

Learning Through Character Play

Education 462/Middle Eastern & North African Studies (MENAS) 462

Fall 2019 Tuesdays/Thursdays 1-2:30, 4212 SEB

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Canvas site: "Place out of Time/JCAT F2019" (assigned readings will be available at our Canvas site, or will be distributed in class)

Course Overview

This seminar revolves around Place out of Time (POOT), a web-based character-playing simulation involving students in grades 6-8. You will have a dual role in the simulation: you will play a character yourself, and you will also act as a project leader and mentor to the younger participants. This year, we are working with a group of Jewish day schools across North America, conducting a variation on POOT called the "Jewish Court of All Time," or JCAT. The POOT/JCAT project is run in cooperation with the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies and we are also working with partner faculty and students at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, and at Towson University in Maryland.

Our simulation draws from all periods of history and all world cultures, and it revolves around a trial - different each time the simulation is run -- based on events and people from history. While the details are ever changing, timeless and universal themes, such as "identity," "freedom," and "security," are the backdrop for the simulation.

This class is different because you are responsible not just for your own learning, but for helping to support the learning of younger students. In order to fulfill that responsibility, you will (collectively) need to understand and articulate a variety of cultural and historical perspectives, as filtered through characters you'll portray in the simulation. We have chosen to utilize character-playing simulation

for two reasons. First, we see great value in character play as an exercise of the imagination. Being forced to “walk in the shoes” of another, and to consider the ideas and the perspective of someone from another time or place, can be a powerful catalyst to learning, as well as to the development of empathy. Secondly, both you and the student participants will be asked to do this character playing in a task-oriented way. Mentors and students will learn about their character’s lives, their points-of-view, and the societal contexts in which their characters lived. You will then be presented with a contemporary problem (see below), which you will consider from the perspective of your character. The idea is to help the students to construct a bridge between historical times and the present day, to gain a heightened appreciation for other worldviews, and to wrestle with some interesting questions in a way that will deepen our learning about history...and about ourselves.

It is often said that the best way to learn something is to teach it. To that, one might add that the next best way to learn something is to play a game with it. This class tries to combine both of those methods.

Our Scenario

The eyes of the world turn to the village of Skokie, Illinois, as a commemoration of civic history has turned into a situation that has civic leaders deeply conflicted.

In 1977, an American Nazi group declared its plans to hold a rally in Skokie. The town's population was over 50% Jewish, and was home to thousands of Holocaust survivors. Skokie denied a permit to the Nazis, who used the situation to gain publicity. They decided to challenge Skokie in court, and were successfully defended by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), who advocated for the group’s rights to stage a rally, based in the first amendment’s guarantee of the right to free speech. The legal battle drew international attention. Ultimately, the rally did not take place in Skokie (the Nazis demonstrated, instead, in Chicago). Figuring out the free speech rights of those whose message is so deeply hateful remains a hugely difficult problem, and this conflict is at the center of Skokie’s historical legacy.

Fast forward to 2019. In order to honor the victims of the terrible shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, the city of Skokie announced plans to host a special virtual commemoration to honor this event. The commemorative event would bring together scholars, philosophers, religious leaders, politicians, and Skokie residents to examine the wide range of social, historical, and free speech issues that arose in 1978. They will also revisit and recognize how Skokie’s Jewish community, and an array of allies, worked out a complex mix of plans to counter the message of the Nazis while ensuring that there would be no physical threat to the marchers, despite their racist and anti-Semitic message. Speakers will address the question of "what can we learn from the past?" to help us in our current unsettling times, and will explore how the issues of 2019 are both similar to, and very different from, those that emerged in the 1970’s.

In the interest of reaching a just and wise decision, Skokie's city leaders have asked for and been granted a special convening of the Jewish Court of All Time (JCAT) to help them decide what to do for this virtual commemoration. Celebrated figures from across the span of human history are on their way to the campus of Northwestern University near Skokie, to research and discuss this matter and the issues embedded in it, and to ultimately reach a decision.

Our Initial Meetings

September 3rd

Today we'll look at the "big picture(s)," exploring some initial background for our simulation as well as talking about your mentoring work, and the issues related to justice and freedom of expression that will be foregrounded in our work this term. By tomorrow night, you'll receive an e-mail from us telling you who will be your primary character in the simulation. This will allow you to begin work on **creating your Profile (see below for more details), which is due on Canvas by Sunday, September 8th.**

September 5th

We'll look more closely at the Profile and talk about ways to approach the work. We'll also engage with the spirit of play with which this project is infused.

The Profile

As part of this written "Profile" (3-5 paragraphs, **written in the first person**, and in a narrative, informal style), please tell everyone something about your background and about the kind of person you are, your passions, your limitations, etc. You might think of this as part biography, part personal ad—you're telling your story and doing it in a way that you think reflects your essence as a human being. *What makes you interesting, what makes you stand out from the crowd?* One of the challenges of this activity is to try and represent your character, as much as possible, from your character's own perspective, and *to do so in a way that middle school student readers can understand and relate to.* Sometimes your character will have done things you don't agree with, or that we might question from our present-day perspective. While we encourage you to think about such issues, we ask you to do so *primarily* so that you can present your character's thoughts and motivations in as genuine and as unapologetic a manner as you can. Some of you might want to speak to where your critics were misguided, and how they failed to understand your true motivations.

Be your character, and allow yourself some dramatic license. *Please do not give us a simple recitation of the significant events in your character's life—the purpose of this task is not to recreate an encyclopedia entry. (see "**Sample Mentor Profiles**" on our Canvas site for some helpful examples).*

Crafting a compelling Profile

The Profile should have a **distinctive voice.**

The Profile should tell a **good story** that draws in the reader.

It should include some evidence that **situates your character in place and time.**

Be **succinct**. You **can't** include everything, so think about which details are most important, or the most illustrative of your character.

Read a segment of your Profile **aloud**. Practice *speaking* it as your character, and think about how s/he would sound.

September 10th

Starting today, we'll ask each of you to introduce your character to your classmates. Here's what that means:

Introducing Your Character

Please introduce yourself by doing the three things listed below. You'll have **3-4 minutes**, so really think about what you want to say, and while you are welcome to bring notes, please don't read from a text. Speak in the first person, and please also present yourself *stylistically* in such a way that your colleagues will get a sense of the *kind of person* you are.

1) Briefly introduce yourself, telling us when and where you lived, what work you did, and what you're best known for.

2) Choose three words to describe the kind of person you are (choose them carefully). Then, if you could only choose ONE as THE best representation, which would you choose, and why.

3) Please tell us about some event that took place during your lifetime--something you or may not have been aware of during your actual life--that shaped or reshaped the world in which you lived.

Once you've done this, be ready to answer questions posed by your fellow guests. They might ask about who your friends or enemies were, about events or people that shaped you, about notably wonderful or horrible experiences you had, or perhaps about accomplishments of which you are proud (or maybe not so proud). They might also ask you about things that are of particular interest to *their* character. We ask that you do your best to answer their questions, knowing that we'll debrief the experience and that you can always do further research to figure out a better answer to any questions you were asked that you didn't know how to answer in the moment.

September 12th

We'll continue with character introductions, and we'll ask all of you to bring to class five paper copies of your profile so that you can get some feedback on your written work.

September 17th

Today we ask that you **bring five paper copies of your REVISED profile to class**. We'll do final work-shopping of one another's profiles, and we'll show you how to post your profiles (profiles must be posted on the POOT simulation website by Friday the 20th).

Special Characters

In addition to your main character, you'll each be assigned a second character later in the semester, a character that you'll play for a short period of time. We have a handful of characters, most of whom were connected directly to the events in Skokie, who will be giving testimony or public interviews, and who will need to be portrayed for a short while after their appearance. We'll talk more in class about the nature and spirit of this work, as well as the logistics.

September 19th

We'll start talking today about the issues embedded in our trial. To that end, we ask that you listen to the "Nazis' Neighborhood" episode of the "Curious City" podcast, and that you read the background material on the website accompanying the show at: <http://interactive.wbez.org/curiouscity/chicagonazineighborhood/>. The show talks both about the incident at Skokie (including interviews with and footage of key actors and events) and about the Nazi presence in Chicago. Please bring any questions you might have to class, and also come with two specific things:

- 1) A "wondering" inspired by the reading—by this, we mean something that you were curious to know more about, or that struck you as interesting, controversial, or strange.
- 2) An idea for a question framed by this material that you think could be productively brought into the simulation, or into our thinking about facilitating the simulation.

September 24th

As the simulation website officially opens, we'll be talking more about your role as mentor, and we'll give you a glimpse into a POOT classroom.

September 26th

We'll continue our conversations about the case and the issues embedded in it by looking at an excerpt from a book (Defending My Enemy: American Nazis, the Skokie Case, and the Risks of Freedom, International Debate Education Association, 2012, pages 125-148) written by the head of American Civil Liberties Union at the time of the Skokie incident, Aryeh Neier. Neier's focus is on the free speech dimensions of the case, and he looks at the evolution of American free speech law over time. Please read the article (posted on Canvas) and come to class with questions and observations. Look for the connections Neier makes

between the evolving legal definition of free speech and what transpired in Skokie, and *bring to class at least one example* of an interesting question that he frames as well as **your** own thoughts about how the internet and social media may have reframed this issue in the 40 years since the original publication of Neier's book.

October 1st

This week we'll look at a historical example of the Nazi presence in the United States in the years before Skokie by looking at two reviews of a 1975 film that we'll watch part of in class called "California Reich." The reviews are from the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/12/12/archives/tv-california-reich-visits-west-coast-nazis.html>

and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency:

<https://www.jta.org/1978/10/18/archive/special-review-the-california-reich-poses-dilemma>

Come to class with examples of what you noticed in reading the reviews that caught your attention or made you curious to know more.

October 3rd

Your homework for today is to spend some time before class looking at last year's simulation (we'll pass out login information in class) and to "notice what you notice" in terms of the kinds of interactions you see and how those interactions look and feel, how the guests speak in character, etc. We'll ask you to come to class with two specific examples:

***One** should be of a post you found to be noteworthy—maybe it was a particularly inspired character portrayal, or an intriguing statement, question, or response to a question.*

***The second** should be something that raised a question for you about the simulation or about being a mentor. Maybe it is a post that led you to wonder how you would respond to it, or perhaps it is simply something you didn't expect to see.*

We'll also get a little more specific about how the simulation unfolds, and we'll talk about the mentor journal assignment.

Mentor Journal

We're going to ask you to keep a term-long journal of your work this term, and of how you're making sense of the task of being a mentor, playing a character, interacting with middle school students, and thinking through the course readings. We'll be looking for a robust and well-considered engagement with the questions we'll pose for your consideration. In addition, because our journals

will be public, we're expecting you to respond to the reflections of your colleagues and/or to their responses to you. Know that one of the final reflection questions will ask you to speak specifically about how your interactions with your colleagues and their journals have impacted your work and your thinking about that work, and to cite examples of interactions that challenged you, inspired you, or made you think differently.

Journaling will start after class on October 3rd, and we'll provide more specific detail about the task in class that day.

October 8th/10th

This week we'll talk about what it means to study history and to think like a historian. **Please read and be prepared to discuss Thomas Holt's "Thinking Historically" article for Tuesday.** As you read the article, *think about what it means to study history, and where the value comes from in so doing. Think also about the kind of inferences Holt makes about what students often think that history is. What are Holt's conclusions? What kinds of challenges and possibilities do these conclusions present us with? Please select a couple of points made in the articles that you found to be especially interesting, or problematic, or confusing, and be prepared to share those points.*

October 15th: Fall Break—No Class Meeting

October 17th

Today we'll begin exploring the idea of a "playful spirit of learning," and we'll ask ourselves how we can leverage this spirit to help our students engage more deeply with big ideas by discussing **an interview with cognitive scientist Adele Diamond**. In this easy-to-listen-to interview (link to the audio and to a written transcript is posted on Canvas), Dr. Diamond talks about supporting creativity in children. As you listen, think about the points that Diamond is making...what does she have to say about how we might better be able to nurture creativity in young people? Pay particular attention to her observations about the importance of creative play. What do you think about her arguments? What strikes you as particularly interesting about what she has to say regarding how kids develop? Are any of the points that she makes relevant to the work that you're doing in POOT? We'll take time to talk about your impressions in class.

October 22nd/24th

Today we'll delve more deeply into the nature of mentoring, and we'll show you a protocol for analyzing student work and for responding to it...which questions are important to consider as we try to put ourselves into the shoes of our students? Pertaining to your mentoring work, please read the **"Advice and Suggestions for the Mentors"** piece, a compilation of mentoring strategies and collected wisdom from your predecessors.

We'll also be opening our **exhibit halls**, where we'll be examining and discussing primary source documents of a variety of types. We'll spend time in

class on Tuesday and Thursday talking about the task at hand, and dividing up responsibilities.

October 29th/ October 31st

This week we're going to talk more about a playful spirit of learning. For Tuesday, we'd like for you to have a look at a brief article that looks at improvisational acting. We'll discuss the connections you see between the ideas discussed by the noted scholar, **Tina Fey** ;-), and elements of theatricality within POOT. What connections do you see? Do the practices Fey talks about seem relevant to your mentoring work? We'll talk about why you feel as you do, and where (if at all) you see connections and useful reminders in the brief excerpt we'll read from her autobiography, "**Bossypants.**"

November 5th

Please prepare for our continued conversation about the work of the historian by reading **Andrews and Burke's "What Does It Mean to Think Historically?"** We'll talk in class about your reactions to the reading in general, but please come to class with ideas about how, in our work, we might be able to deepen and help our students to grasp concepts like *contingency* and *context*.

November 7th

Today we'll look in class at an American political movement that you may be surprised to learn about. We'll think together about the meaning behind this movement, and about how we make sense of it from the perspective of our day and time.

November 12th/14th

Our readings for this week are about observation and about looking carefully at student work. We also hope to add complication to some central questions of our work. What does it mean to cultivate the *disposition* of observing the work of our students in a patient and non-judgmental way? How do we reconcile that stance with our sense of what it means to be a mentor, and of our responsibilities to our students, and to the simulation itself? Starting on Tuesday, we'll discuss these two readings, their meaning and, of course, their relevance to your mentoring: "**Learning from Looking**" by **Steve Seidel**; "**Meditation: On Description**" by **Patricia Carini**.

November 19th

We'll continue our conversation about close observation of work, this time looking at the question through the eyes of an art historian named **Jennifer Roberts**. Please read her "**Power of Patience**" article for Tuesday and come to class with your observations about the applicability of what she discusses to our mentoring work. We'll definitely be talking about what she means by deceleration, and how that idea might be relevant to our work, and we'll explore whether there are meaningful parallels between paintings and student postings.

****Readings and Assignments for our meetings later in November and in December will be discussed in class****

Evaluation

We want you to have a sense of the criteria we use for evaluating your work in this class, so we've attempted to describe them here. We are aware that some of this will still be rather abstract, but we want you to have a feel for the class so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not it makes sense to you...and **for** you. We will be discussing all of this in greater depth, and in fuller context, as things move along.

Becoming your Character and Portraying your Character

This class is based on a simulation activity that will require you to “become” an actual person from the past, from the present day, or from the pages of literature. This is a challenging task, especially since we'll be asking you to spend a good deal of time researching your character for purposes of creating what we call your “Profile,” and for developing an evolving sense of your character's story so that you can truly become your character. We'll be looking for evidence of your knowledge of your character's background, and of the social and historical context in which s/he lived. We'll also be looking for you to convey, both online and in class, a sense of the kind of person your character is, and what you think makes him tick. We want to encourage you, as you learn more about your character, to allow yourself to play a bit. What do you think your character sounded like? Was she a woman of the people? Would he look down his nose at others? We want you to have some fun with this, and to try your best to be true to your vision of your character in her/his time.

Our “gold standard” will be demonstrated investment in your character portrayal, as well as evidence of your creativity, conscientiousness and willingness to take some risks, whether orally in class, in your written work, or in your written postings during the simulation. This will mean that you'll be taking educated guesses as to how your character would react to questions, issues or ideas. The important thing is not to hold yourself to the unattainable standard of being “right” (how could we know?), but rather to make a thoughtful choice that you are prepared to defend (why did you have your character say **this**?) and then to put some creative energy into articulating and defending the point-of-view you've crafted for your character.

Supporting and Modeling Substantive Discourse

A central aspect of your work as a mentor will be your efforts both to model and to support a deep level of engagement with the ideas that will emerge in the conversations. This will have implications for your character play, as you will be expected to be inventive in adding new ideas and twists to your portrayal of your character, and for your engagement with the students in your efforts to offer thoughtful responses to their postings. We expect that all of you will do everything that you can to avoid two hazards:

- 1) Being a “Johnny one note” (choosing one characteristic about your character to guide your character play, and not going beyond it) and
- 2) Anachronism. You all have your own ideas about the world and how we should treat one another. Being “anachronistic” in your character portrayal means that you don’t monitor yourself carefully to speak as your character and not as yourself. It is a challenge to keep pushing yourself to speak as your character and to ask yourself, what would s/he think, but it is vital that you continually make this effort.

Seminar Sessions & Course-related Work

Perhaps the most important aspect of all is the **quality and frequency of your on-line interactions** with the students, your demonstrated engagement with doing this mentoring work, and your reflection on this work in our seminar discussions and in your written work. We will be spending a great deal of time in class talking about mentoring, sharing ideas for how to do it, and giving you opportunities to practice and think about it. We’ll also have an online journaling space where we’ll continue these reflective conversations. Your mentoring work constitutes the most important aspect of the course. You’ll be expected to spend **5 hours per week** doing your online work (this includes reading student postings, responding to them, thinking about and reflecting on your mentoring work) and doing other course assignments as given. ***This will equate to at least ten substantive postings each week of the simulation.*** It is also important for you to know that, because of the nature of the project, it is often impossible to make up missed work. We expect that you will consistently participate in the online conversations, and that you will complete other course assignments in a timely fashion. ***Finally, this is a course that puts a premium on class participation: presenting material, interacting with other students, and taking the initiative in class discussions; we ask that you make your best effort to be a regular participant in our seminar conversations.***

Grades will be determined based on the following criteria:

Quality and consistency of mentoring work (25%) Written assignments (20%)
 Final reflection (35%) Seminar participation & attendance (20%)

Grade Scale

A	4.0	95 - 100
A-	3.7	90 - 94
B+	3.3	86 - 89
B	3.0	82 - 85
B-	2.7	78 - 81
C+	2.3	74 - 77
C	2.0	70 - 73
C-	1.7	67 - 69
D	1.0	60 - 66
F	0.0	0 - 59