

Fall 2021

Learning Through Character Play

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

Tuesdays/Thursdays 1-2:30 2320 School of Education

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Assigned readings will be available on 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, 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, such timeless and universal themes 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 developing an empathic outlook. While of course we can never truly understand the experiences of someone else, we hope that the challenge of character play—and your work as mentor—can help the students to ask meaningful questions about the experiences of others. 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

Background

Students at the Masoret Jewish High School in Virginia had been conducting research on Virginia’s Jewish history. As part of that work, they learned that this history is complex: Jews of diverse backgrounds have lived in Virginia since colonial times and were involved in the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, to name just two important historical events.

As part of their investigation, the students learned about Moses Ezekiel, the first Jewish graduate of Virginia Military Institute, who served the Confederacy in the Civil War. Ezekiel went on to become a sculptor and was commissioned to design a monument to Confederate soldiers that stands in Arlington National Cemetery today. The monument was completed in 1914 and includes symbols romanticizing slavery and the Confederacy.

Ezekiel is buried at the base of the monument.

<https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Monuments-and-Memorials/Confederate-Memorial>

On June 7, 1903, even before the monument was finished, the first “Confederate Memorial Day” ceremonies were held in Arlington’s Confederate section. President Theodore Roosevelt sent a floral arrangement, beginning a tradition followed by nearly every U.S. president.

Taking Action, Spring 2021

For a small group of juniors, the research project about the history of Virginia's Jews turned into more than a school assignment. These students decided to raise their voices in protest over the monument, and to take action.

Initially, the students reached out through emails and letters to their elected officials. However, receiving little response, they brainstormed alternative measures. Tamar, a leader of the group, reached out to her friend, Stacey, from a student group at a local church, Ebenezer Baptist Church with whom she had played basketball. Together the two young women recruited peers who met together to plan. They named their plan "Operation Remove the Statue" (ORTS).

On Memorial Day, May 31, 2021, the ORTS students traveled to Arlington and assembled before the gates of the cemetery. They observed a moment of silence for "victims of racism and antisemitism across the centuries." Leaders gave speeches. They then held up a small recreation of the Ezekiel confederate statue they had built and lit it on fire.

As fate would have it, a spark blew away and lit a fire on a nearby wooden memorial bench honoring COVID-19 Pandemic First Responders. Fortunately, it was quickly put out but not before causing significant damage to the memorial bench. Nevertheless, all students from the group were arrested for lighting a fire on public property without a permit and for damaging public property.

The Aftermath

Following a court date, the students were all assigned hours of community service. The leadership of Masoret Jewish High School and the Ebenezer Baptist Church deliberated all summer to determine how to respond to the student groups and to the greater community. In both settings there were voices praising the students and others calling for their punishment and even expulsion.

Good members of the Jewish Court of All Time, these leaders have invited us here **to help them respond to the ORTS students and their actions** in a just, fair and responsible way.

Our Initial Meetings

August 31st

We'll get acquainted, and we'll look at the "big picture," reading and discussing our scenario and exploring some initial background for our simulation as well as talking about your mentoring work, and the issues related to justice, identity, and social responsibility that will be foregrounded in our work this term.

September 2nd

We'll continue talking today about the issues embedded in our trial, starting with questions of how we remember and why we build memorials.

For class today, please read the following two articles:

“Don’t Take Down Confederate Monuments: Here’s Why” by Sophia Nelson

“A True Daughter of The Confederacy Has Written What Should be the Last Words on the Monuments” by Caroline Randall Williams

Please come to class with the following:

- 1) A “wondering” inspired by one or another of the readings—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 7th

We’ll continue our conversations about the case and the issues embedded in it by reading **Genevieve Carlton’s** piece entitled **“Arguments for and Against Removing Confederate Statues.”**

As with the last session, please come to class with:

- 1) A “wondering” inspired by today’s reading—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 9th

Today we’ll be talking about the sculptor Moses Ezekiel and the Confederate Memorial that he designed and built.

Please read the **“The Not-So Lost Cause of Moses Ezekiel” article by Lara Moehlman**, as well as the **“Excerpt from the Dedication of the Confederate Memorial Monument—1914.”**

Let’s talk in class about what you learn about Moses Ezekiel and about the historical setting in which he built this monument. Let’s also talk about how the monument is described in the excerpt from the memorial’s dedication...what do you notice? What questions are evoked for you?

September 14th

Today we’ll connect our discussion of the background on our case with character play and the assigning of characters.

By tomorrow night, you’ll receive an e-mail from us telling you who will be your permanent 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 Tuesday, September 21st** (handed in to the **“draft profile”** assignment)

As we continue to develop our background for the trial, we'll discuss the reading by **Eric K. Ward** entitled "**Somebody Must Be Blamed: Antisemitism, the Equal Opportunity Ideology.**"

Please come to class prepared to talk about what you understand Ward's arguments to be as well as any questions his article surfaces for you.

September 16th

We'll look more closely at the Profile and talk about ways to approach the work. We'll 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 21st

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.

Your Draft Profile is due today on Canvas.

September 23rd

We'll continue with character introductions and will begin workshopping one another's profiles. You'll get some feedback from colleagues today, and Michael or Jeff will offer you feedback on Canvas by the weekend.

This feedback will inform a revision of your profile that you'll turn in on **September 30th**, together with your thinking about how you crafted your profile, and about the changes you made since your first draft and why you made them. In 250-400 words, we'll ask you to submit a **reflection on the profile writing process** in which you:

1. briefly discuss the kind of image you wanted to convey with your profile
2. talk about a choice you made in crafting your profile

3. tell us about one or more changes you made in your profile, sparked by feedback you received or inspired by what someone else did with their profile. *What was it before? How/why did you make the change?*

September 28th

We'll do final workshopping of one another's profiles, and we'll show you how to post your profiles (profiles must be posted on the simulation website by Sunday, October 3rd).

September 30th

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.*

Your Reflection on the profile writing process is due today on Canvas.

October 5th

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**. 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 7th

The simulation will begin next week, so we'll take time today to talk about the "Nice to Meet You" messages you'll be sending to a special group of guests, your "JCAT Buddies." We'll talk about your relationship with your buddies, and we'll also discuss these initial messages you'll write, expressing your eagerness to get to know your buddies and to learn more about them.

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 of the simulation, 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.

October 12th

We'll do more work with the "Nice to Meet You" messages.

The simulation begins this week, and we'll review the first witness testimony that will be posted on the site, by student activists who called for the confederate memorial to be taken down. **Please read the "Student Activist Testimony"** and come to class on Thursday with thoughts about the arguments they make, and about how those arguments can be defined, challenged and explored.

October 14th

We'll discuss the testimony from the student activists, and we'll also get a little more specific about how the simulation will unfold and what your role will be.

October 19th– No Class (Fall Break)

October 21st

Now that the simulation has begun, 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 talk about the mentor journal assignment, described below. *Your first journaling is due by **Sunday, October 24th***, and we'll provide more specific detail about the task in class.

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.

October 26th

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 (a 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? Do any of the points she makes seem relevant to the work that you're doing as a mentor? We'll talk about your impressions in class.

October 28th

We're opening our **exhibit halls** next week, where we'll be examining and discussing primary source documents of a variety of types. We'll talk about the tasks at hand and about how we'll divide up responsibilities.

November 2nd

Today we're going to talk more about a playful spirit of learning. We'd like for you to read a brief article about improvisational acting. We'll discuss the connections you see between the ideas discussed by the noted scholar, **Tina Fey** ;-), and elements of theatricality within the simulation. 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**." *We'll also talk about the second journal, due by **Sunday, Nov. 7th**.*

November 4th

Coming up soon on the simulation will be witness testimony from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, discussing their relationship as activists from different faith traditions. We'll review their testimony "**King/Heschel Witness Testimony**" and we'll read and discuss an article by Heschel's daughter Susannah ("**Two Friends, Two Prophets**") that describes their personal and philosophical relationship.

November 9th

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 11th

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 16th

Our readings for today 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? 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 18th

We'll reflect on the work of the students so far, and on what you're seeing on the site.

*We'll also talk about the third journal, due by **Sunday, Nov. 21st**.*

November 23rd

Our trial begins this week, and we'll talk about what that means, and what kind of things we want to accomplish as the simulation enters the final phase.

November 30th

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 and come to class with your observations about the applicability of what she discusses to our mentoring work. We'll talk 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.

*We'll also talk about the fourth and final journal, due by **Sunday, Dec. 5th**.*

****Readings and Assignments for our December meetings (held on Dec. 2, 7 and 9) will be discussed in class****

Evaluation

We want you to understand 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. Your Questions are always welcome.

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

About COVID

For the safety of all students, faculty, and staff on campus, it is important for each of us to be mindful of safety measures that have been put in place for our protection. By returning to campus, you have acknowledged your responsibility for protecting the collective health of our community. Your participation in this course on an in-person basis is conditional upon your adherence to all safety

measures mandated by the State of Michigan and the University, including maintaining physical distancing of six feet from others, and properly wearing a face covering in class. Other applicable safety measures may be described in the [Wolverine Culture of Care](#) and the [University's Face Covering Policy for COVID-19](#). Your ability to participate in this course in-person as well as your grade may be impacted by failure to comply with campus safety measures. Individuals seeking to request an accommodation related to the face covering requirement under the Americans with Disabilities Act should contact the [Office for Institutional Equity](#). If you are unable or unwilling to adhere to these safety measures while in a face-to-face class setting, you will be required to participate on a remote basis (if available) or to disenroll from the class. We also encourage you to review the [Statement of Students Rights and Responsibilities](#), which includes a COVID-related Statement Addendum.

Recording Class Sessions

Course lectures may be audio/video recorded and made available to other students in this course only. As part of your participation in this course, you may be recorded. If you do not wish to be recorded, please contact Jeff (stanz@umich.edu) the first week of class to discuss alternative arrangements.

Your Well-Being

We're living in stressful times, and we both want to do everything we can to support you and to ensure that our class is as healthy a place as it can be. If you have any concerns you want to raise regarding the class, please be invited to contact us. Please also know that there are resources available to you on campus to support your emotional health, including these listed at the University's [Well Being for U-M Students](#) website.