Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 190 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, C. Edward Watson talks about studying art teaching in his new book, Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past: Research on High Impact, Active Learning Practices.

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Bonni: [00:00:27] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our personal productivity so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:55] Today for episode number 190, I invite back to the show C. Edward Watson. Eddy is Associate Vice President for Quality, Advocacy and LEAP Initiatives with the Association of American Colleges and Universities AAC&U. And formerly, he's the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Georgia. He's the founding executive editor of the International Journal of E-Portfolio, the executive editor of the International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, and has published on teaching and learning in a number of journals, including Change, Educational Technology, EDUCAUSE Review, the Journal for Effective Teaching, and To Improve the Academy, among others. He's Been on the show a number of times and I'm so excited to be welcoming back Eddie Watson. Eddie, welcome back to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Eddie: [00:01:50] I'm thrilled to be here. Thanks for having me back on.

Bonni: [00:01:53] When we started talking about your new book which is called Playing to Learn with Reacting to the Past: Research on High Impact, Active Learning Practices, which you edited with Thomas Chase Haygood. One Of the things you were concerned about was knowing that we had had an episode

about reacting to the past and you were very gracious to the listening audience not wanting to be too repetitive.

Bonni: [00:02:16] I told you that actually that was all the way back to episode number 21 and we're about to have the two hundredth episode in October of 2014 so I think you might need to give us a refresher. So could you give us, including me, a refresher on what are role immersion games? And specifically, what is reacting to the past?

Eddie: [00:02:36] OK. Well I think that the notion of using games for learning isn't necessarily new, but there is a more protracted process now for kind of creating games and really kind of the focus is games that are face to face games not necessarily leveraging technology. So this isn't an Xbox strategy that we might use in their classroom. But Mark Carnes, who's at Barnard College Columbia University, is I guess you might say the father of the reacting to the past movement and there have been a number of different authors of games.

Eddie: [00:03:11] And the games are typically around sort of key moments in history where there are lots of elements and things to consider and things that might not come together for students. So for instance, there are games on Charles Darwin and on the constitutional convention. A lot of these things at this point are games that are focused within kind of a humanities or history. And so students are kind of given a setup for what the game will focus on. So here's the topic. Here are the issues that we're dealing with.

Eddie: [00:03:47] And the students don't necessarily roleplay a specific person in history but they come to know the ideas that are in that moment in history so well that they can indeed debate them. And so the game kind of begins and sets forth and then time passes and there are certainly parameters and scaffolding that set in place.

Eddie: [00:04:08] And then students work through these key issues at different historical periods and sometimes things work out exactly the way they did in history and sometimes they go in different direction. So there's things for people to be able to talk about as they kind of unpack why certain decisions were made and the reality of these specific ideas or historical points and why maybe the class ended up in a different place.

Bonni: [00:04:35] And we've certainly had guests on the show talking about gamification or ways of using games and classes but you really are distinguishing from one thats technology rich that I might do for more retrieval practice. This is,

from what I've heard from colleagues who have used this at my institution as well as from Mark Carnes when he was on episode 21, is just really igniting students passion to want to do the reading for the class.

Bonni: [00:05:03] What did you discover as far as instead of trying every little trick in our bags to coerce students in some way to actually the ways that these kinds of role immersion games can help just ignite their passion for reading?

Eddie: [00:05:17] Well there's a number of anecdotal stories that Mark Carnes has shared in the past. In fact, in the foreword of the new book he shares a few of these where he talks about students who are so excited about the class that if there was a snow day students will kind of self organize and get the professor to come with them to kind of continue what's taking place within the classroom.

Eddie: [00:05:40] There was even one example of a game concluding a little bit earlier and so the professor was moving on to other areas and the students actually self organized and said hey could we meet. And they actually agreed upon a time that was like 7:30 in the morning and the professor was happy to come and kind of continue the game, to continue reacting to the past kind of pedagogical approach outside of the parameters of what was traditionally or originally planned for the course.

Eddie: [00:06:08] Students, I think all of us, whenever we play various kinds of games will get really engaged and sometimes we get into sort of that state of flow where time is no longer something that we're necessarily that aware of. And reacting to the past game seemed to have that kind of impact regardless of what the topic might be or what the course might be, having students be deeply engaged, move students into sort of this state of flow and and they will take steps to continue to play when they can.

Bonni: [00:06:39] You are really a prolific researcher and writer. And I have to say I was a bit surprised when you told me about this project. Can you talk a bit about how you first became interested in co-editing this book, Playing to Learn With reacting to the Past?

Eddie: [00:06:54] Well most definitely. So my background- I have two undergraduate degrees, one in Statistics and one in English. And then I got my Master's in English and taught high school for a couple of years. Then I went back and got a Doctorate in Education. So really my background or focus or interests has been largely within the domain of education, that's what I've been doing as a career around teaching and learning.

Eddie: [00:07:20] Though I do have some interest in the humanities with that English background. So maybe three years ago, a colleague of mine at the University of Georgia, whenever I was still there, was a historian, is a historian. And he was the Assistant Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at that time whenever I was the Director. And so we had talked about a project and sort of like looking at each other's strengths and how we might come together on a project. And Chase, he had taught with reacting to the past and is involved nationally and sort of reacting to the past movement.

Eddie: [00:07:54] And you know as we were talking about reacting to the past, we saw that it had many of the same characteristics that you see with other active learning strategies and even looking at the Association of American Colleges and Universities list of high impact practices, reacting to the past has some commonalities with those. For instance, there's a lot of time and effort involved by students. Typically there are pretty high expectations by the faculty member. There's lots of opportunities for interaction in reacting to the past. There's opportunities for feedback, and not just feedback, it's immediate feedback as students are in discussions and debates and the faculty member plays his or her role. There's lots of opportunities for feedback. There's opportunities for integration and reflection. If you look at the duck and quacks like a duck is it really a duck. Is it possible that reacting to the past has the same outcome as other high impact practices? We knew it had many of the same characteristics that was sort of this theoretical foundation, but will it have many of the same outcomes?

Eddie: [00:09:03] So that was where Chase and I began kind of moving and thinking about a collaboration. Wouldn't it be great if we could set up a number of different studies at a range of different institution types and have faculty do this work? But we realized that realistically a lot of the faculty that might be in the humanities domain wouldn't necessarily have the professional training to engage in quality, rigorous educational research.

Eddie: [00:09:33] As we moved forward with this idea, we agreed that we should invite people to write who are indeed deeply engaged with using reacting to the past, but they should have a partner for the research. So we didn't require, but we strongly encouraged these faculty to find someone on their campus that they could collaborate with. So go over to a colleague in the College of Education or who is your assessment specialist on campus? Or does your teaching and learning center have a someone who specializes in sotal?

Eddie: [00:10:06] Well these are the people to reach out to to set up your collaboration to actually try to do some really rich research around reacting to the past in your courses. So we put out the call and we were fortunate that Palgrave Macmillan was willing to publish the work that we were embarking on and that's what we did. That's how we really came to this book.

Bonni: [00:10:26] You mentioned the acronym sotal. And for anyone listening that's Scholarship of teaching and learning. We have all different kinds of people that listen to this show, some of them are chuckling because they say of course we all know what that is but not everybody does I mean it's one of those. I actually don't know. Even when that phrase first came into being known and used so commonplace. But talk a little bit just about the scholarship of teaching and learning and how you've sort of seen it evolve and become so important to us today in higher education.

Eddie: [00:10:55] Not sure where the original genesis was probably put it on Ernest Boyer and probably his 1991 report. So that might be the starting point but the notion has been around you know for a while you have people researching what they're doing within their own classes. And I think people come to the notion of sotal with their own biases.

Eddie: [00:11:15] I think some people approach it and they think about it in a very qualitative sense where you talk to your students, just find out what their lived experience is from class to class and try to capture that. And then there are opportunities to present and share that with others. I know that of the biases that I bring forth is because my background is within the field of education and so I guess I really value sotal scholarship that has attributes of other types of rigorous educational social science research.

Eddie: [00:11:46] But there's definitely different schools of thought out there in the sort of the social horizon regarding what truly is sotal research. I've had several different discussions with different colleagues and there's certainly different views but I know that I guess from my background I'm looking for those attributes that you might see in a typical educational research APA formatted sections article.

Bonni: [00:12:13] One of the things I've really noticed is that so much of the time when everything seems to be going great and students are reporting out how wonderful this professor is it can sometimes be a personality based assessment. You know I'm having this person makes me laugh. This person is full of vim and vigor when I get to the classroom and really is engaging in the sense of

entertaining me. And so when people who have had success being very dynamic in a classroom start to attempt to do some of these high impact practices, it can feel a whole lot like failure.

Bonni: [00:12:53] So but but yet we really do need to question how deep our students learning when they are sitting in a class passively. So I think that's one of the other things I remember too about Ernest Boyer is that I associate him with this idea that our evaluation of our success as professors should not be entirely based on our research efforts within our disciplines. That some of our studying of our own teaching should be rewarded within the system of higher education. Am I getting that part right? I've not read this 1991 report but I am taking notes dutifully.I'll go find it after our conversation.

Eddie: [00:13:32] Yeah you're on the right track. That's indeed it. The report was called Scholarship Reconsidered Priorities of the Professoriate. I think it was the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching report. That kind of notion that if we do scholarship on our teaching- we should take teaching and service as seriously as we take research with similar types of investment and rigor and therefore it should be it should be folded into promotion and tenure processes appropriately because for many of us from a third to almost all of our appointments.

Eddie: [00:14:09] So yes we should encourage people to be engaging in not just scholarly teaching where you're investigating what are other people saying are good practices I'm going to look into the literature or go to a conference and then that's going to inform my teaching. That's definitely part of this. But also actually engaging in study of our own practices and the kinds of outcomes that our practice is having on our students.

Bonni: [00:14:34] So in the case of this book you had sometimes teams and occasionally individuals who had the expertise with these role playing games. And then you also had oftentimes a researcher that could help formulate something that went beyond just "they liked the class or the like liked the professor." Talk about some of what were discovered. What were some of the interesting research questions and some of the interesting discoveries?

Eddie: [00:15:02] Well we did quite a bit in the book. There is I guess there's 10 chapters plus the foreword. And we initially begin with this notion of what's the literature on active learning? How those reacting to the past map to that? How does that map to this larger notion of high impact practices? And sort of setting the stage for the research studies that would follow.

Eddie: [00:15:23] And then we conclude with possibly a too lengthy chapter that Colleen Kuusinen and I wrote regarding just sort of like how did you begin SoTL work. It's sort of a primer for doing ed research in your classes. So that was sort of the book ends there. And then the studies within, there's a study that looked at faculty perceptions. There are some that look at student perceptions but then there are studies that go beyond that.

Eddie: [00:15:49] For instance looking specifically at self efficacy and how did a set of reacting to the past courses impact self efficacy. Another set of studies looked at grade indicators so the assessments were the same from previous courses but as reacting was used, did we see a shift in grades? There was another study that even looked at retention rates so thinking about I guess one of the more popular discussions points of the day is really around notions of students success which at large includes more than just student learning.

Eddie: [00:16:24] It's often pointing to things such as retention, graduation rates, things like that. And so I guess thinking back to the self efficacy study they found that students self efficacy increased around making speeches in a class, really alot of this was around sort of speaking publicly, so engaging in debates, using evidence to support a point of view, making a speech in class, arguing your position effectively in front of a group.

Eddie: [00:16:53] Also I found interesting, especially in today's day and age, is that reacting to the past also helps students at least their confidence around understanding the perspective of someone you don't agree with, the sort of handling that kind of situation or dynamic better. And they also found that there were specific improvement differences between the sexes. There was actually greater growth for women, for female students who started from the self efficacy perspective further behind than the male students. And by the end of the class, their efficacy around speaking out in class and all the other things that I just chronicled, their self efficacy scores pulled up into line with the male students.

Eddie: [00:17:37] Regarding grades, there were some of a University of Central Florida study that grades did tend to improve in courses where reacting to the past was used in that study.In Eastern Michigan University when comparing retention rates for the second third and fourth years of college students, whenever they experience reacting to the past during the first year, there were modest improvements when you compared the students in the reacting class to

all of the other students on campus. In other words, the retention rates were just a little bit better, two to three percent as I recall.

Eddie: [00:18:11] So there's a range of stuff that's covered within the book just almost kind of soup to nuts but it was really sort of the notion we often thought about it as sort of given research around reacting to the past kind of a booster shot in just one single book, here's here's a tune that maybe takes us up a couple of stairs on our understanding of the kind of impact that reacting to the past really is having in courses all across the U.S.

Bonni: [00:18:38] When I think about a traditional course in history, I often think about that there's a midterm perhaps two midterms and a final. When I was in college back in the day that was the frequent thing with the blue books with the very very hand exhausting handwritten filling out the blue books kind of kind of idea.

Eddie: [00:19:01] I remember those.

Bonni: [00:19:02] Yes. And so when I think about- what I've heard of reacting to the past, the assessment model is different. Is that accurate? Is that an accurate perception that I have gained?

Eddie: [00:19:16] Well it very much can be. I mean there's a lot of different approaches. Whenever you move from a lecture model or another kind of act of learning strategy model. Then how would you want to assess the outcome that students might have. It could be that part of the assessment model is around the performance.

Eddie: [00:19:36] You can have a rubric that scores how engaged students were throughout the process. Or there could be some kind of summation at the end looking at students sharing their perspectives on the experience. Of course, you could do more direct comparisons to previous semesters if you had used multiple choice or a typical essay type of exams in a class. You could continue to use those if you're teaching to the same outcomes and you would anticipate that the game that you selected in your approach would indeed lead to those same kinds of outcomes.

Eddie: [00:20:09] But people are using these in lots of different ways. Some games will span weeks and weeks within a semester and some might be just a shorter version of a game or designed specifically just to be for a few days within a class. So there's a lot of different strategies that are out there. And I know that

you always add links to the the the web pages that you create for the podcast. A great page around published games that's on the reacting side at Barnard College and that's a great place to kind of do a deep dive to see what's currently out there, what's been published. And there's always typically things in the works for new games as well. So things are coming down the line. But you can see what's been out there, what's been used in lots of different contexts and pretty much what you see listed there are some of those have been covered in the the new Reacting to the Past book.

Bonni: [00:21:05] One of the things I know you're really concerned about and emphasize is that we all get better at studying our own teaching. So what is some advice that you have? Why don't we start kind of at a very what you probably would consider a more elementary level about studying our own teaching. And then perhaps we can advance our advice and guidance to more of the actually publishing those findings. So if I just wanted to dip my toe into studying my own teaching, what's a couple of ways I could just get started in reframing my thinking about studying my teaching?

Eddie: [00:21:38] Well I think one place to start might just be the end of semester evaluations that most of us do in our courses. I think unfortunately the way that those are often framed by departments or colleges are that they are summative and that they often will feed directly into promotion and tenure processes and things like that. But realistically, those end of semester evaluations should be seen as formative, that we look at those and we look at them with a grain of salt and we see which bits of advice the students are giving us that we might adopt and embrace and maybe make a change in our next class.

Eddie: [00:22:18] And certainly as you look at it with a critical eye, there's probably some advice. I mean believe it or not sometimes students have bad ideas regarding what we should do in our classes. So I think that that's a first step is just looking at those end of semester evaluations and see them through the lens of them being formative. Here's some advice. Here's some things looking retrospectively that that we might do differently in our classes.

Eddie: [00:22:42] Sort of expanding that model is the notion of mid semester formative evaluations where maybe six to eight weeks into the semester you ask your students for their perceptions on how the class is going. Maybe what's working well. What's not working so well. And what advice they would have to change the class. And you might want to help focus them on specifically on student learning. Sometimes students might say well the textbook is too

expensive or or maybe the class is too early in the day or too late in the day or whatever. And those things you can't really change in that given semester.

Eddie: [00:23:18] But the notion of mid semester evaluations is you get feedback that's formative where you could actually change the class you're teaching this semester. We used to have a formative process that we offered at the University of Georgia that looked very much like that, where we did the work for the faculty member and then brought back a summative report and kind of talked through what are the good advice points? What are the bad advice points?

Eddie: [00:23:41] But those are kind of maybe baseline things. But then you start moving a little higher up in maybe the research taxonomy and asking students regarding their perceptions of things, which certainly perception's doesn't translate directly to learning but as a next step up, we just tried reacting to the past for the first time or are we just tried flipping the classroom for the first time. What did you think? Was this helpful to you? Next time I do this, what should I do differently? Moving beyond perceptions you might ask might be moving more toward which is sort of the holy grail of educational research is moving more toward specific types of outcomes.

Eddie: [00:24:21] There are learning outcomes, there are persistence outcomes, there are student success outcomes but if you know essentially if your courses first course in a sequence of courses and you know that your students need to know a handful of things as they move into the next course in the sequence what might you do to kind of test to see if the students have indeed achieved those outcomes?

Eddie: [00:24:43] And we do that in many ways with tests and exams or papers or projects or anything that we grade. But they don't necessarily align directly to specific outcome. As an example of this, I can imagine a student writing a paper that was really well written but didn't really get at the core ideas of the project or a specific outcome. So maybe the grade they got on the paper was a pretty good grade but yet it didn't necessarily show great strength around a specific learning outcome. So the grade doesn't translate specifically to outcome but if you were looking just I'm not grading on how well they wrote something or what their grammar was or what their vocabulary was.

Eddie: [00:25:27] I'm just looking to see if they have these central ideas. So this is really kind of describing a lot of the work that assessment specialists do within colleges and universities. But it's really this notion of are students learning what

we're trying to do to ensure that they learn? So I guess that would be kind of a quick and dirty sort of model of what a taxonomy of sotal might look like.

Bonni: [00:25:52] And before we get to the recommendations segment, if we want to actually then take that next step and begin publishing these results in some way, what are some of the things we should consider?

Eddie: [00:26:04] Well if you are thinking about having any kind of an audience for the work that you're doing, you would you would need to go through the Institutional Review Board at your university. So IRB you would need to do even if you're just going to do a presentation on your own campus or even in your own department you should go through IRB. If you're just doing it for your own evaluative purposes like you're doing a mid semester formative evaluation and you're just going to use that data yourself privately to make changes next semester or later that semester, you wouldn't need to go through IRB typically for that.

Eddie: [00:26:35] But if you are going to share out you'd want to do IRB first. And then there are a number of conferences that are opportunities to share your work. As you know I work for the Association of American Colleges and Universities these days and they have conferences that are focused on general education and assessment and teaching and learning. There are other teacher learning conferences out there.

Eddie: [00:26:57] There is a Conference on Higher Education Pedagogy at Virginia Tech which is an excellent conference that highlights both just general practice as well as as they have a research track there as well. There is the Lilly conferences and there's a whole bunch out there for thinking just conferences. And then there are indeed journals, sort of different tiered journals that sort of traffic in sotal research. Some executive editor for the International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

Eddie: [00:27:27] And so it's one such journal that is peer reviewed, double blind peer reviewed journal that it publishes a lot of research that takes place in individual faculty members classes, it's really kind of a broad journal as the title suggests. But there's there's a number of great journals out there in that in that sotal domain.

Bonni: [00:27:48] Well that's all really helpful. And it gives me a little bit more confidence just to be thinking about how we could take what's happening on a

more micro level and to spread that out more and just continue to to be bettering ourselves as educators that's exciting to me to think about that.

Eddie: [00:28:05] And a lot of not only the general sotal journals there is also- most disciplines now have their own sort of Educational Research Journal like the Journal of Chemical Education, the Journal of Engineering Education, most disciplines have a journal that focuses on teaching and learning specifically within that discipline. So there's literally hundreds of journals in the higher education domain these days. So you can do a little shopping, talk to colleagues and find a journal that's the best match for the work that you're hoping to do around your own classes.

Bonni: [00:28:39] This is the point in the show where we get to give some recommendations and someone who I consider who studies his own teaching very well is Teddy Svoronos. He was back on episode number 168. And he was talking about using technology in our presenting and teaching. But one of the other things he was talking about with regard to technology, he used the word friction, thinking about how much friction a tool will bring into our our systems and wanting to have tools that don't cause a lot of friction.

Bonni: [00:29:10] And that word has just kept bubbling up in my mind ever since then. In fact, I did write a blog post this a couple of weeks ago about Frictionless systems and I'll put a link to that in the show notes. But so one of the things that- this is one of those recommendations that's either good to connect with people or they're going to go what on earth is she talking about?

Bonni: [00:29:29] One of the new things that recently came into my life was carrying a backpack to work instead of a rolling bag. And I had mentioned this on previous shows that many of you went out and bought your own backpack after I talked about it.

Bonni: [00:29:42] So I'm going back and forth between. Sometimes I'm just carrying a purse. But then if I go to work, I've got my backpack. But I don't want to carry a purse and a backpack. These are problems that Eddie I'm thinking you don't necessarily have. But one of the things I was discovering, whether you carry a purse or not or whether you've got your travel bag and then your everyday stuff is just how much friction we can reduce in our lives when we just get over ourselves and buy two of things.

Bonni: [00:30:10] So in the case of when I travel, when I go and travel I have all my makeup, I have double makeup to go if I travel somewhere there's just one

bag that is ready to go. I don't have to pack anything as far as those personal items are concerned. Toothbrushes, right. I mean why not just get two toothbrushes and have them already ready to go? And so that is my recommendation for today is think about those friction points and then decide if getting two or more will help you out. And Eddie, I get to pass it over to you for I suspect something completely different one.

Eddie: [00:30:43] Well the recommendations are around reading. So I guess thinking about Ernest Boyers book from 1991 there was sort of a refresh on that book in 2005 I believe. And the book was called the Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons and it was written by Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings, also at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Eddie: [00:31:08] And what I really like about their book is that they really focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning and how that notion is kind of married to the notion of quality of learning in higher education that while total can benefit you know faculty careers and things like that. It's really tied at its most fundamental at making teaching better at making learning outcomes more achievable for students. So it's something to revisit again that books you know maybe 12 years old if I'm remembering the date right. But that would be one recommendation.

Eddie: [00:31:44] Another book that's just on my desk right now. Is it just kind of relates to some of my open educational resources work. But if if folks haven't seen the Sarah Goldrick-Rab book called Paying the Price, about sort of college costs and financial aid and stuff like that. How things really are in higher education today from sort of that physical perspective, given that we all work within higher education it's really kind of an interesting read to sort of get our fingers on the pulse of part of the campus or part of a university that maybe we don't think about all that much.

Bonni: [00:32:18] Oh that has been on my list of ones I've got read for so long and I need to have this be my final nudge to go do it because I've heard I've heard her be interviewed in a number of podcasts and shows and just such as you said such important messages for us to be aware of. And so many times we're not. So that's those are a couple of really helpful recommendations.

Eddie: [00:32:40] Right.

Bonni: [00:32:41] Well Eddie, thank you so much for coming back on the show. I mentioned to you how much people have had such warm positive things to say about your visits in the past and I'm just looking forward to the next time we get a chance to talk.

Eddie: [00:32:52] Well thanks so much for having me back on. I've really enjoyed talking about the book and sotal and all the things that we've covered.

Bonni: [00:32:59] Another energizing and inspiring conversation with C. Edward Watson. Thank you so much Eddie for your time today. And thanks to all of you for listening. So many of you have been writing in and sharing how the program has impacted your teaching and your scholarship and if you ever want to send me a note you're welcome to go to teachinginhighered.com/feedback.

Bonni: [00:33:24] I do always love to hear from you. You also can find me on Twitter @Bonni208. It's great to connect with you over there and be able to have those broader conversations with other people. Thanks so much for listening today. Today is episode what episode number are we on? It went off of the screen. Oh no. You would think. You would think. Oh yes, Frictionless Systems episode number 190 was C. Edward Watson. You can find this in the show notes at teachinginhighered.com/190. Thanks so much for listening.

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