

ACTIVE LEARNING AND THE SURVEY CLASS:
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AS A ROLE-PLAYING SCENARIO

Raymond C. Bailey
Northern Virginia Community College

Noel C. Eggleston
Radford University

Despite the expanding literature on innovative teaching methods,¹ most historians--including the authors--remain committed primarily to the traditional combination of lecture and discussion in survey classes. Faculty and students alike are familiar and generally satisfied with this methodology. The lecture-discussion format is well suited to the increasingly large class sizes required by budgetary constraints facing so many colleges and universities today; moreover, most faculty remain convinced that the lecture-discussion combination has proven effective and appropriate for the survey class.

Although this format remains popular, many instructors continue to seek supplementary learning strategies and techniques. Two fundamental realities, one philosophical and the other practical, account for this interest. First, use of innovative techniques involving active rather than passive learning on the part of students can be both enjoyable and educationally sound.² Second, it is difficult to oppose continued expansion of class size to auditorium levels--indeed, to oppose replacing the teacher altogether by substituting television sets, video display terminals, or mail boxes for the delivery of "packaged" courses--unless professors in classes of reasonable size do more than just lecture.³

The occasional use of role playing or simulation exercises, whether professionally developed and marketed or developed by instructors to meet their particular requirements, can provide an exciting and effective method for supplementing regular classroom techniques. Numerous historical issues, especially those involving the selection of choices among viable alternatives, can be readily adapted for role playing in class.⁴ The discussion below outlines the development and use of a role-playing exercise formulated to help students understand the issue of affirmative action and the controversy surrounding that issue.

For over a decade affirmative action--the granting of preferences to members of groups discriminated against in the past--has been hailed by its advocates as the next logical step in eliminating racism and sexism in American society. For just as long, and with equal conviction, critics have charged that the concept was not only a form of "reverse discrimination" but also an ineffective method for aiding the truly disadvantaged. The debate continues unabated, both in the courts and in the political arena, with no conclusive settlement yet in sight. In 1985, for example, even the Reagan Administration failed to present a uniform position, as Assistant Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds vigorously opposed affirmative action while Secretary of Labor William Brock publicly supported it. The American public seemed equally unsure. In public opinion polls both blacks and whites have sometimes favored and at other times opposed affirmative action, depending on how the issue was explained or worded.

Because of its continuing significance, the issue of affirmative action became one of the seven major topics covered in a course called "The U.S. in a Changing World," a required part of the curriculum at the 1985 Virginia Governor's School for the Gifted, a four-week program held annually in the summer. Our half of the Governor's School was held at Virginia Polytechnic

Institute and State University and attracted 209 of the very brightest high school students, mostly rising seniors, from across the state (another 200 students attended Governor's School programs at two other institutions). Our course, like the rest of the program, was intended to combine academic rigor, an interdisciplinary focus, and innovative teaching. Both of us taught four sections of the course, each section containing twenty-five to twenty-seven students.

In preparation for the role-playing exercise, all students read two articles on affirmative action. One article, selections from Justice Thurgood Marshall's dissenting opinion in the Bakke case, recounted the history of race relations in this country and argued the necessity for continuing the battle against racial discrimination. The second article, by economist Thomas Sowell, attacked both the philosophical assumptions and practical effects of affirmative action programs. These two articles effectively introduced students to the key concepts of the controversial issue.⁵

We had used brief role-playing scenarios during two previous classes, so our students had at least some experience with the methodology before attempting this much larger project. Students had also viewed a videotaped segment from the PBS series The Constitution: That Delicate Balance. While the segment involved the issue of freedom of the press rather than affirmative action, it utilized an excellent role-playing format in its production.

We hoped that our use of role playing would accomplish several objectives. First, we wanted to reinforce and allow students to apply the knowledge and insights gained from the reading assignments.⁶ Second, we wanted to stimulate maximum student participation, with as many students as possible actively grappling with the ethical and practical complexities raised by the issue. Third, we hoped to promote an understanding of the different arguments concerning affirmative action voiced by various constituencies faced with admission, hiring, and promotion decisions. Time constraints dictated that the exercise be conducted in a single seventy-five minute period.⁷ This length of time proved adequate since we had explained the format of the exercise and had assigned roles at the end of the preceding class meeting.

The premise of this role-playing exercise was that six applicants sought admission to a prestigious medical school, but only two slots remained to be filled. The number of applicants and vacancies could be changed as deemed appropriate. For the exercise we postulated that, in the past decade, only 3% of all applicants admitted to the medical school were black and only 25% were female. For all candidates admitted during that period the grade point average was 3.70 (on a 4.0 scale) and the average score on the "medical boards" was 720 (with a maximum of 800). During the Carter Administration, we said, the medical school reached a voluntary affirmative action agreement with the Justice Department for increasing the percentage of qualified blacks and women admitted; however, no specific quotas had been specified and, during the past year, the percentage of blacks admitted had risen to 5% and women to 33% of the entering class. At the same time, the grade point average and board scores both increased slightly, to 3.73 and 725 respectively. Finally, during the Reagan Administration the Justice Department had stopped closely monitoring the voluntary agreement and, in fact, no longer seemed concerned with the situation.

We debated how to assign roles, finally agreeing that each student would simply draw a slip of paper containing his or her role. This method of assigning roles had several advantages. It prevented students from considering only those roles that matched preconceived opinion and reinforced the essential concept that, in role playing, the student should represent the opinions and actions of the role rather than personal opinions. This method could be unsatisfactory if the success of the exercise depended upon a few key roles being represented by especially capable students. Designers of such scenarios frequently prefer to assign roles themselves to insure a proper match of the best students and the most essential roles.⁸ In our case, however, literally any role could be significant if handled properly, and given the nature of our students we expected most if not all to perform well. We did permit students to trade roles among themselves, but most seemed quite satisfied with this manner of selection (though it was readily apparent that many received roles that conflicted with personal beliefs), and few trades occurred. In fact, the students seemed to enjoy playing, or watching others play, roles that were physically or ideologically different--as when a very athletic male drew the role of President of the National Organization for Women, or when a black female student presented the Reagan Administration's views through the role of William Bradford Reynolds.

In each class, six students assumed the roles of applicants for admission. We provided the following information for the six fictitious candidates:

JOSEPH DREW. White; male; age 22; B.S. Brown University, 3.85 g.p.a.; medical board score 770;
Letters of recommendation and interview indicate difficulty in relating to people, a disposition described by one professor as "tending toward arrogance" and by another as "occasionally insensitive."

MARY FARMER. Black; female; age 22; B.S. Howard University, 3.64 g.p.a.; medical board score 680;
Letters of recommendation and interview indicate father is physician despite coming from poor background. She is one of six children.

PHILLIP JONES. Black; male; age 22; B.S. University of Virginia, 3.51 g.p.a.; medical board score 730;
Letters of recommendation and interview indicate that he is articulate, sensitive, and very idealistic. He has indicated his desire to return to practice in the inner city of Philadelphia.

MUFFY SINCLAIR. White; female; age 22; B.S. Wellesley College, 3.70 g.p.a.; medical board score 760;
Letters of recommendation and interview indicate some question about her commitment. Motivation for applying seems to come from desire to please wealthy, successful parents.

JOHN STRONG. White; male; age 34; B.S. Elon College, 3.00 g.p.a.; medical board score 710;
Letters of recommendation and interview indicate that he has a wife and three children, has been successful high school biology teacher for ten years, and is now highly motivated and in a position to pursue his dream of becoming a physician.

NGUYEN VAN THO. Vietnamese; male; age 31; Graduate Saigon University and one year of study at the Medical School of Saigon; medical board score 690;

Letters of recommendation and interview indicate he was drafted out of medical school into the army where he served as medic for one year, then came to U.S. and has supported extended family of wife, children, and relatives. Clearly dedicated and willing to work hard. Has had to work at a lower paying job in hospital to support family but is now in position to resume studies.

The students representing these candidates were allowed to supplement the information provided as long as any additional details remained "in character." Some did an effective job rounding out the credentials and personality of their characters.

Three to five students assumed roles as members of the medical school Admissions Committee. As such they would consider the discussion and debate during the exercise, ask questions of the applicants and other participants as they deemed appropriate, and ultimately decide which two applicants would be admitted. Two additional students represented 1) the Director of the medical school, who was expected to discuss such matters as what characteristics a university or medical school looks for in its student body, and 2) the Affirmative Action Officer of the medical school, who could discuss what actions the school had taken or might take to increase the enrollment of women and minorities. Another student represented the Director of the Educational Testing Service and was prepared to discuss the validity and uses of standardized test scores for making admissions decisions.

Two students assumed roles as federal officials--Assistant Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds, to defend the Reagan Administration's record on affirmative action, and Justice Thurgood Marshall, to argue both the constitutionality of and the practical necessity for the concept. One student represented the President of the American Medical Association, while another represented a nurse with fifteen years of experience at a local hospital--each prepared to discuss the issue of what makes a good physician, though perhaps from two rather different points of view. Other students played a white male physician, a black male physician, a white female physician, and a black female physician. Finally, we included the Executive Director of the NAACP, the President of NOW, Phyllis Schlafly, Geraldine Ferraro, and Thomas Sowell. Students representing these individuals could discuss the importance of role models, for example, or present interest group sentiment on affirmative action. Clearly, other participating roles could be added by an instructor. Students were told to use the library for whatever research they considered necessary in order to feel comfortable with their roles and to interview anyone who might be in a position to offer assistance (for example, the admissions staff at the host institution).

The authors had the aid of two "teaching assistants," Phillip Bigler and G.J. Tarazi, who were highly trained professionals with Master's degrees and experience as high school teachers.⁹ We therefore decided that the four of us would share duties as moderator in the exercises. Each individual thus ran the exercise in two classes; our experiences, however, were uniformly positive.

The exercise often began with the moderator asking each candidate to introduce himself and explain why he or she should be admitted. The moderator then asked questions or solicited comments from other

participants. The Affirmative Action Officer might be asked if he is satisfied with the progress already made at the medical school; the Director of the NAACP might be asked if institutional discrimination still exists and, if so, whether affirmative action is an appropriate way to address the problem; the President of the AMA might be asked what characteristics go into making a good physician and how we can identify applicants possessing those characteristics. William Bradford Reynolds might be asked why affirmative action is legally or ethically wrong in a society that gives preference to veterans (in civil service jobs or housing, for example) and football players (in lowered admission standards at many colleges and universities)--indeed, he might be asked if Sandra Day O'Connor was an affirmative action appointment. The President of NOW might be asked if affirmative action for women is just reverse discrimination against men. A few such questions should generate a steady stream of students seeking to ask questions themselves, volunteer comments, and respond to attacks against their arguments. To a significant extent, then, the moderator can simply help maintain some degree of order in such exchanges, keep some questions in mind to be used as necessary to spark debate, correct any significant errors in the dialogue, and otherwise interfere as little as possible in the vigorous exchange. In particular, members of the Admissions Committee will want to address their own questions to applicants and experts alike, and the applicants with little or no prompting will seek to win support for their candidacies.

Such exchanges can frequently be rather noisy, but they certainly avoid Jonathan Zophy's telling criticism that most traditional class discussions "seldom amount to more than questions raised by the teacher and answers given by the students."¹⁰ Indeed, in all eight classes that used this exercise, taught by four different instructors, student participation approached 100%. Even students who normally were quiet in class would participate, either on their own initiative or when asked a question by the moderator or by other students.

We concluded the exercise by permitting the Admissions Committee members to withdraw from the class, deliberate among themselves, and decide which two applicants to admit. While they did so, the remaining members of the class also voted to determine which two applicants to admit. In four classes the students voted while remaining in their roles; in four others the students dropped their roles and voted according to their own preferences. Yet all eight classes and eight Admissions Committees independently reached very similar decisions. Phillip Jones, the black male candidate, was accepted in every class, both by the Admissions Committee and by the students. In retrospect, we decided that we had made him perhaps too easy a choice with his combination of idealism and credentials. Even in classes where the role received a less impressive performance, Jones always won acceptance; in classes with a strong performance in that role, Jones was practically a unanimous choice. Surprisingly, at least to us, Nguyen Van Tho was the next most successful applicant, winning admission from a majority of Admissions Committees and classes. John Strong, the non-traditional white male applicant, also was occasionally successful. A strong student performance in either of these latter roles significantly enhanced the candidate's possibility of success.

By contrast, applicants Joseph Drew, Mary Farmer, and Muffy Sinclair sometimes came close but were successful only once (Drew)--an indication that we might consider improving their credentials. In the case of Joseph Drew, the white male candidate with a spectacular academic record, students were clearly alienated by his insensitivity and arrogance--characteristics,

they insisted, that simply should not be tolerated in a physician. A few students playing that role did make significant headway, however, by deciding to stress that Drew was seeking a career in medical research, where his personal deficiencies would be irrelevant (or, as one student in that role said, "You may not like me personally, but I'm the one with the potential for discovering a cure for cancer."). Applicant Mary Farmer simply did not have adequate credentials to compete successfully in this group, especially with a far more impressive black candidate available in Jones. Muffy Sinclair's academic strength was offset by her seeming lack of commitment.

Having only a single class period available to us for this topic limited the amount of in-class discussion that followed the exercise. If more time were available, an extended discussion could profitably examine what the students had learned and how they decided which of the candidates to support. Indeed, some authors assert that this "debriefing" is critical to the overall success of the exercise.¹¹

We did find an impressive degree of continuing student discussion, both with the instructors and among themselves, after the period ended. Such after-class discussion has a very positive effect upon student understanding and retention.¹² Faculty and students alike enjoyed the exercise immensely and considered it to be one of the most successful learning experiences of the entire Governor's School program. For the authors it reconfirmed that role playing can be an integral part of the successful classroom experience and recommitted us to finding more ways to use it.

NOTES

¹This literature is, of course, generally familiar to readers of such journals as The History Teacher and Teaching History. The following recent examples are representative: Jonathan W. Zophy, "On Learner-Centered Teaching," History Teacher 15 (1982), 185-96; Alan V. Briceland, "The Group-Task Approach: Developing Analytical Skills in the United States History Survey," History Teacher 14 (1981), 191-207; Robert S. Feldman, "Historical Role Playing: An Alternative Teaching Strategy," Teaching History 5 (1980), 66-74; Johnny S. Moore, "From the Ground Up: Constructing a Society," Teaching History 9 (1984), 69-73; H. Eugene Karjala and Raymond E. White, "American History Through Music and Role Playing," History Teacher 17 (1983), 33-59; Thomas Ladenburg and Geoffrey Tegnell, "Strategies for Teaching America Since 1945," Teaching History 7 (1982), 67-72.

²See, for example, Lawrence A. Lucas, Charles H. Postma, and Jay C. Thompson, "A Comparative Study of Cognitive Retention Using Simulation-Gaming as Opposed to Lecture-Discussion Techniques," Peabody Journal of Education 52 (1975), 261-66; Stephen M. Sachs, "The Uses and Limits of Simulation Models in Teaching Social Science and History," Social Studies 61 (1970), 163-67; Wayne Dumas, "Role Playing: Effective Technique in the Teaching of History," The Clearing House 44 (1970), 468-70.

³See John Naisbitt, Megatrends (New York: Warner Books, 1982), especially his chapter, "High Tech--High Touch." Naisbitt argues that technological advances can assist but not replace an effective teacher.

⁴For examples, see Noel C. Eggleston, "Role Playing: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," Teaching History 3 (1978), 52-58; James Patrick Kiernan, "The French Revolution: A Simulation Game," History

Teacher 11 (1978), 515-23; Harold Gorvine, "Teaching History Through Role Playing," History Teacher 3 (1970), 7-20; and Eggleston, "Reconstructing Reconstruction," The Society for History Education Network News Exchange 1 (1976), 8-9.

⁵The two articles can be found in Robert E. DiClerico and Allan S. Hammock, Points of View: Readings in American Government and Politics, 2d ed. (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1983), ch. 15. In our opinion, the fact that both Marshall and Sowell are black further enhanced the value of the articles.

⁶Several authors have observed that role playing is especially useful in reinforcing knowledge and increasing understanding gained through other methods. It also tends to stimulate greater interest in reading assignments since, students realize, information thus acquired can be actively utilized. See Sachs, "Uses and Limits of Simulation," 163-64, and Martin C. Campion, "War Games: World War II in the West," History Teacher 10 (1977), 575-85.

⁷By contrast, some professors have designed very elaborate exercises requiring several periods, or even several weeks, to complete. See Lee A. Makela, "A Senate Investigation into the 'Fall' of China: A Role-Playing Exercise," History Teacher 11 (1978), 525-34; Clair W. Keller, "Role Playing and Simulation in History Classes," History Teacher 8 (1975), 573-81; Gorvine, "Teaching History," 18.

⁸Dumas, "Role Playing," 470; Sachs, "Uses and Limits of Simulation," 166; Gorvine, "Teaching History," 10-13, 15.

⁹Among their many other contributions they aided in developing the roles and details of this scenario, and we wish to acknowledge our appreciation for their assistance.

¹⁰Zophy, "On Learner-Centered Teaching," 186.

¹¹Sachs, "Uses and Limits of Simulation," 165; Dumas, "Role Playing," 470; Walter M. Bacon, Jr., and M. Glen Newkirk, "Uses of Simulation in Teaching History," Contemporary Education 46 (1974), 40-41.

¹²Lucas, Postma, and Thompson, "Cognitive Retention," 261-66.