accessible to history students than to philosophy students. Undergraduate philosophy students will benefit from this conference by being able to learn philosophy in a highly active yet textually sensitive way. Instructors who are committed to high-quality teaching will benefit from gaining proficiency with a new teaching method that has the potential to increase interest in their classes and majors.
A secondary purpose of the conference is to gauge the interest of participants in forming an organization to promote philosophical role-immersion as a teaching method. If a critical mass of practitioners emerges at the conference, it could eventually transform the teaching of philosophy at a national level.

References


Higbee, Mark D (2009). How Reacting to the Past Games “made me want to come to class and learn”: An Assessment of the Reacting Pedagogy at EMU, 2007-2008. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at EMU 2/1: 4


Project Goals

- The primary goal of the conference is to introduce faculty and graduate students to role-immersion pedagogy and to train them in its effective use.
- A second goal is to determine whether there exists a critical mass of philosophy instructors interested in further developing role-immersion pedagogy and/or launching a professional organization for this purpose.
- A third goal is to learn if there are any aspects of Justice: The Game that could be revised to make it more effective in meeting the diverse needs of philosophy instructors at different institutions.

Project Timeline


January 2022: Run conference advertisement at Daily Nous. Post conference announcement on Philpapers, the Reacting Faculty Lounge, Teaching Philosophy Facebook Group, Philos-L listserver.
Spring 2022: Repost conference announcements as needed. Confirm registration and field queries from conference attendees, including queries related to disability accommodation. Hire sign-language interpreters and/or student proctors. Assign roles to conference attendees and organize conference catering.

May 2022: Email role sheets and conference information to attendees.

June 2-3 2022: Run conference at UCSD concluding with exit survey.

May-June 2023: Administer follow-up survey gauging post-conference use of role immersion.

**Project Outreach**

The primary audience is instructors of political philosophy at universities and community colleges. This includes faculty and advanced graduate students.

The secondary audience is faculty and graduate students in other disciplines that may be interested in using a political philosophy role-immersion game, e.g. political theorists in political science departments.

We will reach these audiences through the project coordinator’s web site, UCSD Philosophy’s web site, the conference announcements page on the web site of the APA, Facebook groups devoted to role-immersion pedagogy and philosophy instruction, and philosophical list-serves such as Philos-L.

For further detail see below, Online Presence.

**Accessibility Plan**

The conference will be held at the University of California, San Diego, an ADA-compliant institution. UCSD has free disabled parking throughout the campus and its campus transit system is free to disabled visitors. The conference will be held at the Meeting Rooms at the Village, a conference space that is wheelchair accessible. All conference activities will take place in a single conference room with access to disabled bathrooms on the same floor.

Role-immersion games commonly see players move around the conference space, as when for example they give a speech from a podium at the front of the room or huddle with other players to discuss game objectives. Players however control when and where they give a speech and how they engage other players. Those who prefer to speak or engage other players while seated, or who prefer not to give speeches at all, can do so without fear of negatively impacting the game or their ability to master it.

Conference attendees will receive all conference materials electronically at least one week prior to the conference. Should attendees require conference materials even earlier, for accessibility or other reasons, this can be easily accommodated.

The amount of new written material attendees will need to absorb at the conference itself will be minimal. Based on similar conferences organized by the project coordinator, new material is
unlikely fill more than 8-10 Powerpoint slides presented during a brief opening presentation. Any such presentation will uphold universal design for learning (UDL) principles, as by, for example, presenting all slide material orally, and by including written and verbal description of slide images.

If any conference attendees are hard of hearing or deaf, a sign-language interpreter will be hired from UCSD's Office of Students with Disabilities. This service is listed under Recharge Captioning and Interpreting at this web site:

https://osd.ucsd.edu/faculty-staff/forms.html#Recharge-Captioning-and-Interpr

The conference may have student proctors (see the budget narrative, below). If so their functions can include pushing someone's wheelchair, delivering an in-game message on behalf of a player with mobility issues, reading text aloud, and other accessibility accommodations as needed.

The project coordinator will serve as the initial point person on accessibility.

The conference announcement and web page will include accommodation language, e.g. “Accessibility accommodation is available for conference attendees who require it. Please contact Andy Lamey at alamey@ucsd.edu who will be happy to arrange it.”

One expert resource supporting disability accommodation is the Office of Students With Disabilities (OSD), University of California, San Diego. Another is Nancy Guerrero, Undergraduate Program Coordinator and OSD Liaison in Philosophy at UCSD.

Evaluation Plan
We hope to administer a survey to conference participants at the end of the conference obtaining preliminary feedback on their interest in using role-immersions.

We additionally hope to survey conference participants a year after the conference obtaining feedback on their post-conference use of role-immersion.

Online Presence
We hope to advertise the conference on Daily Nous and submit a conference listing to the APA list of upcoming conferences.

We will also create a new page at the project coordinator’s web site, andylamey.com, describing the conference and soliciting interest. We will have UCSD's philosophy department link to this page from its home page.

We will also post calls for participation at the Reacting Faculty Lounge, a Facebook group for faculty who use role-immersion with 2.4K members.

We will also post calls for participation at Teaching Philosophy, a Facebook group for philosophy instructors with 3.7K members.

We will also announce the conference on various list serves related to philosophy.
Budget Narrative

The most expensive budget item, the game itself, has already been funded. The game’s creation and playtesting were supported by a 2019 grant from UCSD’s Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Education. The same office separately funded a 2020 study of the game’s effectiveness as a learning tool (the results of which are described in Martin, Lamey and Draper [2020]). Amounts of both grants are listed in the budget template. This history of financial support for game development and assessment means that the iteration that conference attendees will play will be a finished, well-tested version. After the conference is over attendees can use the game “as is” as soon as they may wish.

The room rental covers the cost of the proposed venue for the conference. The space in question is managed by UCSD Hospitality and Conference Services. It is located within the Fifteenth Floor at Seventh College, rates for which are available at https://hdh.ucsd.edu/conferences/pages/Venues.html.

Catering costs are for four meals for 30 people over two days (a figure which includes attendees, the GM, proctors and/or a sign language interpreter). The total is based on UCSD Catering Services rates, which are available at https://hdh.ucsd.edu/catering/pages/Menus.html. Total catering costs are similar to previous conferences the project coordinator organized at UCSD in 2017 and 2018.

The conference advertisement reflects the cost of an ad on Daily Nous, which charges $600 per month for a single rectangular ad. Rates were provided by the blog’s editor at dailynouseditor@gmail.com. Currently, there is no equivalent to the Reacting Consortium, which takes a lead role in attracting attendees to existing role-immersion conferences. An advertisement at the popular Daily Nous blog, along with vigorous online outreach, is necessary to ensure the conference attracts the critical mass of player’s necessary for the game’s success.

If any conference attendees are hard of hearing or deaf, the conference will require a sign-language interpreter, at a cost of $450. This reflects the rate charged by UCSD’s Office of Students with Disabilities, which was obtained by contacting the office at deaf-hohrequest@ucsd.edu.

The budget includes a separate $450 for student proctors. These are students who have played the game in the classroom and are available at the conference to provide strategic and other advice during game play, assist with conference logistics and provide a student perspective during panel discussions. For a conference this size three students will be ideal, each of whom will receive a $150 honorarium. This rate has attracted high-quality proctors at previous role-immersion conferences, and will significantly enhance the conference as a whole.

See Other Funding Sources, below, for information on how the budget items for proctors and a sign-language interpreter interact.
The gamemaster (GM) duties at this conference will be similar to those at instructional conferences organized by the Reacting Consortium, which typically pays conference GMs $750. The project coordinator is GMing the conference for free. As such there is no budget item for GMing.

**Other Funding Sources**

As noted above, UCSD’s Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Education funded the creation and assessment of the conference game.

The project coordinator is a UCSD faculty member with access to $1,200 of personal research funding, already confirmed, that can be put toward the conference budget.

Further funding for the conference will be generated by charging attendees a nominal conference fee, $25 for faculty and $15 for graduate students. Previous role-immersion conferences at UCSD made a select number of conference spaces available for free. A number of faculty and graduate students who received free spaces ended up not attending. Because a successful game requires attendees to show up familiar with their role sheet, no-shows can negatively impact the conference as a whole. A nominal fee paid in advance, in return for which attendees receive four meals and all conference materials, supports the budget and incentivizes attendance while keeping the conference financially accessible. Based on previous conferences, an even mix of faculty and graduate students is a conservative estimate. Thirteen attendees of both types would generate $520, which is built into the budget. Depending on the final ratio of faculty to graduate students, it may be possible to refund graduate student fees at the end of the conference. In the unlikely event no graduate students attend and every attendee pays the faculty rate, the extra $130 dollars will be put toward additional proctoring or catering.

Whether the conference will require a sign-language interpreter will not be known until attendees register in the spring. The budget as submitted assumes that a sign-language interpreter will be required. In that eventuality, the project coordinator will seek separate funding for student proctors from UCSD's Department of Philosophy and its Division of Arts and Humanities. In the event both requests are declined, either in whole or in part, the conference will proceed with a reduced number of proctors or none at all. If an interpreter is not required, the $450 budget item will be applied toward proctors instead.