

Humanities Meta-disciplinary Content for FYE Course: Reacting to the Past: America's Founding – The Constitutional Convention of 1787

In this meta-disciplinary unit, students will participate in a 5 week role-playing simulation of the Constitutional Convention based upon the curriculum in the Reacting to the Past series developed by Barnard College. In this game, each student will come to break-out sessions as an assigned delegate to the Constitutional Convention. Each student uses shared readings in the Game Book (distributed via PDF, available for free) along with their individual role profile outlining their character's biography, beliefs, and interests, as well as convention assignments, which include presenting speeches and participating in debate and discussion. Over the course of the unit, delegates will grapple with the structure of government, modes of election, nature of republicanism and representation, slavery, commerce, and the admission of new states to the union, culminating in the election of a committee to draft the constitution, which inevitably will differ from the one written in Philadelphia in 1787.

Student learning outcomes:

- Engage with big (philosophical) questions regarding citizenship and democracy
- Hone skills in oral and written communication, teamwork, compromise, and critical thinking
- Foster ethical thinking and empathy and taking on a role that differs from one's own worldview
- Demonstrate civic knowledge and engagement

Week 1: Introduction to the Game and its Context

Read Game Book, (page 1-53), plus supplementary readings found in appendix:

- Aristotle, *Politics* (selections)
- Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (selections)
- Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (selections)
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (selection)

Electronically fill out pre-game questionnaire

Session 1: Large Class

- Introduction to the Game
- Review of the time period and issues
- Take Home Quiz assigned

Session 2: Large Class

- Interdisciplinary presentation/discussion of supplemental readings
- Perspectives on the dawn of modern democracy from history, literature, and philosophy

Session 3: Large Class

- Role Assignments distributed

- Q&A with Constitutional Convention alums
- Review of Take Home Quiz and distribution of tie-breaker cards
- Final Preparations

Week 2-6: The Constitutional Convention (break out sessions)

During the subsequent weeks, each professor will serve as game master for a sub-section (1/4) of the class. Four conventions will simultaneously occur. Each group will follow a detailed agenda for the convention with topics assigned to delegates to debate and discuss, which includes:

1. Structure of the federal government, including legislative and executive bodies, their modes of election, and terms of office, and designated powers.
2. Merits of small and large republics
3. The nature of representation in a republic
4. Proportional versus equal representation and the role of states within a confederacy
5. Slavery, as an institution, moral issue, and economic powerhouse
6. The government's role in regulating commerce
7. The expansion of the nation

Each student will have at least one speech to present and various topics which she or he must be prepared to debate and discuss informally. The individual role profile will direct students to primary and secondary sources to consult in preparation of speeches and debate talking points.

During the final week, the delegates will elect a committee to draft the constitution, and then each delegate will "score" it based on their character's interests, and make a decision whether they can vote to ratify it.

Final session (Large Class):

With four drafted constitutions, this is a fitting time to reflect and de-brief, comparing notes from the four conventions. In this final session, instructors and students will also discuss how the various simulated conventions and their resulting constitutions differed from the one in 1787. What were the different outcomes? What were the distinct solutions to the challenges of electing the president, slavery, and the other particular sticking points delegates encountered? How has the actual constitution of 1787 continued to impact the course of American history and our lives today?