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Acting Contentiously: Simulating Social Movements

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Abstract

The following experiential course activity makes use of the benefits of simulation gaming without the semester long commitment of many other social movement course exercises. Student interactions remain short, targeted, and specific; all of which ensure maximum student participation. The exercise requires only three class periods and can be delivered early in the semester so the instructor can judge the learning outcomes appropriately. Finally, this exercise provides every student, regardless of the preferred method of learning, an opportunity to experience social movements in action.

Introduction

Collective behavior and social movements is a popular topic on campus. University students are interested in learning about why movements emerge, how they change over time, and their relative effectiveness. While, indeed, this is an exciting time to teach courses on social movements, the challenges associated with explaining theoretical perspectives and concepts remain. These barriers remain for at least two reasons. First, students have limited experience with and often superficial understandings of social movements. Second, social movement instructors typically rely on lecture and discussion to teach movement concepts. Although these methods are conducive to memorization and recall (Garoutte and Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011), the concepts learned via the lecture and discussion classroom method do not necessary translate into a working knowledge that may be applied outside the classroom (Howard and Zoeller, 2007). In short, like social theory courses, students often leave social movement courses frustrated because the concepts are regarded as too abstract and irrelevant in the real world (Pedersen, 2010).

Instructors address the disconnect students sometimes feel to the introductory social movement curriculum by including active learning exercises in their courses. Active learning refers to the idea that students are participants in their education and, consequently, learn by exploring ideas in structured situations (Hamlin and Janseen 1987). Students report deeper engagement with the course material, memory of the course content after the course ends, and a more sophisticated exploration of their own assumptions about the topic. (Hamlin and Janssen, 1987) Social movement topics are not easily converted into short classroom activities (Lewis, 2004). Scholars at liberal arts schools have taken steps to develop semester-long, active learning exercises to give students experience with social movements. These activities range from the extreme 32 day bus

tour (Cunningham and Kingma-Kiekhofers, 2004) to social movement organization case studies (Pederson, 2010; Griffith, 2012). While these semester long assignments may effectively make activism meaningful for a room full of undergraduates, most of who have never participated in collective activism themselves, they are untenable for instructors at larger research institutions where practical considerations such as high enrollment, student attendance, and funding restrictions rein.

In order to integrate active learning exercises into courses with many students, instructors may use “simulation games” to supplement more traditional methods. A simulation game can be any model of an external reality in which players interact by playing roles in much the same way as they would interact in reality (Dorn, 1989). Simulations, in short, are a good way to provide students hands on learning experiences that make complex concepts easier to understand and highlights their applicability in the real world. While social movements lend themselves well to simulation exercises, there are few of them discussed in the teaching literature, and none can be completed over the course of a few class periods. Here, we outline a simulation used in two sections of a course titled, “Collective Action and Social Movements” immediately following Spring Break in March 2012 which was completed in three class sessions. Since attendance was not a requirement of the course, the instructor offered a small amount of extra credit points for participation in order to maximize interest in the simulation.

Choosing the What to Simulate: Four Criteria

Determining what movement to use in the classroom is not an easy task. Ultimately, we used four criteria in the selection process. First, in order to be effective, the simulation needed to engage students in tasks around issues and ideas with which they were at least familiar (Gamson and Peppers 2000). Second, since most students expressed interest in contemporary politics, the movement had to be current. Third, in an effort to bridge disciplinary divides in the classroom and to lend students insight into the complexity of collective action, the movement had to involve diverse kinds of actors (e.g., corporate, movement, and government). Finally, the movement could not be so complex that students would miss the connection between the simulation and the relevant course concepts (Dorn, 1989). The farmworkers’ movement in Florida met all four of these criteria. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), which primarily is comprised of Latinos, Mayan Indian, and Haitian immigrants, uses institutional and extra-institutional tactics to further its goals to secure an enforceable Code of Conduct and provide incentives to suppliers who respected worker rights, beyond those dictated by state and federal law [1].

This simulation is designed to address two objectives in particular: a working understanding of 1) strategy and tactics and 2) social movement theory. Students have difficulty grasping the difference between strategy (a long-term plan of action that involves engaging different targets in different ways toward an ultimate goal) and tactics (a short-term plan designed to achieve a specific goal). Typically, students regard these concepts as interchangeable and, consequently, miss this question on the final exam. Students also have difficulty delineating resource mobilization theory (which emphasizes the importance of organizations and field-level dynamics in the emergence, course, and content of movements) from political process theory (which focuses on political opportunities to explain the life of a movement). In the remainder of the paper, we outline the three day simulation activity and its various components. Then, we

highlight some of the lessons learned from the simulation. We conclude with a brief discussion of the utility of this approach to teaching social movement concepts.

The Simulation Experience

Day 1: Introducing Contention and the Actors

On Day 1, introduce students to the movement, the simulation game, and allow them to choose their roles. We began by briefly outlining the demographics of the average farmworker (e.g., a 31 year-old who earns less than \$7,500/year) and the conditions farmworkers seek to change (wages, living conditions, and incidents of worker abuse). Then, we introduced the two groups in the simulation that would be advocating for change: the Coalition for Immokalee Workers (CIW) and the United Unitarian Universalism Church, which has mobilized on behalf of farmworkers' rights in the state. We specifically discussed the rationale for involvement by each and outlined some of the successful (and not so successful) tactics used in the past.

Allow students to choose what kind of actor they want to be in the simulation. In our simulation, there were six roles from which students could choose: an activist, a politician, a restaurant, a grocery, a grower, or a journalist. Be advised that you want to set minimum and maximum numbers for each kind of role so that you can spread the students out. Once the students are organized into groups based on their respective roles, give each participant a simulation packet that includes basic information about the organization or company, a list of things to do, and a list of factors that the group needs to consider when deciding how to proceed in the simulation. Students, for instance, who chose to be CIW activists were given several tasks. They were told to choose a target and come up with both a long-term goal and a short-term, achievable goal. Students, then, were asked to outline a basic campaign that might achieve the goal and were warned to pay careful attention to the potential consequences of their actions. In our informational guide, we noted that work stoppages can result in mass firings. The student activists also were asked to consider the relative importance of media in their campaign and to come up with a plan noting how they would try and use this resource. We provided basic reminders that the CIW prioritizes the voices of the workers and their experiences, and, consequently, this needed to be central to any campaign they devised. We gave student activists approximately 30 minutes to come up with an original campaign and to comprise a brief press release to read at the start of Day 2, which would signal the start of the simulation.

Provide each group a list of tasks and reasonable goals during Day 1. In our simulation, for instance, corporate actors were charged with two tasks. First, they were instructed to decide whether or not they wanted to negotiate with the activists. If they were willing to negotiate, they needed to determine what they were willing to give them or do on workers' behalf. Second, once the activists' announced their campaigns and goals, the student growers had to decide how to respond and whether the response would be public or happen behind closed doors. When making their decisions, students had to consider the following three constraints on their choices: 1) The mandate of the Pacific Tomato Growers is to keep things running relatively smoothly and increase the profitability of the company, 2) Pacific Tomato Growers is part of a larger company, SunRipe, and, therefore, their actions have implications for reputation of the entire corporation, and 3) According the U.S. Department of Labor, most of farmworkers are illegal immigrants, which means responses need to be made carefully. A mass arrest and deportation of illegal immigrants at the farm would minimally slow production and affect corporate profits. The other

corporate actors (student restaurant owners and grocers) were given similar instructions and provided 30 minutes to write up a plan of action for the following class period. The list of tasks and background of each actor is available online at www.sociology.fsu.edu/people/rohlinger/.

The students who decided to cover the story for either Florida Public Radio or the local newspaper were also provided an instruction packet. On Day 1, they needed to brainstorm two or three headlines for the story and determine what angle they thought they wanted to pursue (e.g., feature the activist group or the target), discuss their position on the issue and how it might affect their reporting, and outline what kind of story would attract the broadest audience. Students representing Florida Public Radio were advised that they needed to provide a “balanced” story insofar as they discussed two points of view, but told that these positions did not need to be equally represented. Student journalists for *The New Times* had to consider the commercial constraints of news media and discuss the costs and benefits of writing a feature story on the issue as opposed to a news brief that provided a quick overview of the happenings. In short, student journalists prepared for the simulation differently. They primarily had to think about how to cover the simulation, the implications of their coverage for the outlet, and develop a plan of action that determined who was in charge of observing and interviewing various actors as well as who would be responsible for compiling and writing the story on Day 2.

Day 2: Acting Contentiously

The simulation should begin with an announcement from the student activist organizations. They should read their press release and, more specifically identify their targets and outline their campaigns. When their announcement concludes, give the remaining groups 5-7 minutes to decide on their course of action. The biggest challenge you will confront is organizing the interactions among the various actors in a way that gives students a sense of how collective challenges work and the factors that affect what activist organizations’ strategic choices. The simulation lasted approximately 40 minutes.

At the end of the simulation, students wrote statements summarizing their individual positions and group decisions. For instance, the activist groups outlined the obstacles they encountered when trying to achieve their goals, the anticipated outcomes from their efforts, and what they would do differently in the next campaign. Corporate actors (growers and restaurateurs) discussed their goals, how they tried to force activists to either give up or accept their offer, and evaluated the effectiveness of their approach. Politicians summarized their position on the issue (e.g., the extent to which there was support for the movement), the kinds of solutions that were put forward, and the factors that undermined compromise in the legislative process. The journalists spelled out their objectives in covering the events and the pressures that shaped the story. It is important that you give students clear instructions regarding what you want them to address from their role in the simulation. We also recommend that you have a representative from each group read their statements to the entire class. The simulation concluded with journalists from each outlet reading their coverage of the event.

Day 3: Returning to the Concepts

It is important to follow up the simulation with a guided discussion that reinforces the learning objectives of the exercise. During the class following the simulation, we facilitated a discussion that asked students to reflect on what they had learned about the three core social movement

concepts – strategy and tactics, resource mobilization theory, and political process theory. We asked students to talk about some of the surprising moves of the actors and their implications for movements. We then wrote the concepts of interest on the board and asked students to explain each and give specific examples from the simulation. For example, we had the student activists identify their strategy and asked other participants to outline the tactics used in the simulation. This afforded us an opportunity to talk about cooperation among activist groups and relate this to resource mobilization.

Although we did not measure learning outcomes formally, we did compare three test questions in two courses that did not include the simulation to the two courses that did include the simulation. These courses were taught in different academic years by the same instructor. The students in the classes that included the simulation correctly answered the multiple choice questions at higher rates than the students in the classes without the exercise. Despite reading, lecture, and an in-class application exercise, students typically do very poorly on the essay question. In fact, the failure rate on this essay question was approximately 42%. Students who participated in the simulation, however, did much better. In fact, almost 80% of the students received four of the six points on the short essay. This evidence points to the potential of classroom simulations to increase student understanding of difficult concepts and the need for scholars to measure the effectiveness of these exercises.

Lessons Learned from Acting Contentiously in the Classroom

There are three factors that potentially affect the success of a classroom simulation: classroom diversity, classroom size, and student accountability. To address the diversity of student experience, we choose a movement that involved not just social movement organizations, authorities and mass media, but also the business and religious community. This approach ensured that students could relate to one aspect of the simulation, which, in turn, made participation more fun and realistic. Second, classroom size affects the simulation insofar as the more students in a class the more difficult it is to effectively engage all of the students. Ideally, an instructor will have 50 students or less when using this simulation. Third, and related, there needs to be student accountability during the simulation. Here, we required students to respond to specific questions, note what decisions their group made and why, and write up a public statement, which was read at the conclusion of the simulation. Each student had to hand in her own answers if she wanted to receive any points for the exercise.

Despite the specific challenges mentioned above, simulation gaming to demonstrate social movement activism is an effective way to capture student attention and highlight difficult concepts. Like collective behavior generally, the performances and decisions made while acting out a role are unpredictable and sometimes comical. The three day experience lends itself to intensity and suspense motivating the students to engage with previously obscure concepts. This short simulation exercise is meant to provide instructors with a broad outline of the criteria needed when creating their own classroom experiences. Defining the roles, managing student participation, and connecting the experience to the concepts will increase the likelihood of simulation success. This activity is intended to be used as a model with practical advice for many college classrooms.

Endnotes

[1] See CIW's website at <http://ciw-online.org/index.html>

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