Reacting to the Past Annual Conference Report
June 6-9, 2013
By Jina E. Kim

With the generous funding support from the Sherrerd Center for Teaching and Learning, I was able to attend Reacting to the Past’s 13th Annual Faculty Institute (June 6-9, 2013) at Barnard College, NYC. Reacting to the Past is a pedagogical method which consists of role playing games set in the past. It was pioneered by Professor Mark Carnes of Barnard in 1990 and since then has undergone various new developments including a formation of a Consortium, which Smith College is a member of, working together to govern Reacting to the Past.

The purpose of Reacting to the Past is to improve students’ academic skills of writing and oral presentations while engaging in a fun role playing game that will simultaneously help students to improve their ideas on the subject and to think about new ways to understand the subject. The games range from ancient historical topics such as The Threshold of Democracy, Athens 403 BC to contemporary topics such as The Struggle for Civil Rights, 1963-66.

The annual faculty accepted several hundred faculty members from all over the world who are either already familiar with and use RTTP as well as those who are new to the game to play the games ourselves as a way of testing RTTP. I chose to play Confucianism and Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor, 1587 and Japan, the West, and the Road to World War II, 1940-41. Due to the short duration of the Annual Institute, these games had to be played in abbreviated sessions. Despite that, I was able to experience the intense, fun of these games. I also became convinced how RTTP could help develop critical thinking, analytical writing, and logical speaking skills along with the development social and emotional intelligence. I believe it would also aid in developing sustained discourse amongst the students while motivating students to gain depth of knowledge on the topic at hand. I say this because the games are designed so that students must talk with each other in meaningful ways to negotiate, to find out what others are thinking or unearth others’ beliefs, etc in order to solve a common problem from different positions. The problem to solve is really open ended although in most cases we already know the outcome of history.

One of the primary reasons for my wanting to attend and participate in the Annual Institute was so that I could ultimately implement RTTP on Korea, Korea at the Crossroads of Civilization: Confucianism, Westernization, and the Kabo Reforms of 1895, for my Modern Korean History (EAS 218) course. This game is still under development but the materials for the game is available to faculty members.

In addition to the multiple game playing sessions, I attended several other seminar sessions on administering and teaching with RTTP which were incredibly helpful as a first time attendee. If given another opportunity to attend another Annual Institute or a Regional conference, I would definitely do so because there is still much more to learn about this pedagogy and how it could be used not only in subject specific courses but how could be adapted to other courses.