

FROM THE GROUND UP: CONSTRUCTING A SOCIETY

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The word simulation has been a much used but much abused term. To some it suggests a contrivance attempted by harried instructors as a last resort to revive a gasping and dying class. On the other extreme, some apparently view simulations as a panacea for learning--gain with little, if any, pain. Some students tend to equate simulation activities with mere fun and games which is not necessarily negative but tends to promote the idea that "fun" and "learning" are mutually exclusive.¹ A simulation activity should join these two facets in the student mind rather than compartmentalize them. A useful way to view a simulation was suggested by Kenneth Jones: "Instead of thinking of a simulation as being like a game or an informal drama, it is more useful to think of it as being like a case study but with the participants on the inside, not on the outside."²

Many instructors tend to shun simulations because of a fear that student participation will be minimal. Others complain that time constraints dictate the necessity of the traditional lecture method so that the class can "get through" the required course material. The goal of good instruction, of course, is not simply to "get through" material but rather to stimulate informed thought about a particular historical process. The best approach undoubtedly encompasses a variety of methods.³ Exclusive use of one particular method, whether it is the traditional lecture or whether it is more innovative, is certainly myopic.

The simulation I have developed has been tested at both the secondary level (tenth grade) and at the college level (U.S. history survey courses) and seems to overcome the dual plagues of minimal student participation and limited time. In addition, this simulation can be used in a variety of contexts, principally involving historical situations where a coup d'etat has occurred or where those in power are contemplating a reformed governmental structure. It has the added benefit of being adaptable to a wide variety of age levels. The motivational principles also can be employed with a multitude of classroom techniques.

The Setup

This simulation can be used effectively within a single sixty or seventy-five minute period or can be extended to cover two periods.⁴ I normally use the simulation for the American post-Revolutionary era although the idea is applicable to a host of historical situations.⁵ Students are placed in a circular seating arrangement and each is given a sheet with the following questions:

1. What will be the goals of our society?
2. Who will decide on these goals?
3. Do we choose a leader? How?
4. Who will have power in the society?
5. How will power be legitimized?
6. Do we make rules? Written rules? How can they be changed?
7. Who will decide on these rules? Who will enforce these rules? Who will interpret them?
8. What will the rules regulate--private behavior, public behavior--what?

9. How will dissenters and rulebreakers be dealt with?
10. What resources do we have?
11. Who will allocate these resources?
12. Will everyone have the same access to these resources?
13. How will outsiders be handled? Will they enjoy the same privileges as original members?

While the students are pondering the questions (and becoming totally perplexed), each receives five poker chips. In addition, I begin placing small paper bags at random throughout the classroom. The bags contain the "resources" of the society, but the students are told nothing concerning either the contents or the nature of the bags. Although the contents may vary, one bag usually contains pennies, one has candy cigarettes, one has ten poker chips, one has candy fireballs, and another has several small candy bars. The items chosen have no particular significance other than what the students eventually will give them.

The Situation

The instructor then addresses the students as follows:

"We are a society bound by these four walls and we must live together during this period. The chips you have received are 'good.' You want to accumulate as many chips as possible during the course of this period. Since everyone has received five chips, this is the norm. At the end of the simulation you will turn in a piece of paper showing the total number of chips you possess. A good performance (i.e. more than five chips) will result in a good grade for the period while a poor showing (i.e. less than five chips) will result in a poor grade. What you are to do is implement (within our society) answers to the questions you have been given. The questions will serve as a guide and do not necessarily need to be considered in the same order as presented. You may construct any type of society you desire and are not bound by any restrictions. Now get started."

You should expect a very pronounced silence and a bevy of puzzled and twisted stares. Prod the class by repeating: "Formulate answers to the questions on your sheet." Wait for a few more seconds. Usually nothing happens. Begin walking around the circle and remove a chip from each student. Not surprisingly, they act very quickly as the mystery of the chips becomes apparent. As students make positive contributions simply reinforce their behavior by presenting them with a chip. Within a few minutes there will be a buzz of activity and the studied silence turns into a sometimes chaotic situation as students realize that they have a vested interest in the type of society they construct. It is necessary to be liberal with chip-giving at first in order to stimulate activity, but within a few minutes the chips should be given only for significant contributions. The degree of merit needed to obtain a chip is, of course, a subjective assessment by the instructor. Chips may be removed at any time for disruptive behavior or inactivity. The latter appraisal must be used only with great tactfulness to avoid total suppression of a normally passive student. In some situations, a student's silence could merit a chip if the classroom has become particularly chaotic. In this case, overly vocal students receive the message very quickly and usually plead for order. The chips have been defined simply as "good" and there is no other intended meaning other than what students may give to them in the course of the simulation.

The Dynamics of the Situation

The students may fashion any kind of society they desire, guided only by the questions before them. Some very interesting situations usually develop. At first, most entertain and advocate altruistic motives--that the society should benefit everyone equally and that each should hold an equal voice in determining the laws and operations of the society. However, the greed factor begins to operate when the question of available resources is addressed. Mentioned as resources are the desks, their books, themselves, and, lastly, the mysterious brown bags. It continues to amaze me how long the bags remain unopened even by those students who are within an arm's length of them. Eventually those closest to the bags take the initiative, open them and report the contents to the group at large. The big question then becomes: Who owns the contents? Does each societal member share equally in ownership or does the individual who demonstrated the initiative to reach for the bag control its contents? Very quickly those who actually possess the bags begin to lose their earlier altruism, and most refuse to give up their bags without promises of some kind of remuneration or special privileges from the corporate body. The classic struggle between communal and private ownership begins to unfold. Students quickly realize the difficulty of arriving at social and political definitions which form the parameters of a society. An appreciation of these difficulties is the central purpose of the simulation.

Assessment and Feedback

The instructor should allot approximately ten to fifteen minutes at the end of the period for assessment. In oral feedback prompted by questions from the instructor, students attempt to determine the purpose of the activity. They should describe their feeling as participants, assess what preconceived notions led them in the direction taken and how certain assumptions and biases regarding "proper" governmental and societal organization influenced efforts to shape their society. That is, do we begin with Locke's tabula rasa or do conscious and perhaps unconscious notions from the past constrict and guide present attempts to construct a society? Is a radical break with the past possible or even desirable--is wading in familiar waters perhaps safer and in the end more constructive than flailing about in uncharted seas? These types of questions will stimulate considerable discussion among the participants.

At this point the simulation provides a nice backdrop for a written assignment. If this exercise is used as an introduction to post-Revolutionary political evolution, have students apply the thirteen questions used in the simulation to the development of the Articles of Confederation and then, as a follow-up exercise, to the Constitution. These written exercises will serve as a starting point for discussion of political development in this "critical era" and can be evaluated separately from performances in the simulation. The students' own experiences in evolving a society will add a novel element to this historical period that has many times been treated in a perfunctory manner in secondary education.

This exercise provides an opportunity for instructors to experiment with a simulation technique without investing a large block of time. Feedback from my experience with the activity has been most favorable. One of the intangible benefits that results is a closer, more intimate rapport among students and between students and the instructor. An opportunity that allows students to become something other than passive recipients of information has real value. "Normal" classes that follow the simulation seem more alive and invigorated. Stimulating normalcy (to use Harding's ill-conceived word) is an admirable goal in itself.

NOTES

¹Nine years ago as a student teacher fresh out of college education courses which advocated wholesale use of simulations and gaming, a student confronted me quite confidentially one day in a whisper: "I know you student teachers have to play a lot of games with us to get a good grade. But that's all right, we like to play."

²Kenneth Jones, Simulations: A Handbook for Teachers (London and New York: Nichols Publishing Company, 1980), 10. Historical simulations published recently have been extremely varied. See Richard Balaban, "Romans v. Barbarians: A Simulation Approach to Learning," Social Studies, LXXIII (November-December, 1982), 273-78; Joseph M. Balkoski and Redmond A. Simonsen, "Fighting Sail: Sea Combat in the Age of Canvas and Shot, 1775-1815," Strategy and Tactics, LXXXV (1981), 21-36; C.A. Hope and R.G. Stover, "Commons Game; an Exercise in Resource Allocation," Teaching Sociology, IX (July, 1982), 383-99; T.T. Lasater and F.F. Montalvo, "Understanding Mexican-American Culture: a Training Program," Children Today, XI (May-June, 1982), 23-25; Jamie W. Moore, "Simulating History," Social Studies, LXXII (July-August, 1981), 188-90; Ann C. Shelly and William W. Wilen, "ERA Simulation," Social Studies, LXXIII (March-April, 1982), 52-56; Nancy Thompson, "Nine Nations Project: Seeing North America Through New Lenses," Phi Delta Kappan, LXIV (November, 1982), 212-13.

³See Henry C. Ellis, Fundamentals of Human Learning and Cognition (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1972), 21-22, 152-53; Jonathan Kozol, Free Schools (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 101.

⁴I have never extended it beyond two periods although I suspect it could be done profitably.

⁵For other examples, the same simulation and follow-up exercise could be applied as an introduction to the Cromwellian period, the French Revolution of 1789 or the development of the July monarchy in 1830, the various revolutions of 1848 throughout Europe, the Irish drive for home rule of the late 1800s, the Easter Rebellion, or the many revolutionary movements in the third world during the twentieth century. These are merely a few suggestions. The list is virtually endless.