

**Learning Through Character Play—Winter 2023**  
**Education 462/Middle Eastern & North African Studies**  
**(MENAS) 462**

**Tuesdays & Thursdays 1-2:30, West Quad G023**

*Instructor:*

**Jeff Stanzler**

**E-mail: [stanz@umich.edu](mailto:stanz@umich.edu) Phone: 763-5950**

**Office: 4007 School of Education**

***Office Hours by appointment***

**\*\*All readings are on Canvas (in the “Course Readings” folder under FILES) unless a link is provided below\*\***

**\*\*I will do my best to follow the schedule in the syllabus, but because the simulation is unpredictable and we need to respond to it, I ask your understanding in advance about “on the fly” changes I’ll sometimes need to make.\*\***

*Overview*

This seminar revolves around Place out of Time (POOT), a web-based character-playing simulation involving college, high school, and middle school students. 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. The simulation revolves around a case - 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 POOT.

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.

Second, 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 series of two problems, 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 Class Meetings in Detail**

**(Readings and class meeting agendas are subject to change)**

### ***January 5<sup>th</sup>***

- Today we'll look at the "big picture," exploring some initial background for our simulation as well as talking about your mentoring work.
- By tomorrow night, you'll receive an e-mail from me telling you which character you will portray in the simulation, allowing you to begin work on **creating your Profile (see below for more details), which is due on Canvas by Sunday, January 15<sup>th</sup>**

### ***January 10<sup>th</sup>***

- We'll look more closely at the Profile and talk about ways to approach the work. We'll also discuss what we mean by a "playful spirit of learning."

### ***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 one part biography, one 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 I encourage you to think about such issues, I 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.*

Do your best to be your character, and to allow yourself some creative 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**. Your goal is to have your profile sound like your character is speaking, not being spoken about.
- The Profile should tell a **good story** that draws in the reader.
- There should be 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.

## ***January 12<sup>th</sup>***

- Starting today, I’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 **about 5 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 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 an 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, or about accomplishments of which you are proud (or maybe not so proud). They might also ask you about things about you that are of particular interest to *their* character. I 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 find out the answer to any questions you were asked that you didn’t know how to answer in the

moment. **I want you to get some practice speaking as your character, and using your intuition and your knowledge about your character to respond to unexpected questions.**

*Assignment Due (January 15):*  
**Draft Profile posted on Canvas**

### ***January 17<sup>th</sup>***

- We'll continue with character introductions.

### ***January 19<sup>th</sup>***

- More character introductions today **and** we'll take time for each of you to get some peer feedback on your profile (more details about this in class).
- In preparation for our next class, and for the homework you'll do for the 24<sup>th</sup>, I'll show you last year's site...we'll talk more about this task in class and I'll pass out login information.

### ***January 24<sup>th</sup>***

- Your homework for today is to spend some time on your own looking at last year's simulation 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. Over and beyond the observations and questions that arise for you, please 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.

### ***January 26<sup>th</sup>***

- We'll do final workshopping of one another's profiles, and we'll show you how to post your profiles (**your revised and completed profile must be posted on the POOT simulation website by Sunday, January 29<sup>th</sup>—I'll show you how**).
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*Assignment Due (January 29):*  
**Profile posted on POOT website**

## **January 31<sup>st</sup>**

- *So what is Place out of Time, anyway?* We'll begin our look at the nature of the POOT simulation, and our explorations of the playful spirit of learning by reading two articles. *Please come to class with questions and observations about the articles—what jumps out at you about the arguments being made?*

*For today's class, please read:*

- **“It Matters Because it’s a Game”** This is an attempt by our team members to describe the nature of our project, and what we try to support in the context of the POOT project. We're particularly interested in hearing your reactions to and questions about the vision of what makes a game, or an educational endeavor of any kind, “serious,” and about the question of what makes a learning activity matter.
- **“Schools Need to Pay More Attention to Intelligence in the Wild”** David Perkins argues that schools should focus less on “laboratory intelligence” and more on creating opportunities for students to identify and explore meaningful problems, and to “puzzle out what (they) want or need to do.”

## **February 2<sup>nd</sup>**

- The simulation will begin on February 13th, 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 “POOT 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.
- As we begin to explore the issues of our case, and think about matters of reputation and justice, we'll talk about George Santos, who was recently elected to Congress from New York. It turned out that Santos misrepresented himself, exaggerating about or fabricating aspects of his identity and his work experience. Please read these two articles and come to class prepared to talk about what Santos did and what the meaning is of his actions and of the various reactions to those actions. I want to talk about whether we can learn anything about ourselves and our society from examining this story.

*For today's class, please read:*

**“Rep.-elect George Santos admits to lying about bio, but says he still intends to serve in Congress”** (by Kyle Blaine, CNN Politics, 12-27-22).

**“George Santos Blames ‘Bourgeois’ Media for Pointing Out His Many, Many Campaign Lies”** (by Nikki McCann Ramirez, Rolling Stone, December 27, 2022).

*Assignment Due (February 3):*

**Reflection on Profile Writing Process (details below)**

## Reflection on Profile Writing Process

On **February 3rd**, I would like you to submit a reflection that includes 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, please:

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?*

## February 7<sup>th</sup>

- Today we'll have a conversation about what it means to study history and to be a historian.
- **Please read and be prepared to discuss Thomas Holt's "Thinking Historically" article.**
- As you read the Holt 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.

*For today's class, please read:*

- **"Thinking Historically"** (by Thomas Holt, College Entrance Examination Board, 1990, pp. 1-16).

## February 9<sup>th</sup>

- Please write **five Nice to Meet You messages** (choose the recipients from the list you'll receive in class) and **copy the text of your messages (along with your character's name and the character you're messaging) into our shared google doc:**

<https://umich.instructure.com/courses/582757/pages/post-five-nice-to-meet-you-messages-here> (or via link on front page of our canvas site)

- 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.
- We'll also discuss the initial discussion prompts.

*Assignment Due (by class time today):*

**Post Five "Nice to Meet You" messages in shared google doc on CANVAS)**

## ***February 14<sup>th</sup>***

- 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 she 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 we'll be doing in POOT?* We'll take time to talk about your impressions in class.
- As we get ready for the start of the simulation, you'll each get 2 sample replies to the initial discussion post and we'll ask that you write responses to them—in character—and post them in our shared google doc (*linked on front page of our canvas site*) in time for our next class meeting on the 16<sup>th</sup>.

*For today's class, please [listen to OR read](#):*

- [Interview with Adele Diamond from "On Being" radio program: "Learning, Doing, Being – A New Science of Education."](#)

## ***February 16<sup>th</sup>***

- We'll share and discuss the sample responses you wrote for today's class.

## ***February 21<sup>st</sup>***

- Perhaps the most powerful tools available to you as a mentor are **questions**. Please read the **"Useful Questions for Dialogue Facilitation"** article and come to class ready to talk about what you notice about the different types of questions discussed in the article, why and where they might be used, and about the kinds of questions that **you** find most helpful in engaging you in deeper thinking.

*For today's class, please read:*

["Useful Questions for Dialogue Facilitation"](#) (published by LSA Inclusive Teaching)

## ***February 23<sup>rd</sup>***

- 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?

- The first discussion posts have been posted in the forum, and we want to look more carefully at the mentoring work, and to think together about its purposes and possibilities. We'll look carefully at the **"mentoring moments"** piece and we'll talk through a couple of mentoring examples together.

*For today's class, please read:*

- **"Mentoring Moments"** Handout

### **March 7<sup>th</sup>**

- What's happened in the simulation while you were on break? We'll take time to explore, and to post and discuss some responses.

### **March 9<sup>th</sup>**

- We'll start talking today about the issues embedded in our second case. To that end, please read the **"About the Roman Ostriakov case"** reading. Please come to class prepared to discuss this scenario and its intellectual and educational dimensions, and please also come with at least two "wonderings" inspired by the reading—by this, we mean two things that you were curious to know more about, or that struck you as interesting, controversial, or strange.

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*For today's class, please read:*

- **"About the Roman Ostriakov case"** Handout

### **March 14<sup>th</sup>: No Class Meeting**

### **March 16<sup>th</sup>**

- We'll continue our conversations about the case and the issues embedded in it by looking at some specific "takes" on the case by having you read the three media accounts below. Please come to class with your questions and observations, and be ready to name specific arguments made by each author:

- *For today's class, please read:*

- **"Hunger shouldn't be a crime: This is what a humane response to food insecurity looks like" by Mary Elizabeth Williams (salon.com, 5-4-16):**

[https://www.salon.com/2016/05/04/hunger\\_shouldnt\\_be\\_a\\_crime\\_this\\_is\\_what\\_a\\_humane\\_response\\_to\\_food\\_insecurity\\_looks\\_like/](https://www.salon.com/2016/05/04/hunger_shouldnt_be_a_crime_this_is_what_a_humane_response_to_food_insecurity_looks_like/)



- “Ethic Quiz: The Jean Valjean Rule” by Jack Williams (Ethics Alarms Blog, 5-8-16): <https://ethicsalarms.com/2016/05/08/ethic-quiz-the-jean-vanjean-rule/>
- “Can the Homeless and Hungry Steal Food? Maybe, an Italian Court Says” by Gaia Pianigiani and Sewell Chan (New York Times, 5-3-16): [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/world/europe/food-theft-in-italy-may-not-be-a-crime-court-rules.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/world/europe/food-theft-in-italy-may-not-be-a-crime-court-rules.html?_r=1)
- We’ll also talk about the mentor journal assignment (details below)

## Mentor Journal

I’d like you to keep a journal of some of your intellectual 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. I’m looking for a robust and well-considered engagement with the questions I’ll pose for your consideration. In addition, because our journals will be public, I’ll expect you to respond to the reflections of your colleagues and/or to their responses to you.

***Your first Journal is due on March 19<sup>th</sup>. I’ll provide more specific detail about the task in class on the 16<sup>th</sup>.***

*Assignment Due (on Canvas by Sunday, March 19):*  
**Journal #1**

### March 21<sup>st</sup>

**Special Guest:** Cultural anthropologist and POOT Project Director, Michael Fahy

- We’ll talk about employing a playful spirit of learning to help students engage with ideas, to develop their character’s voice, and to feel more seen...and we’ll do some playing ourselves!
- Today we’ll talk about improvisational acting. Today, we’ll discuss the connections you see between ideas discussed by the noted scholar, **Tina Fey** ;-), and elements of theatricality within POOT. What connections do you see, and does what Fey talk about seem relevant to your mentoring work? We’ll talk today 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**.”

*For today’s class, please read:*

- *Excerpt from “**Bossypants**” by Tina Fey (Little, Brown, 2013, pp. 84-85)*

### March 23<sup>rd</sup>

- Today we’ll talk about the posts you wrote this past week that were inspired by one of Tina Fey’s four rules of improvisation.

*Assignment Due (on Canvas by Sunday, March 26):*  
**Journal #2**

### **March 28<sup>th</sup>**

- Our readings for today are about observation and about looking carefully at student work. I hope to add complication to some central questions of our work, including: *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.

*For today's class, please read:*

- **"Learning from Looking"** (by Steve Seidel, taken from "With Portfolio in Hand," edited by Nona Lyons, Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 69-89).
- **"Meditation: On Description"** (by Patricia Carini, from "Starting Strong," Teachers College Press, 2001, pp. 163-164).

### **March 30<sup>th</sup>**

- For today we'll read a short piece written by the biographer of Robert E. Lee, and we'll discuss questions about the nature of biography, whose stories should (and shouldn't?) be told, and what the value is of researching and telling about problematic lives.

*For today's class, please read:*

**"How do I tell the Story of Robert E. Lee"** (by Gary Guelzo, New York Times, September 25, 2021).

*Assignment Due (on Canvas by Sunday, April 2):*  
**Journal #3**

*Assignment Due (on Canvas by Tuesday, April 4):*  
**Post at least 2 responses to journals of classmates**

### **April 4<sup>th</sup>**

- We'll continue our conversation about close observation of work, this time looking at the question through the eyes of art historian **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. In addition to your observations, we'll discuss 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.

*For today's class, please read:*

- “**Power of Patience**” (by Jennifer Roberts, Harvard Magazine, Nov/Dec. 2013, pp. 40-43).

*Assignment Due (on Canvas by Sunday, April 9):*

### **Journal #4**

*Assignment Due (on Canvas by Friday, April 14):*

### **Post 4 compiled responses to journals of classmates**

**\*\*Readings and Assignments for our remaining April meetings 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. Please try to avoid these 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.** Being “anachronistic” in your character portrayal means that you don’t monitor yourself carefully to speak as your character and not as yourself. Try always to speak as your character and to ask yourself, what would my character think?

### 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