

**Bonni:** [00:00:00] Students voting to extend the class time? Professors reporting that students are doing the reading for the course without threats and coercion? Today in episode 21 Dr. Mark Carnes joins me to talk role immersion games in the higher ed classroom

**Production Credit:** [00:00:19] Produced by Innovate Learning: maximizing human potential.

**Bonni:** [00:00:29] Welcome to this Episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches. So we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

**Bonni:** [00:00:54] Today I am so pleased to have Dr. Mark Carnes joining us to talk about how role immersion games transform college. He is the Professor of History at Barnard College which he joined in 1982. His academic specialty is Modern American History. His courses include the United States 1940 to 1975 and several versions of a role playing game called Reacting To The Past which we'll be talking about extensively on today's show is the author of the book minds on fire how roll immersion games transform college. Dr. Carnes welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

**Mark:** [00:01:37] Bonni thank you so much for inviting me I'm delighted to be here.

**Bonni:** [00:01:41] One of the things our students are saying these days - a little meme is they say the struggle is real. That's it. That's just the thing that they put on social media and they say a lot. I want to know first from you. Tell me about your struggle in teaching and others struggles before you created reacting to the past. What are some of the struggles that we can encounter?

**Mark:** [00:02:04] Well I think like all young faculty early in my career I was so swamped with figuring out what I was doing that I didn't really think too much about how it was going over I was just trying to get through the classes.

**Mark:** [00:02:17] But around the mid 1990s I was I felt I was sort of at the top of my game. I'd gotten tenure at Barnard and Columbia as chair of the department. I knew what I was talking about. Finally I was teaching students in seminars and lecture classes but I was particularly interested in the seminar where I was a veteran teacher. I knew the material.

**Mark:** [00:02:40] I had terrific students from highly selective school and I was teaching a seminar on classic texts the masterpieces of the human imagination. The absolutely ideal learning circumstance and I realized that my students were bored and I was bored too.

**Bonni:** [00:03:03] I love it, in your book you actually talk about one of the backwards backhanded compliments you've got was a student saying that classes in college are boring and yours isn't quite as boring as some of the others.

**Mark:** [00:03:14] Yeah, that was that was that was the moment of revelation where I invited students from this class which should have been the ideal learning experience to chat with me and after the third student said that this class had been her favorite of the previous semester I said, "How can that be? You were bored. I was bored." You could feel the boredom in the room and she sort of looked up at my books as if to choose one she said, "Well, yeah. All classes are sort of boring. Yours is less boring than most."

**Mark:** [00:03:48] And that was the moment, because it reminded me of my experiences as an undergraduate, too. You know all classes were sort of boring. Learning went on and I had moments where I learned but there was this this this sense of disengagement which I thought was characteristic of the act of of the learning experience. That's what triggered me to try to come up with something else.

**Bonni:** [00:04:12] And you certainly have come up with something absolutely incredible and I want to start broadly just by defining some of our terms. And then get specifically to react into the past. What is a role immersion game?

**Mark:** [00:04:25] A role immersion games different from a role playing game or the sort of simulations you see in political science and international affairs

schools. A role immersion game unfolds over the course of perhaps an entire month that is that students really will take on roles and this is part of a program which I've been involved with and several hundred other scholars have been developing called Reacting to the Past.

**Mark:** [00:04:49] In Reacting to the Past, college students play complex games that in the past their roles informed by classic text. So one game will be set say in ancient Athens and 403 B.C.. Athens has lost the Peloponnesian War. Its fledgling democracy has proven deficient. And what did the Athenians do at this moment?

**Mark:** [00:05:13] Some say they need to restore the radical democracy of Athens. Others say get rid of it and have landed elites wrong. Others like Socrates are saying abandon this democratic system. Let's have a different form of governance and the games reflect the sort of collisions of ideas as Athens tries to reconstitute itself. So students in that particular game would spend a month hashing out the issues trying to rebuild Athens and that's what a role immersion game in Reacting to the Past consists of.

**Mark:** [00:05:47] This sort of elaborate experience where students have enough time not just to solve the problem but take on in a deep way an alternative idea an identity informed by a cluster of important texts. So these ideas over the course of a month resonate deeply. A role immersion game is a very deep learning experience unlike anything most students have ever experienced

**Bonni:** [00:06:11] And were going to be going really into of course the example from Minds on Fire and specifically Reacting to the Past but before we have anyone stop the recording and decide, "Hey. I teach in biology. I teach in business. I don't... There's nothing really I can gain from this podcast."

**Bonni:** [00:06:28] Could you speak briefly about how are Reacting to the Past really transcends disciplinary structures and how someone listening who may not think it relates to their area of expertise might be surprised.

**Mark:** [00:06:40] Well there are a couple of answers to that question. One is that the the number of games that have been developed and are being developed there are now some 60 teams of scholars and all sorts of fields ranging from math and science to art history and religion and philosophy developing Reacting to the Past games.

**Mark:** [00:07:04] For your biologists, one of the games is set in 1860. The Royal Society in London trying to determine whether Charles Darwin's Origin of Species should win a Copley Medal - its most prestigious award. What was Darwin's classic text Origin of Species? Was it science or was that brilliant guesswork?

**Mark:** [00:07:27] Brilliant deductions, brilliant deductions aren't science so that's a game that focuses on not only on the Origin of Species and evolutionary thinking but also on the philosophy of science and what constitutes science.

**Mark:** [00:07:41] We also have games that explore the origins of the Bible. There is a game on the origins of Deuteronomy on Confucianism on our history on just about every field and every day every year brings dozens of new games as scholars use this pedagogy for all sorts of purposes. Professors of communications and business have also found that Reacting Games on just about anything teach problem solving and leadership and community building sorts of skills too.

**Bonni:** [00:08:17] Thank you so much for addressing that potential concern and I'm going to actually continue back on our conversation about Reacting to the Past and you've given permission for me to play just a little bit of a video that's on your website that I will link to in the show notes but gives us a little glimpse of them we'll talk more about it.

**Video:** [00:08:35] The biggest challenge is the in the traditional classroom is that its boring, students seem to be interested in the assignments I didn't want to read them. You feel like you're doing all the work and only some of the students really leave the class with the kind of information and skills that I was hoping they would leave with...

**Video:** [00:08:51] Faculty complain all time about taking responsibility. They will only take responsibility if we are open the door for them to have responsibility for part of the class. You can always tell A Reacting Class because as you walk towards the classroom on the first day they are like, "What is that noise?" Things are happening... Decisions are being made. Stakes are high. People are getting executed. They're cutting deals they're making arguments they're stabbing people in the back.

**Video:** [00:09:16] I felt the difference immediately, there's a lot of talking going on in the classroom. The students are really in control. The classroom becomes the exciting place.

**Video:** [00:09:28] When I explain reacting I say that it's a pedagogy that uses complex role-playing games to teach about key moments in history. We're not simply reenacting an event in the past but we are getting students to immerse themselves into the thinking and the culture of that period. It is meant to have students beat one another and to convince others of their cause.

**Video:** [00:09:52] I frame it to my students as they're becoming historians and they're also becoming historical actors. They have victory objectives and the competitiveness of the students is sort of the catalyst to get them engaged and involved. The INC operates on a pragmatic level. We are striving and have been striving for unifying India since its conception. I will say something INC there is one way in which the minority groups are united. We do not want to be Hindu.

**Video:** [00:10:22] It is really about grabbing ideas. What were these people thinking? How did these ideas come into contact with each other and into conflict with each other? And How are those conflicts resolved ultimately?

**Bonni:** [00:10:34] Mark, the title of your book is Minds On Fire. Would you tell me about the origins of the name?

**Mark:** [00:10:41] What we happened upon - and let me just emphasize that though I was one of the people who sort of posed that question early on - what I uncovered was a skepticism towards the traditional approaches and the willingness to try some experiments.

**Mark:** [00:11:01] The students I was working with and then as more and more faculty gravitated to the idea, we formed this this enterprise which now involves hundreds and hundreds of faculty around the world developing good. So it's this is not my my baby. This is a broad project involving hundreds of people, but I've tried to explain it in and Minds On Fire.

**Mark:** [00:11:24] And the challenge for me was to figure out why does this seem to - this pedagogy - seem to be so powerful? Why does it work at so many different institutions and so easily? And so the book is really my attempt to figure out why something works so easily. Another question is why - if it works so easily - hasn't it happened upon before? It has been happened upon before. I have probably given - when I've given talks at different institutions - probably 60 or 70 faculty have come up to me and said at different points, "I tried something like that," and I always ask, "How did it go?" Nearly always the response is really, really well. And that person says, "But, we didn't take it this far," and that's what Reacting roll immersion games do.

**Mark:** [00:12:09] It takes the sort of role playing that many faculty have done and takes it much further. These games are very elaborate. They involve seven or eight hundred pages of instructions of background material of advisory's rules of roles and it's an immersive experience that is very, very deep and profound.

**Mark:** [00:12:33] The book chronicles the different the different ways that it leaves an imprint on students. Part of it is that they take on new identities they become someone other than themselves. This is very very powerful.

**Mark:** [00:12:47] Part of it is the competition of the experience. Part of it is that by working in factions to solve difficult problems. One group will win one debate and think they're ahead and then the other group will work harder and the competition builds and the team gets stronger and the whole experience becomes the group building and leadership building and teamwork building experience.

**Mark:** [00:13:12] Students also chew on moral dilemmas and big philosophical issues is so so that's what the book is about the ways that this very different learning experience change the way students learn and think of themselves.

**Bonni:** [00:13:27] You talk about that aspect of competition and I think those of us that teach in higher ed at least that resonates with me that that students might get jazzed and energized by that. And then there's this more subtle aspect that you talked about of the imagining what it's like to be someone else.

**Bonni:** [00:13:43] Perhaps that's building empathy or that deeper learning that you described. Tell the story about teaching civil disobedience and how that could have potentially been an out of control problem for some some professors. But just how how you handled that situation with your students.

**Mark:** [00:14:02] One of the arguments that I make is that in reacting there is that lovely dynamic that's completely new I think to the teaching repertoire. Sometimes you have it in a class where the students will sort of bond together and you as the game master the person who's setting the rules - so you've got the students just trying to accomplish something - and you as the game master are trying to uphold the rule structure. You uphold the role structure because that makes the task more historical and more difficult. Students want to assimilate to the present two identities with which they're familiar and so there's a little bit of tension.

**Mark:** [00:14:44] So there's a tension between the students and the instructor which is is fun and interesting and challenging. Like my favorite story involved Larry Carver who's Dean of the Honors College at the University of Texas in Austin. And he was doing the game so to me in the India in 1945 the game book is is 400 pages long and act as the game is being set up as it should be.

**Mark:** [00:15:14] The game has three sessions three or four sessions where students read through this massive material. And then there's a quiz. And the students were preparing for the quiz. Larry Carver had yet to arrive in that class.

**Mark:** [00:15:29] And then one of the students Ingrid Norton says this isn't really the spirit of reacting to the past we shouldn't have to take a quiz that's like regular regular class. So she decides hold a Gandhian sit down strike a a refusal to to participate in this experience. Larry Carver shows up and he says he walked in the room and the students gathered on the floor.

**Bonni:** [00:15:57] [laughter] I just can picture that.

**Mark:** [00:15:58] "What's going on?" And they won't say anything he says- so he walks out of the room. The students now are a little nervous because not only is Larry Carver their instructor he's also Dean of the Honors College. So several of them say, "Go get him and bring him back. We don't want to get in trouble."

**Mark:** [00:16:17] And he says, "No, I'm not coming back. I'm going to take action against you." So what then happens is he doesn't come back and the students then spend the next hour debating civil disobedience and eventually they put it together which was that when Gandhi would have a sit down strike - when he'd have a protest or the salt march - he expected there to be sharp opposition.

**Mark:** [00:16:43] He said that when you engage in civil disobedience that you have to be prepared to experience the consequences. So here's an instance of a professor taking this sort of tension between the game master and the students and building a game within a game on that sort of element the sort of thing is fairly common in the experience not quite like Larry Carver's experience. But, that the tension between students and the new role of the instructor as game master.

**Bonni:** [00:17:17] I was somewhat embarrassed by my lack of reading comprehension because in my mind this had happened to you and not to him. But it is interesting because your writing style is just so engaging that you almost do in the book where you ask students to do which is that we're able to put

ourselves in the positions of all of the different professors you talk about and tell their stories and so I was picturing what that would be like to have a student decide that they were going to engage in that act and just that tension that is just such a fun thing. And one of the things that also reminds me of is that as professors we do have to give up something when we engage in this kind of facilitation of deep learning. What do professors have to give up to to make this all work?

**Mark:** [00:18:02] Oh you hit the nail on the head. I . . . By the time when I went in the mid 1990s when I was a established professor and had tenure and sort of knew what I was doing, I knew how to give a performance and it was a pretty good one. And I had to give that up. I had to give up control of the classroom. In a Reacting class, you don't know what the students are going to do. You don't know - sure they have roles and rules and the like, but they're given these difficult problems and the most excruciating moments in human history and they struggle hard to solve them and come up with creative solutions.

**Mark:** [00:18:42] So you don't know what they're going to do. You lose control of the classroom. Students run the classes and you lose the performance elements that sometimes are very satisfying. I gave a good lecture. I told a good joke.

**Mark:** [00:18:57] I had them in the palm of my hand. But, you by giving them the space they do things that are wonderful. Every reacting professor will have moments where they'll get a shiver down their spine. When a shy student being besieged by other students standing at the podium and gives a terrific speech - handled - where students confronted with difficult problems come up with ingenious solutions on the spot.

**Mark:** [00:19:26] There are these moments that almost move you to tears. They are so powerful. So on the one hand you give up the performance thrill of giving a good lecture or of inspiring some lovely conversations seminar. You give up the control of knowing what the classroom is going to be like. Instead you'll get to - and often these moments of ordinary student performances and transformations that leave you amazed.

**Bonni:** [00:19:56] One of the assumptions that I had that I now know was flawed was that I was picturing and as I was reading and as I was watching the videos on your website I was picturing very small classes that this would only work in an institution that was able to limit.

**Bonni:** [00:20:12] I mean I guess I imagine no more than 20 students but then of course that's a flawed assumption. So talk to me about how it scales and where you see the limits or boundaries of a number of students that this might work for.

**Mark:** [00:20:27] Well we've learned a number of things over the over the really the first decade and a half of this experience and one is that it is an entirely new pedagogical mode - this notion of a role immersion game - and we don't really know the rules.

**Mark:** [00:20:42] I used to argue and give talks saying Reacting classes couldn't be larger than 16 or 20 students because while professors can control a class of 60 or 80 or 150 students couldn't do so they just wouldn't have the skills or the authority. Then I visited a class at Queens College where 53 students were playing the India game and this very complicated game with lots of factions very tumultuous.

**Mark:** [00:21:08] I visited in early December towards the end of the semester and when I arrived they didn't have a chair for me because every single student was in the class that day. So in his class of 53 late in the semester everyone showed up at Queens College is a commuter school so that you've got full and perfect attendance late in the semester was sort of astonishing.

**Mark:** [00:21:31] There were several governors general. Normally there are one or two smaller class and I thought there's no way that they can control this class just to impose order. But what I didn't count on was that though these governors general and they weren't superb in their organization though they didn't have the the command and authority of a veteran professor.

**Mark:** [00:21:57] The students in the class even those in the back roads and they're all sort of clumped together in their factions. They were part of this experience and they were all focused on it.

**Mark:** [00:22:10] There's something about a student run enterprise with drama and challenges and factions that that the students gave each other far more slack than me would have given me in similar circumstances so my point is this. I thought that Reacting couldn't be larger than 20 but we are Reacting classes 50 or 60. We have at California State University in East Bay, Bridget Ford is experimenting a reacting class of 125 and an American history survey course. So we're not really sure exactly where this experiment will end up but with the experiment we've got probably thousands faculty around the nation are doing reacting to the best classes.

**Bonni:** [00:23:02] I was really surprised when I just thought I'd ask the history and political science professors at my institution and we used it at ours, too. He really does as does all across the country and so exciting to hear about.

**Bonni:** [00:23:14] In fact one of the professors had used it extensively. He teaches a class on China the history of China. There was one game that he used for that and then one of them actually had remembered using it when she was a student. So it's just fun to see how it has spread and the...

**Mark:** [00:23:30] It is especially fun when former Reacting students - and that's now happening - are becoming Reacting instructors.

**Bonni:** [00:23:37] Yeah. So let's let's get sort of for the skeptics although maybe just the realists there they're still regardless of how engaging in exercises and how much our minds are on fire. There are still going to be students who are apathetic. Could you describe the apathetic student in a Reacting to the Past class?

**Mark:** [00:24:00] Well let me first say that any at any pedagogy as radically different as this one warrants skepticism. And that's absolutely appropriate. There have been a host of pedagogical fads that have sloshed around the ivory tower these past decades. Faculty skepticism is absolutely appropriate.

**Mark:** [00:24:21] On the other hand very few faculty go into the classroom confident that they're going to have a satisfactory or an inspiring or a teaching and learning experience. Even then master teachers know that there's a there's a shot that their well-prepared class will turn out to be a dud and it will be a long slog for all involved.

**Mark:** [00:24:44] While some skepticism towards such a different pedagogy is Reacting is appropriate - our tried and true methods aren't that fail-safe... Often, they are not particularly engaging, often even for your superstar teachers. The superstar lecturers they'll be missing a third of the students at the end of semester.

**Mark:** [00:25:09] What you'll find with reacting classes is very seldom we have students who don't show. It's rare to have people who don't show. There are - to say that all students become engaged in Reacting to the Past is wrong.

**Mark:** [00:25:27] There are still slackers. But what's different about the structure of Reacting in terms of class dynamics is that when there is a slacker who comes into my lecture - the person will go sit in the back row and start playing a game online, or fall asleep and I can still keep on - my class continues.

**Mark:** [00:25:50] But, in Reacting, you're a member of a faction and your faction is under pressure and if your slacker doesn't do his job - doesn't prepare for his speech and then the other - your contending factions making an argument and your teammates look at you and say okay what are you - You're supposed to - Your job was to take this part of the argument. What have you done? And the slackers shrugs.

**Mark:** [00:26:19] I haven't done anything. You've got the peers looking at the slacker. You wouldn't... So what happens is that these teams put pressure on the weaker students or lazier students or students who over-committed to do the work so that instead of just being an issue the faculty member saying, "Come on. Do your work. Come to class. Prepare for... Prepare for things."

**Mark:** [00:26:44] You have students pressuring other students to do what needs to be done and the cost of failure and of ill preparation is so evident. It's one thing if you're sitting at the back of the room or even if you're sluffing through a seminar and you're ill-prepared and you just sort of getting a sloppy, lazy response.

**Mark:** [00:27:05] But when you have to give the speech on the subject it's different from bungling the response in a discussion in a seminar. The pressure is on you to say something to make an argument to support it to have data behind it to make it persuasive. It's much harder for slackers to hang out and they've got immense peer pressure to do well.

**Mark:** [00:27:27] We certainly have classes - I've certainly had Reacting classes where not every student is engaged - where some students are elsewhere but they can't hide out as they could in other classes as well.

**Bonni:** [00:27:38] What have I not asked you about Reacting to the Past or Minds on Fire that we should make sure we talk about before we go to recommendations?

**Mark:** [00:27:46] I would say that the importance particularly I think amongst students today of becoming someone else. I think that they are suffocated in their own sense of self. They have their Facebook wall and they're concerned

with their presentation of self. They have to have the best pictures. They've got to burnish their achievements. They guild their walls so they look to be spectacular.

**Mark:** [00:28:12] And I think that they just become overwhelmed with the burden of being this special high-achieving sort of person and the idea of taking on an identity - of being a Confucian scholar in Ming China of being a member of the Inquisition during the time of Galileo of of being an artist or an artist in Paris in 1880 or being someone entirely different from who they are is liberating.

**Mark:** [00:28:45] It's fun it's exhilarating and it allows them to escape deeper and deeper into different selves. And this is part of the real potency of this pedagogy is becoming someone different from who you are today. And often these very different people sometimes they're appalled or to become sometimes they're stimulated and it keeps it's interesting and educational.

**Bonni:** [00:29:10] Thank you so much. So we're going to move on to the recommendations and but before we transition I just wanted to say to anyone listening in the show notes which are at [Teachinginhighered.com/21](https://teachinginhighered.com/21) because this is Episode 21, I highly encourage you to go because I'm going to link to the book which is fabulous.

**Bonni:** [00:29:28] It's a wonderful read for anyone from any discipline to start to think about how we could be innovating in our classrooms in this way and also to the Web site and just encourage you to get involved there.

**Bonni:** [00:29:41] There are conferences there are workshops there are as as Mark pointed out all of these different colleagues that are getting together and this is not as as he's so humbly said this is not just his thing this is this is much larger than him and it's just an exciting thing to see.

**Bonni:** [00:29:57] So in terms of recommendations how about Mark I'll start and then I'll let you give yours. I'm going to go a totally different direction. I haven't really ever recommended anything that was that was not sort of related to teaching in higher ed but if anyone's just looking for a good drive-time break I started listening to a podcast by the producers of this American life. It's called serial.

**Bonni:** [00:30:20] I mistakenly thought it was cereal like the kind we have for breakfast. At first when I first heard the name and it is just a whole different way

of doing podcasting because this journalist has gone in to try to uncover some of the details from a man who was convicted.

**Bonni:** [00:30:39] A young man who was convicted of murder for a crime that had no physical evidence just one witness's testimony. And it is riveting listening. It's taken over a span of weeks and since she is still in the middle of her journalistic investigations we don't know how it's going to end - as listeners - but also she doesn't know how it's going to end. So it's just a very suspenseful Listen. And I just love this: this new twist on podcasting. Mark what's your recommendation for the listeners.

**Mark:** [00:31:11] Well now that you're suggesting something in a different direction. I also just it's one way that you can look into Reacting to the Past is just google Reacting to the Past and look for videos because it turns out that the students from all over the world put up videos of their Reacting classes.

**Mark:** [00:31:27] Some of them are appalling. But, some of them are fascinating and they're all interesting. Sometimes students take things - we'll do send ups of the Reacting class - but you can get some sense of things from doing it, if nothing else, of the energy and creativity that this unleashes and of course I also want you to go to the regular reacting website. That's [www.reactiving.barnard.edu](http://www.reactiving.barnard.edu).

**Mark:** [00:31:56] Then you can connect with all of the sort of scholars who are involved in the reacting consortium which is the governing body of the Reacting project.

**Bonni:** [00:32:05] Mark thank you so much for being on this week's Teaching in Higher Ed

**Mark:** [00:32:08] Bonni Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

**Bonni:** [00:32:12] And thanks to all of you who took me up on my request to go and write a review for Teaching in Higher Ed either on iTunes or on Stitcher. It actually has helped other people discover the show and it's is so rewarding to see this community building and getting your suggestions for future guests and future topics.

**Bonni:** [00:32:32] It is wonderful to be connecting with so many of you if you have not subscribed already to our weekly update. That means you're not getting the show notes in your inbox and are going to have to remember to go

on to the episode in order to get them. So please feel free to go to [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](https://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe) that will get you the weekly updates with the podcast notes a teaching article and it also will get you our guide to educational technology essentials.

**Bonni:** [00:33:01] And lastly if you have suggestions for future shows please go on [teachinginhighered.com/feedback](https://teachinginhighered.com/feedback).

*Teaching in Higher Ed transcripts are created using a combination of an automated transcription service and human beings. This text likely will not represent the precise, word-for-word conversation that was had. The accuracy of the transcripts will vary. The authoritative record of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcasts is contained in the audio file.*