"People Can Get FIRED UP": Slack in the Classroom with Reacting to the Past in a Live, Video-linked Classroom

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This paper investigates the use of Slack in a livestreamed class, where students played to Reacting to the Past (RTTP) games. Slack has important advantages, in particular providing a channel of communication for students that allowed the games to proceed uninterrupted. While students on the main campus reported largely positive experiences, distance learning students had difficulty connecting with those on the main campus. Despite these problems, distance students nonetheless made clear that their experience showed a deep understanding of the historical period. To be effective, Slack requires additional scaffolding to ensure that students use it to its full potential.

In 1637, the General Court of Massachusetts had sought to punish Anne Hutchinson for leading religious discussions out of her home—the colony's leaders saw her actions as heretical and politically destabilizing (Winship and Carnes, 2005). Nearly four hundred years later, students in my class stepped into roles revisiting the original trial. Two students confronted each other, one pulling a careful, point-by-point defense of Hutchinson's claims, the other seeking to prevent Hutchinson's supporters from persuading the community to allow her to remain in the colony. They each faced off from two podiums seventy-four miles away from each other, connected via a live video feed. In the meantime, the rest of the class was abuzz, thinking and planning about how to respond, and cheering on their speakers—all on their Slack channels. Distance learning may have placed them apart, but the class was coming together in different ways.

Slack is a new online communications tool that can serve as a replacement for email and live chat; it organizes discussions into topical channels, allowing for easier prioritization. This paper investigates the usefulness of Slack in connecting distance students in classes where teaching is done via live-streaming video across multiple campuses. In so doing, it argues not only for its benefits: Slack also allows multiple forms of communication in the classroom that can give distance students the ability

to connect and learn not only from the instructor, but with and from their fellow students on other campuses. In making its claims, it draws on scholarship on the use of role-playing games in classes; scholarship on the use of Slack in academic contexts, on distance learning, media richness, and technology adoption. Slack works, but students on remote campuses will have their experiences further helped by greater adoption and use from home campus students.

Additionally, this paper also seeks to explore how to address game-running issues that come up in a distance-learning context when running a role-playing *Reacting to the Past* game: how can instructors ensure that students across campuses are immersing themselves in the game? Are they interacting with their fellow students effectively, and are they engaging in the deep re-learning and re-thinking that such games can provide? This paper identifies several issues that can emerge in running a game in a distance-learning classroom, and offers suggestions to ensure that remote students don't miss out. Here, once again, Slack proved useful in encouraging team communication and in more practical game-running aspects as well.

Scholarship assessing *Reacting to the Past* has emphasized its benefits in historicizing thinking, increasing engagement in the classroom, and improving retention rates at universities (Carnes 2014; Higbee 2009; Olwell and Stevens 2015). Its structure means that the instructor functions as a "guide on the side" rather than a lecturing "sage on the stage" when the game is running (King 1993). It is also an enhanced version of the "flipped classroom:" students are expected to read, plan, and prepare prior to class time, where instead of formal lecturing, they will use their preparation to fulfill and enact their roles (Olwell and Stevens). The structure further gives students a sense of ownership in the class, and the ability to connect the ideas in one class with other classes they are taking. *Reacting to the Past* also has its limits: while many students find it to be a positive experience, and it has the potential to deeply change students' understandings of historical events, some students find it unfamiliar with their understanding of how learning should function, and disengage from the process (Olwell and Stevens).

Extant peer-reviewed scholarship on the use of Slack in an academic context has centered primarily on its use in labs and team research environments rather than classrooms (Gofine and Clark 2017; Perkel 2017). That scholarship has noted the ability to connect team members across

shifts and other situations with limited face-to-face contact, and the ability to keep records in ways that are not possible using group texts. Scholarship has also noted Slack's help with the easy incorporation and training of new team members, as well as informal bonding. Where introduced in the classroom, non-peer-reviewed research has noted the effectiveness of Slack in graduate classrooms, while limited adoption hampered its effectiveness in undergraduate classrooms (Hussain, Mills, and Sanders 2018; Talbot 2015). Additional limitations in the classroom included communication being largely restricted to required or formal matters, structural issues such as choice of the number of discussion channels, and student awareness of the robustness and integration of Slack's features, tools, and searchability.

Placing Slack in the context of e-learning theory shows that it provides a particular form of communication that allows for synchronous chat that does not disrupt the flow of learning when games are in session (Liu, Liao, and Pratt 2009; Venkatesh and Davis 2000). To what extent students are concentrated on learning tasks also correlates with the effectiveness of the distance teaching medium. However, for some students, Slack suffers from a lack of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, discouraging students from investing a brief amount of time familiarizing themselves with the tool and engaging with their fellow students. However, students who were not on the home campus overcame these barriers more easily, while students from the home campus were more likely to rely on traditional forms of face-to-face communication.

Slack provides a missing form of communication in the class: its live-chat allows students to check in and discuss matters in a non-disruptive way while games are in-play. This can be for both one-to-one communication and one-to-many: checking in with a student about an individual question or giving advice to a faction on how to react to a sudden change in events. The mediated format also means that communicating with students on another campus is not substantially different from communicating with students on the same campus, putting both groups of students on a more equal footing.

Results from a class survey indicate that building connections across campuses and engaging students through distance learning remains a challenge. While students on the home campus reported largely positive experiences, distance learning students had difficulty connecting with those on the home campus. Despite these problems, distance students nonetheless made clear that their experience showed a deep understanding of the historical period. To be effective, Slack requires additional scaffolding

to ensure that students use it to its full potential.

In this essay, my analysis of the survey data makes qualitative claims and shows the possibilities of Slack as a tool in bringing about deeper learning and enhancing social bonds between students: the survey serves as a focus group and I do not seek to make statistically-backed claims. My students were not fully representative of college-students in terms of demography, especially students on remote campuses: they were disproportionally white, female, non-traditional, working-class, and rural.

Methodology

Data was gathered through an anonymous, in-class survey. The survey had open-ended questions asking about what students felt they'd learned in the class, their key takeaways from the first Reacting game, the extent to which they used Slack, how useful it was for them, and how it compared with other forms of cross-campus communication. Students also indicated which campus they were on. The survey is available in the appendix of this article. In keeping with IRB practices, students were given an explanation of the purpose of the survey, the survey was optional, and I did not review survey results until after I had submitted grades for the course. The survey was given on the first day of the second, different game in the class, at the beginning of class before the game itself started, and was given in the second-to-last week of a fourteen-week semester course (not counting spring break and finals week). Most of the student comments can be understood in the light of reflecting on the first game, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, and preparing for their roles in the second game. Owing to the small size of students in the survey, my analysis is qualitative, and I make no broad statistically backed claims regarding my findings.

Details about the Class

The class taught was Famous Trials in American History, and it covered trials from the early colonial period into the twenty-first century. I sought to get students to learn about the origins and development of present-day inequalities in the justice system. In format, it was what I would consider typical of an upper-level undergraduate class, other than the addition of the games within the class: I ran this class as a seminar: weekly readings and discussion. The class had a discussion board run via Blackboard, the designated learning management system (LMS) for our campus, where discussion questions were posted prior to that day's class,

and students wrote replies to those questions. In class, I usually broke students into smaller groups for discussion, focused on particular questions, and then regrouped as a whole for a larger discussion. Assignments included two written papers as take-home exams, a midterm and a final, and there were occasional in-class quizzes on readings. In addition to the seminar format, the class featured two in-class *Reacting to the Past* games: *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, and *Hacking Harvard: Law, Ethics, and the Dawn of the Facebook Era*. The latter is a game in the process of being developed by Enrique Guerra-Pujol that explores the legal issues surrounding the introduction of Facemash (precursor to Facebook) to the Harvard campus by then-student Mark Zuckerberg (Guerra-Pujol).

The class was taught via the Ohio University Learning Network (OULN) a live, digitally linked classroom across multiple livestreamed campuses of the University. Ohio University's main campus is located in Athens, Ohio; in addition to the main campus, the university also has regional campuses or classroom centers in a number of towns in southeastern Ohio. Faculty members are affiliated with a particular campus and predominantly teach out of that campus (here referred to as the "home campus"). Students on other campuses not only can see and hear the home campus, but the live video is synced across campuses: students can ask questions and converse across all campuses, and cameras can pan and zoom to show different areas of classrooms such as the speaker's podium and student seating areas. Additionally, the system is integrated to show lecture slides and other video, and these can be shown from any campus.

The class enrolled fifteen students on the home campus ("Campus A") from which I taught, one student at Campus B, three at Campus C, and four at Campus D, for a total of nine students taught via distance, and twenty-four students total at the time of the survey. Prior to the survey date, two students had withdrawn at Campus A, and one at Campus B. .

Role of Games in the Class

Both games involve assigning students various roles in a historical scenario. Students are expected to advocate for their character's interests and negotiate with other students' characters to advance those interests. Characters are more broadly grouped into factions: two opposing factions, and a heterogeneous group of indeterminates who can be swayed to one side or another through varying means, but who often have interests or concerns of their own. Factions often have roles that serve as leadership

positions. The instructor functions as the game-master, running the game, determining victory scores, giving advice to factions, and other similar tasks.

I assigned roles with the challenges of distance learning in mind: I wanted to ensure that students on other campuses did not feel left out of the action. In the Anne Hutchinson game, I assigned faction leaders to students on those campuses, and grouped most of one faction (supporters of Governor Winthrop) on Campus D. Leaders of the opposing faction (friends of Anne Hutchinson) had their leaders on Campus C, but had a significant number of supporters on the home campus, Campus A. Indeterminates were mainly on Campus A for the Hutchinson game. The Anne Hutchinson game took up seven class days, so students were in their roles for a while: this long-term immersion in the role helps facilitate deep learning, getting students to re-think their assumptions about the historical relationships between church, state, and the law, along with women's roles during the colonial period.

The Hacking Harvard game ran over three class days, and most students had a different role each day. Each day was a discussion of the Facemash site set up by Mark Zuckerberg and the legal and ethical concerns that the creation and use of the site posed, with fictionalized meetings where students were assigned roles encouraging them to address the issues from a particular ideology or perspective. Day one of the game was set as a meeting of the student government, day two of the game was a meeting of the faculty of Harvard Law School, and day three the board meeting of Harvard Corporation. Day one focused on the impact on students and their response, day two on the legal issues surrounding the site, and day three on the University's responsibility relating to the site. Campus D students were assigned the role of Harvard student government on the first day, the indeterminate group to be swayed by the advocacy of other student groups on the home campus. On days two and three, different students on Campus A had presiding roles directing discussions, and Campus D students had (different) faction roles. Students at Campuses B and C were assigned continuous roles as journalists covering the issue. [6]

Role of Slack: Building Communications and Community across Campuses

I introduced Slack to encourage cross-campus collaboration and communication. Slack is and online communications tool that has positioned itself as an improvement on email. According to its website, "Teamwork in Slack happens in channels — a single place for messaging,

tools and files — helping everyone save time and collaborate together (Slack 2019)." The channels are akin to a group chat or email, but the interface is designed so that channels appear on a lefthand sidebar, allowing the user to not be flooded with low-importance matters (see figure 1). Additionally, Slack has designed integration with a variety of tools, allowing for the sharing of spreadsheets, charts, images, and polling with relative ease of use. Students also had access to email through Blackboard, our institutional course-management tool, so Slack was not the only such communication tool at their disposal.

For the class, Slack served to pull collaborating students closer together through the means of assigned channels: I created closed Slack channels for each faction, where I remained a member, and open channels for each campus. Both games were structured with a guide-on-the-side role for the game-master: I was generally not at the front of the podium unless I needed to come up to clarify an issue or point of order. I moved to the back of the room, but was ready to field questions from students/characters. I also gave suggestions or pushed students to act in the interests of their character or faction where needed—this is where Slack was especially useful for me.

How We Used Slack: Making Connections Beyond the Game

My students used Slack in the class, and as an instructor I did as well. In many ways, it functioned as I expected: Slack was useful for announcements and practical communications, and students communicated not just with me, but with each other, both within and across campuses. However, students went beyond game use, and also engaged in some cross-campus community-building as well.

I had initially thought of Slack as primarily as for my students to use, but I myself became an active user as the games progressed. My Slack usage can be grouped into several general categories: practical game-running, other practical class-running activities, directing students to resources, and providing historical information and context to students. Practical game-running included sending of a lists of role distributions and faction groups to students, posting the order in which students were scheduled to speak, and as a quick check-in and multitasking tool while running other aspects of the game. This last aspect I found especially useful for cross-campus communication, but also for our home campus: students could ping me with questions, but not disrupt the flow of activities of the game itself. I also used

Slack channels to provide encouragement to factions for organizing and preparing to debate their opponents. I also used Slack for other, non-game practical class-running: in particular, the Polly polling app was useful for organizing a field trip to a federal courthouse and for polling which game they wanted to run as a second option, and promoting classes for future semesters. Slack was also useful for connecting students to resources, such as the original text of the examination of Anne Hutchinson, and providing helpful suggestions such as using using Ctrl-F to search within the text of a document. I also used Slack to clarify important concepts, such as the Puritan concepts of the covenants of works and grace.

All this use is best put into comparison with existing course management tools such as Blackboard. Slack's advantages for me were its easy creation of channels, simultaneous chat function, and seamless integration of tools. Other class management systems have felt functional but clunky. Slack was easy, and it was easy to discover new tools and implement them.

Students used Slack for strategic coordination and game-running, for in-class discussion during non-game class days, for practical communication over class matters with me, and also for sharing photos from our class field trip. When it came to using Slack for the games, students worked to distribute work for group/team assignments, and to coordinate game strategy. For the Anne Hutchinson game, this included determining who should be first pastor of Boston church, determining how to argue in defense of Anne Hutchinson, evaluating the claims made by new arrivals to the colony, and whether those new colonists should be admitted to Boston Church. These were important choices made to control voting power and influence between pro- and anti- Hutchinson factions in the game. While the Anne Hutchinson game ran over a longer period, the Hacking Harvard game ran over three game days, with varying assignments and factions for each day: one day as Harvard students debating ethical issues surrounding the hacking of student data, another as faculty of the law school, debating the legal issues, and finally as the board of Harvard corporation, debating the University's risk and responsibility for Facemash. Additionally, the Hacking Harvard game had certain roles that I chose to double-up to make for a more even workload, and to encourage cross-campus participation. These were generally roles of discussion facilitators, such as professor Elena Kagan's role leading the Harvard Law School faculty discussion. Students in some factions or groups were particularly active in

real-time response planning to speeches given by their opponents.

In addition to use of Slack for game purposes, they used it for practical matters, and for community-building. Students got in touch with me through Slack regarding absences and making up missed work. I also directed students to use Slack to chat with their fellow students when our non-game class discussions broke into small groups. Since some OULN campuses had a small number of students (only two on one campus) there were times when only one student was in attendance on a particular campus. This use of Slack was at my specific direction. Our class field trip to a federal courthouse was an opportunity to have all the class in one location, and we ended up taking a few class photos—one of the students from a regional campus ended up sharing them via Slack as well.

Survey Results: Bridging the Cross-Campus Divide, but with Limits

A majority of students reported finding Slack to be useful, but its effectiveness was limited; not all students used Slack in the classroom, limiting communication. Those who reported it as useful highlighted the quick in-class communication, their collaborating with members of their factions, and checking in with me about questions. Students from remote campuses all reported it being useful, but some were careful to point out its limitations. Among those who did not use Slack, some reported technical or familiarity issues. One student responded "I kept forgetting my password," while another stated that they "found it confusing, I don't really know why. " A number of students on the home and remote campuses expressed a preference for face-to-face interaction over Slack.

The information from the surveys indicates that Slack is helpful in bridging the divide with remote campuses, but would be a more effective tool if more students can be encouraged to use it. I ran my class with Blackboard, email, and Slack all being used simultaneously, so students could avoid Slack and still achieve basic class goals without it (Being new to Slack myself, I had wanted to keep my options open in case any problems emerged). One possibility for encouraging use is to have students submit a grading portfolio that includes a summary of their Slack channel uses and direct messages.

All students on the distance campuses reported finding Slack useful, but many of them noted that its benefit was limited, especially because not all students on other campuses used it. A majority of students on the home campus reported it as being useful, but when tempering their comments,

their criticism differed: it was less preferable to face-to-face communication. Those pointing out specific ways that Slack was useful emphasized its value "in team exercises," "for private conversations with factions," and that it "allowed for easy communication in and out of class with fellow classmates." Somewhat unexpectedly, one student mentioned its usefulness for communicating within the home campus for people in different parts of the room. Based on the student responses, the value of Slack is where I had intended it to help: in bringing distance students more fully into communication with the rest of the class. Getting students to use it more fully, especially on the home campus, would bring further benefit. In future classes, I plan to more fully incentivize Slack use.

OULN, Livestreamed Classes, and Cross-Campus Communication: Addressing the Challenges of Distance Learning

Students reported that in addition to Slack, posting on Blackboard and my mediation of class discussion helped to build cross-campus connections. Students from outside the home campus stated that they saw the OULN system as effective, and noted that this was in part the result of my method of facilitating discussions on non-game days: I would give each campus a "turn" to respond to discussion questions, or to build on what students on other campuses had said in the course of discussion. Most students on the home campus also reported similar feelings about the use of OULN, noting that "OULN seems to be pretty effective. No different than if they were on campus." However, one student noted continued problems connecting with students from other campuses, stating that "face to face real conversations and planning didn't happen which made less teamwork." The same student survey noting this issue, however, also noted the utility of Slack for private conversations with factions and for "good connection."

The game also posed some issues with liminality, role-playing, and classroom management. The games were set up with students on opposing sides, but with each role having different interests that could also be points of conflict. The use of assigned roles in part distances the issues from students' own personal beliefs, but there was a tense, heated moment, where students from different factions blurred their roles and student selves. This happened as one speaker finished on one campus, and another approached the podium on a different campus: the two campuses and two podiums made it less clear when on person's turn to speak had ended, contributing to the issue. One student noted that the use of Blackboard's

discussion boards "gave us a chance to debate or react in a healthy way" in contrast to that tense moment.

Livestreamed learning also can pose other challenges to teaching. My own experience in OULN teaching has made me realize a number of its advantages and disadvantages. Its main advantages are connecting students across campuses, and the ability to offer a greater variety of classes, allowing the regional campuses of my university to offer a broader variety of majors. The limits include some that I expected: students on other campuses can be less engaged with the class, appear bored or disinterested when they are not directly interacting with the home campus, and the lack of an instructor's embodied, geographical presence means that the benefits of, say, checking in a small group discussion, or students' ability to pop in during office hours are missing: while I make myself available via office phone and email, I do not recall ever having received a phone call from an off-campus student during my office hours. What I did not expect was how much interaction happens in the minutes immediately before and after class: distance students don't have those few minutes to walk up to me and ask a question about what we have learned, or share an interesting story about a related matter. This was especially the case at the end of a class session: OULN automatically cuts off the video feed at the end of class. Additionally, the setup doesn't always set up bidirectional audio-video feed in the minutes before the start of class, but sometimes provides a unidirectional feed from the distance campuses to the home campus. I did inform students of this fact and let them know that I could hear and see them even if they couldn't see me. However, they often forgot this was the case and I sometimes heard students discuss class matters in an informal, unguarded way. This helped me assess the class mood and adjust my teaching style if need be.

Conclusion

Slack works well, but its advantages are best understood within the broader context of technology/medium adoption and use in the classroom, with the goal of building and sustaining student engagement and interpersonal cross-campus connections. Even with less than universal adoption and use within the class, Slack appears to be effective in building connections across campuses. Furthermore, its benefits came to the fore in course of running a *Reacting to the Past* game: students were active, engaged, and worked collectively to further their goals.

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Figure 1: Sample screencap of Slack from class Slack page.

Appendix: Original Survey

HIST 3070 Class Survey

I attended the majority of my classes at the following campus (circle one):

Campus A Campus X Campus Y Campus Z

What are some ways that your understanding of the legal system changed as a result of taking this course?

What did this course teach you about change over time in the legal system? In American society?

hat were your key takeaways from the *Reacting to the Past* trial re-enactments in this class (such as the Trial of Anne Hutchinson)?

This class added the use of Slack for purposes of in-class communication, especially across campuses. Did you find Slack helpful in connecting with your fellow students? What do you think made it effective? Where did it fall short of that goal?

Were there other ways that you felt that communication and engagement across campuses was effective, including the traditional discussions? Please explain below.

Is there any other feedback that you would like to give about your experience? Please add below. SEP

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