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Considering Games in Libraries and Such — A Liminal Response to Watching Paint Dry

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There I was in front of an 8am library instruction session. Since these yawning students had been told that they were going to be in a library instruction session, they were pretty much expecting a session along the lines of “How to Watch Paint Dry: The Critical Tools.” You can imagine the level of excitement and the raw anticipation. I suppose a severe lack of coffee was not helping, but it was still depressing to face a room full of young students whose demeanors were decidedly lacking in glee and whose eyes were significantly blank in expression.

The thing is that I knew from their professor that many of these students had never searched a database before and had little idea what resources are found in an academic library. Their minds needed this critical knowledge, and their minds were ripe for it. Except they weren’t.

I announced in my best sing-song, joyful voice that this was going to be a class about “everything you ever wanted to know about the library but were afraid to ask.” Not an eyeball blinked. Not a head nodded. Not a sigh sighed. There was nary a halfhearted chuckle at my obvious witty irony of the situation to which we all shared. Nada.

I was up against the one nightmare that has afflicted teachers of every education level and every discipline ... and surely every teacher in every age and era. This is the nightmare of the class from hell. The class in which no matter what I say or do, I can get no perceptible feedback either verbal or non-verbal from the students. There is nothing that in any way indicates that they care one jot about what I am talking about or that we are even in the same universe. One might as well be teaching to a class of crash test dummies. To be sure, these were not dumb students. These were just severely uninspired and unengaged students. No amount of coffee or marching bands or excitement on my part seemed likely to change that.

Not to disparage those students who do enjoy library research (for I am sure there are some out there), but even I know that being subjected to such a “chalk and talk” presentation about the joys of library research at 8am can be difficult to anticipate with any significant degree of excitement. This was no doubt exacerbated by a classroom pandemic of IKTA (I Know This Already) syndrome. In the era when one can google anything and get an answer (right or wrong), the perceived value of such a library session is already starting off in the gutter. And did I mention that it was 8am?

Now, I know what you are thinking. Get these students into an engaging and inspiring game about libraries, and this problem is solved ... because ... you know ... the title of this column. But, let’s allow a bit of analysis.

The thoughtful reader might be tempted to ask ... okay, let’s examine why these students are uninspired and unengaged so that we can determine how to fix it. What sort of application or activity might change the equation? As it happens, I recently came across a teacher who had asked himself this very question and had the good sense to write an enlightening article about it.

It seems a certain professor of history, **Dr. Mark Carnes** of **Barnard College**, was brooding about a particularly unsuccessful seminar characterized by his students’ lack of engagement and a high degree of superficiality and obvious boredom. He felt the seminar had been a failure. He sought out his colleagues who recounted similar times of frustration. But, he was not content to simply brood.

The following semester he met individually with many of the students from that seminar to ask what he may have done wrong. The students were actually surprised at his sense of inadequacy and his interpretation of their disinterest. It seems that they tended to blame themselves for the way the seminar went. “*They explained that what I had taken to be sullenness on their part was actually a manifestation of deep anxiety. They knew that my knowledge of the texts exceeded their own; they chafed at being obliged to reveal the insufficiency of their understanding*”¹ **Professor Carnes** had another revelation. “*If students were uncomfortable with me, they were even more worried about their peers’ reactions. Their sophisticated disinterest masked a fear of saying something foolish, inappropriate, or — even worse — revealing about their fragile sense of self. The more I pushed them to the brink of otherness — other ideas, cultures, and societies — the more they clung to familiarity or simply clammed up.*”¹

Dr. Carnes had discovered an insightful truth about why his students exhibited a “sophisticated disinterest.” They were not necessarily disinterested in the subject matter. They had anxiety about their own inadequacies in the subject and a fear of showing their ignorance and appearing foolish in front of their teacher and their peers.

Mark Carnes went on to address these issues in a big way — with a gaming environment, of course. **Dr. Mark Carnes** is the founder and creator of the award winning “*Reacting to the Past*” history role playing, immersion games at **Barnard College**. This program has been implemented by hundreds of Colleges and Universities in the United States since 2001. He wrote a book about his experiences, *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*.²

When contemplating what his students had revealed to him, **Carnes** wrote, “*I con-*

cluded that if my role as mentor impeded my students’ engagement with the texts, it should be minimized. If students’ insecurity hampered their ability to engage fully with otherness, they should assume an alternative identity. If students regarded important texts as vague and abstract, they should examine the texts within the context of the impassioned debates and dramas from which they had emerged.”¹

Basically it is the age old idea of learning by doing. But, this is engaged doing within a meaningful context. By its nature it both directly engages and allows one an experience within the world of the subject. Don’t tell students the knowledge. Don’t even just let them work hands-on with the knowledge. Put them in a world or environment where they have to experience the subject matter in a challenging, meaningful way.

Carnes talks about how his game environment puts students into a “world of liminality — that threshold region where the normal rules of society are suspended or subverted. Liminal settings are characterized by uncertainty and emotional intensity, by the inversion of status and social hierarchies, and by imaginative expressiveness.”

Merriam-Webster defines *liminal* variously as “relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process” or “occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.” *Collins English Dictionary* sees it as meaning “at a boundary or transitional point between two conditions, stages in a process, ways of life, etc.”

These games turn the classroom into such a liminal space. Games — and particularly game activities that offer these immersions into an active, transitional environment — have shown that students need not react to a “boring or difficult subject with disinterest or anxiety.” **Dr. Carnes** has proven it with his immersive “*Reacting to the Past*” games. I have seen the same reaction to Escape Rooms. So, even a one shot library instruction class can attain an even more engaging learning experience. No doubt my “Get out of Library Hell” themed escape room is going to be a smash hit. I hope the “drying paint puzzle” will be particularly engaging. 🐾

Endnotes

1. **Carnes, Mark C.** “Being There: the Liminal Classroom.” *The Chronicle Review*. 8 Oct. 2004. Available online here: [reacting.barnard.edu/node/3048](http://barnard.edu/node/3048).
2. **Carnes, Mark C.** *Minds on Fire: How Role-Immersion Games Transform College*. Harvard Univ. Press, 2018.