

Learning Through Character Play—Winter 2020 Tuesdays & Thursdays 1-2:30

Course meets via Bluejeans video conference:

<https://umich.bluejeans.com/7346632895/>

As a fallback, if your video doesn't work, here's how you can access the conference by phone:

1.888.240.2560

Meeting ID: 7346632895

Finally, in case you have trouble of any kind, my cell is 734-330-0263.

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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 trial - different each time the simulation is run -- based on events and people from history. While the details are ever-changing, timeless and universal themes, such as "identity," "freedom," and "security" are the backdrop for 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. 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 Trial Scenario

*In 2015, a group of 21 plaintiffs, ages 8 to 19, filed a lawsuit against the government of the United States. In this landmark federal case, known as *Juliana v. The United States*, the plaintiffs argue that “through the government’s affirmative actions that cause climate change, it has violated the youngest generation’s constitutional rights to life, liberty, property, and publicly-held resources by federal government actions that knowingly destroy, endanger, and impair (nature’s) climate system.” In short, the complaint argues that young people are being denied their fundamental rights—both at present and in the future--due to the actions of the federal government. Initially, the American government and the fossil fuel industry attempted to have the case dismissed, but they failed.*

The plaintiffs ask that the court stop the government from continued violation of their rights, and require that the government develop a plan to dramatically reduce carbon dioxide emissions. They also claim that the lack of governmental action on climate change discriminates against young people, since young people would be most impacted by climate change but have no voting rights to influence governmental action. Attorneys for the American Government argue that “there is no fundamental constitutional right to a ‘stable climate system,’” and further state that the plaintiffs’ proposed solution is unworkable and unconstitutional, “essentially placing a single district court in Oregon — acting at the behest of a few plaintiffs with one particular perspective on the complex issues involved — in charge of directing American energy and environmental policy.”

*Determining whether the *Juliana v. United States* can go forward will take months, and perhaps even years, and this is even before the case itself might actually be heard.*

As a consequence, the plaintiffs and the defendants have conferred secretly, and reached a most unusual agreement. Both sides want an opportunity to make their case before a public audience of stature, and to the surprise of most observers, they asked the Court of All Time to convene, to hear their case, and to rule on it. Each side believes that their argument is the stronger one, and that proving this before this prestigious gathering will doubtlessly influence the

American courts. It has just been announced by Chief Magistrate Amina Muhammad that the Court of All Time has agreed to fulfill this unusual request.

The upcoming trial before the Court of All Time will provide a place where the great minds of the past and present can debate the question of whether a court can hold a government responsible for something that—it could be argued—hasn't happened yet. In announcing their willingness to hear this case, court officials have announced that noted thinkers from the worlds of arts, science, literature and politics are already being summoned back to our day and our world to consider the meaning of ideas like justice and responsibility in a case that promises to weave together a rich tapestry of environmental, educational, and moral issues.

Our Class Meetings in Detail

(Reading list subject to change)

January 9th

Today we'll look at the "big picture(s)," exploring some initial background for our trial as well as talking about your mentoring work, and the issues related to identity and justice that will be foregrounded in our work this term. By tomorrow night, you'll receive an e-mail from us 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 19th.**

January 14th

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

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 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.

There should be 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.

January 16th

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 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 about you 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 find out the answer to any questions you were asked that you didn't know how to answer in the moment.

Your Draft Profile is due on Canvas this Sunday, January 19th.

January 21st

We'll continue with character introductions.

January 23rd

More character introductions today **and** we'll ask all of you to bring to class five paper copies of your profile so that you can get some feedback.

January 28th

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.*

January 30th

Once again, we ask that you **bring five paper copies of your REVISED profile to class.** We'll do final workshopping of one another's profiles, and today or Wednesday we'll show you how to post your profiles (**your revised and completed profile must be posted on the POOT simulation website by Monday, February 3rd**).

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

February 4th

We'll start talking in detail today about the issues embedded in our trial by looking at a couple of articles that will give you an overview of the case and where it is right now, as well a sense of what's at stake:

The Right to a Stable Climate Is the Constitutional Question of the Twenty-first Century (*good summary of what's being argued for and where the case is right now*)

By Carrollyn Korrman, New Yorker, June 15, 2019.

Those Meddling Kids! (*does a nice job of explaining what the plaintiffs are asking for, how the demands could be met if the case is successful, and making predictions about how the process might unfold*)

By Zoe Saylor, grist.org, July 22, 2019.

<https://grist.org/fix/how-21-kids-could-force-a-major-turnaround-on-climate/>

February 6th

For today, please read the “**About the Case: Scenario & Juliana v US arguments**” piece, which is drawn from our Teacher’s Guide. Come to class prepared to discuss the trial scenario and its intellectual and educational dimensions, as well as one argument from each side that you found to be interesting, surprising or likely to spark controversy.

February 11th

We’ll also continue our conversations about the case and the issues embedded in it by looking at some specific “takes” on the case. Please come with questions and observations, and let’s talk about how we might use some of these arguments to get the kids thinking (and thinking differently!). We’ll read the following articles (all on Canvas):

The World’s Biggest Lawsuit: Juliana v United States (summary of the history of the Juliana case and the nature of arguments the team is making—mostly very sympathetic to plaintiffs)

By Lambert Strether, nakedcapitalism.com, July 25, 2019

<https://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2019/07/the-worlds-biggest-lawsuit-juliana-v-united-state.html>

Children's Crusade For Judicially Managed Climate Regulation Stalls In Federal Court (uses judge’s ruling in a case similar to ‘Juliana’ to critique the basic arguments of ‘Team Juliana’ and the effort to legislate through the courts)

By Cory L. Andrews, forbes.com, February 25, 2019.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/wlf/2019/02/25/childrens-crusade-for-judicially-managed-climate-regulation-stalls-in-federal-court/#7880of66777d>

February 13th

We’ll look today at a new angle on the issues raised by our case. Our article looks at a couple of interesting examples of court decisions that gave rights to nature itself, most notably in Ecuador.

When a river is a person: from Ecuador to New Zealand, nature gets its day in court

By Mihnea Tanasescu, theconversation.com, June 19, 2017.

<https://theconversation.com/when-a-river-is-a-person-from-ecuador-to-new-zealand-nature-gets-its-day-in-court-79278>

We'll also start our mentoring journal assignment this weekend, and we'll review the details in class.

POOT 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 POOT mentor, playing a character, interacting with middle school students, and thinking through the course readings. We'll be looking for a robust engagement with the kinds of questions articulated in this syllabus, and others that you'll frame along the way. 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 your interactions with your colleagues and their journals have impacted your work and your thinking about that work, and to cite examples of interactions that challenged you, inspired you, or made you think differently.

Journaling will start after class on February 13th, and we'll provide more detail about the task in class.

February 18th

Our reading for today discusses some international cases that are similar to the Juliana case Our reading is:

Kids suing governments about climate: It's a global trend

By Laura Parker, nationalgeographic.com, June 26, 2019

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/06/kids-suing-governments-about-climate-growing-trend/>

February 20th

This week 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 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.*

February 25th

Today we're going to talk more about a playful spirit of learning. We'd like for you to have a look at a brief article that looks at improvisational acting. Today, we'll discuss the connections you see between the ideas discussed by the noted scholar, **Tina Fey** ;-), and elements of theatricality within POOT. What connections do you see, and does what Fey talks 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.**"

February 27th

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

We'll also be opening our **exhibit halls**, where we'll examine and discuss primary source documents of a variety of types. We'll spend time in class today talking about that project, and dividing up responsibilities.

SPECIAL PROJECT

At some point this term, we'll ask each of you to carry out a special project. It may be making an audio recording to be posted on the simulation website, or doing a special piece of research, or portraying a witness giving testimony. We'll let you know as things move along, and we'll be looking to all of you for suggestions for things that could enhance the simulation or build the drama, so please keep your eyes and mind open as things unfold.

March 17th/March 19th

This week we'll begin exploring some of the core questions connected with a "playful spirit of learning" and ask ourselves how we can leverage this playful spirit to help our students engage more deeply with big ideas. On Monday, we'll discuss **an interview with cognitive scientist Adele Diamond.**

In this easy-to-listen-to interview (link to the audio and to a written transcript is posted on Canvas), Dr. Diamond talks about supporting creativity in children. As you listen, think about the points that Diamond is making...what does she have to say about how we might better be able to nurture creativity in young people? Pay particular attention to her observations about the importance of creative play. What do you think about her arguments? What strikes you as particularly interesting about what she has to say, especially regarding how kids develop? Are any of the points that she makes relevant to the work that you're doing in POOT? We'll take time to talk about your impressions in class.

March 24th/March 31st

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

April 7th/ April 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?”** for Monday. We'll talk in class about your reactions to the Andrews and Burke 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*.

April 14th/ April 16th

We'll continue our conversation about close observation of work, this time looking at the question through the eyes of an art historian named **Jennifer Roberts**. Please read her **“Power of Patience”** article for Monday 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, we'll explore whether there are meaningful parallels between paintings and student postings, and we'll consider the idea of “time batteries” and how it applies to the work of your students.

*****Readings and Assignments for the rest of our 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 described them below. We are aware that some of this is still 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? Have some fun with it, and 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, 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 at our trial. 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’re all thoughtful people and have your own ideas about the world, how we should treat one another, etc. Being “anachronistic” in your character portrayal means that you don’t monitor yourself carefully to speak as your character and not as yourself, and that you lean too heavily on understandings/ways of thinking from our day in portraying historical characters. 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