

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 428 007

SO 029 608

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TITLE Building Classroom Community through Group Assignments, Role Plays and Modeling.  
PUB DATE 1998-09-00  
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (Boston, MA, September 3-6, 1998).  
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Classroom Techniques; Critical Thinking; \*Discussion (Teaching Technique); \*Group Activities; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; \*Political Science; Skill Development; Student Participation  
IDENTIFIERS Learning Environment; Small Group Communication

## ABSTRACT

Academics spend most of their intellectual lives engaged in theoretically complex and sometimes arcane debates, and it is sometimes easy for them to forget that their students are being introduced for the first time to many of the concepts they as educators take for granted. In political science courses, a variety of group activities can serve the basic instructional goals of (1) subject mastery; (2) building critical thinking, writing, and speaking skills; and (3) promoting literacy in social scientific method. Group activities also can promote community both inside and outside the classroom. Small group discussions and in-class debates are instructional activities that extend the learning environment into a community building mode, especially when used with concrete goals in mind. Dividing a class of 30 into six groups for a short set of discussions allows frequent student interaction. In-class debates are a logical extension of small group discussions. Each group is asked to prepare a 2-minute opening statement in which they summarize their position; then each presents a 1-minute critique of the competing position. A debate between the two positions ensues with each group alternating by answering specific critiques and posing follow-up questions to the other group. Another way that participation can be built into courses is through group-based case study projects combined with class presentations. Intensive role-play projects that encompass virtually all of the group-based activities combine rigorous demands that students understand the substance of the course material with an enjoyable way for them to interact with their peers and with the instructor. Contains a table. (BT)

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**Building Classroom Community  
Through Group Assignments, Role Plays, and Modeling**

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Draft -- Cite at will.

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Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association  
September 3-6, 1998  
Boston

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## Introduction

Community in the college classroom is an important goal insofar as it contributes to the achievement of basic teaching and learning objectives. In my courses, I typically define these basic objectives in three subsets. 1) The students should gain a mastery of the specific subject matter of the course. 2) The students should maintain or build habits of excellence in basic skills such as critical reading, analytical writing, and informed public speaking. 3) The students should become functionally literate in the basic model of social scientific epistemology. They should recognize both the strengths and weaknesses of knowledge building in the social sciences and be able to apply social scientific logic to a range of problems specific to the course. I am convinced that all three of these goals are interrelated and that group oriented projects can play a key role in promoting these goals. Further, an important collateral benefit of a range of group projects may be that they aid students in building trust and cooperative patterns across a range of divisions including ethnic, class, regional, gender, sexual orientation, religious, and nationality. The purpose of this paper is to provide specific examples of group projects and activities that can aid in achieving both the three basic objectives I have identified and can build classroom community in the process.

My first teaching experience as a new graduate student is instructive. I was assigned as a TA for a large section of Introduction to American Politics. The course instructor was masterful. Like Political Science's answer to Jay Lenno, he was able to make the separation of powers, legislative oversight, and the development of the federal bureaucracy come to life for 300 students twice a week. Humorous, quick witted, and fast on his feet, he made lecturing look easy. Meeting with students in discussion sections, I soon realized that the course instructor possessed a gift that I did not have. (He also undoubtedly spent many hours in preparation for his lectures so that his ease and humor were more than just entertaining but also served the goal of teaching.) Nevertheless, I was then, and continue to be convinced that "the rest of us" can also learn to be great teachers.

The model of an engaging, funny, and intellectually compelling lecturer is not for everyone. (Though we could all probably learn to improve our style at the podium considerably.) I have found that pedagogical tools such as structured group discussions, in-class debates, group projects and class presentations, role plays, and modeling activities can all build a classroom environment in which students are excited and motivated to learn.

Elementary and secondary school educators who I know are constantly striving to provide their students with hands-on learning projects. The logic of this approach says that active participation in learning provides students with a high capacity for retention of the concepts being taught. Standard reading assignments, lectures, and traditional examinations often fail to have the same lasting impact. In higher education, we often assume that our students are “intellectually mature” and thus do not need the same kind of stimulus as their younger counterparts. In fact, it may be that given the complexity and sophistication of many of the concepts that we try to teach students, techniques to promote active learning are even more appropriate at this level.

Though my experience has been primarily in teaching courses on politics of the Third World, comparative politics, African IR, political economy and African comparative politics, I have also used many of these techniques in political theory courses as well as in discussion sections of Introduction to American Politics. Thus, I am convinced that many or most of these techniques can have wide applicability across the political science curriculum. The various projects are organized below in rough order of the amount of time and effort that each activity takes for both the teacher and the student. It is hoped that this paper can serve as a menu from which instructors can choose activities that will enhance the attainment of specific course goals and that build class-room community.

### **Small Group Discussions, In-class Debates**

These instructional activities are probably the most obvious ways of extending the learning environment into a community building mode, but they are also in some ways the

most difficult. While breaking-up into small groups and working on short-term class projects may seem fairly straightforward, I have found that students can tire of this quite quickly if the technique is used too often and without a particular objective. Hence, as with all of the methods I describe in this paper, these tools must be used with a concrete goals in mind. Further, they often take more time to prepare and more time in-class than do simple lectures. Even so, the extra effort usually pays off in higher levels of student involvement and achievement.

### **Small Group Discussions**

Dividing a class of 30 into 6 groups for a short set of discussions allows for a number of benefits. Students who are otherwise less likely to contribute in a larger group often feel more comfortable in smaller groups. They also have less anonymity in a smaller group and so they are forced to provide input. Frequent intellectual interactions between students builds an awareness and familiarity that aids in other forms of group work. The feelings of comfort and ease that soon develop when students solve problems together serve as the building blocks for further group projects. This is also the most basic form of class-room community building.

While most of us have undoubtedly used group discussions in the course of teaching, there are a handful of tactics that might make them more productive. Of primary importance is that students need explicit instructions as to the goals of the discussion. It is far more productive to ask students to identify three strengths and three weaknesses of Rostow's "Stages of Development", than to simply ask them to discuss the article. This allows students to focus on a clear analytical task rather than drifting around the topic. Group discussions also seem to be more productive when the group is expected to report back to the class as a whole. This makes each student responsible to the entire class and lends a sense of purpose to the discussion.

Classroom community is further enhanced if the instructor gives some thought to how students are grouped. By predetermining groups, an instructor can fight against a

natural tendency that most people have of grouping with those with whom they are most familiar. Whether the groups are chosen by random or by design, varying group composition can insure that each student has an opportunity to work directly with others of different background, ideology, and skills.

Finally, because working in a group is a skill that must be cultivated, most classes will improve as the semester continues. Discussions should normally be for a relatively short period of time at the start of the semester when students are first learning the norms and expectations of group work. Later, as students become more efficient in small groups, the time and complexity of the tasks demanded can both be profitably increased. This, of course, assumes that the instructor is consistent in demanding group work. If it is only attempted infrequently, the potential benefits will be negligible.

### **In-Class Debates**

One logical extension of small group discussions is the use of in-class debates. Debates can evolve by asking students to defend competing analytical approaches, explanatory theories, or policy choices. By requiring groups to prepare to debate you provide incentive for them to gain in-depth knowledge of the position they are to defend as well as a solid understanding of the other position(s). Further, during the process of the debate, student knowledge of each position is reinforced and the logical relationships between opposing positions can be clarified. This will surely vary from group to group but the instructor can also use the questions and issues raised in the debate to stress important points in subsequent discussions.

I have used in-class debates regularly and with good result. One example is asking small groups to defend the application of Keynesian economic theory as opposed to neo-liberal economic theory, to questions of Third World political economy. After having done readings that address this topic, the students are given fifteen minutes to discuss their task in their groups. I ask each group to prepare a two minute opening statement in which they

summarize their position. After the opening statements the groups then each present a one minute critique of the competing position. A debate between the two positions ensues with each group alternating by answering specific critiques and posing follow-up questions to the other group. It is sometimes necessary for the instructor to guide this process and pose some critiques that may have escaped the students themselves. As with group discussions, these informal debates tend to improve over the course of the semester as students gain more experience and practice.

Another debate that I have used requires three groups. Each group is assigned to defend a different European colonial policy in Africa. One group defends and argues for indirect rule (commonly associated with British colonization), another takes up the assimilation model (associated with the French), while a third group defends a policy of settler colonies. The students are asked to imagine themselves as colonial officers and to argue as if they had the mind set of late Victorian Europeans. This debate works very well as the differences between the three positions are fairly easy to grasp and the students find it easy to critique their peers in the opposing camps. These type of debates help students to prepare for more subtle and complex debates later in the course.

The debate can be informal, as I have described, or it can be made more formalized by providing students a longer period of time for preparation and designating more precise rules of debate. Extended preparation can require students to meet on their own outside of class time. When such meetings are needed, it is important that students are given ample time to arrange their schedules in advance of when the debate will take place. As the time requirements increase, it is also important that students be given appropriate credit for their increased efforts.

### **Case Study Projects and Class Presentations**

Another way that group participation can be built into Political Science courses is through group-based case study projects combined with class presentations. When a more

involved project of this nature is used, a few additional issues need to be dealt with. Clear and detailed expectations are of even greater importance. Students may need extra guidance because an error or misunderstanding about the instructor's expectations is magnified when extensive amounts of group work take place away from the classroom.

I have used extended case-study projects in which students are grouped and asked to make a formal in-class presentation. They are given the assignment and the name of fellow group members three to four weeks prior to when the assignment is due which allows them to plan for the needed out of class meetings. The case studies that I have asked students to do focus on the task of linking specific nations to a broader phenomena which we have studied in the context of the course. For example: I have had students focus on what an in-depth look at Rwanda in the 1990s can help us learn about ethnic conflict; what does contemporary Mexico offer theorists of revolution; how can the experience of Mali's struggle with student unrest shed light on problems of political transitions in newly emerging democracies; and what can Indonesia's relationships with multi-lateral lending institutions tell us about the conditions that contribute to success or failure of contemporary structural adjustment programs? It is suggested that each member of the group focus on a different aspect of the question at hand but that they coordinate closely as to how the individual topics will engage each other and function to provide a unified presentation. After approximately two weeks time, each group gives a short preliminary report to the class. They are asked to present an outline of how they intend to answer the questions and also to indicate which group members are in charge of which portions of the project. I provide written and oral feedback to each group after the preliminary report.

It is advisable to suggest enough discrete tasks that each student can "own" an easily defined portion of project. This makes evaluation easier. The method for grading these assignments deserves some attention. Although I base a large part of the grade on the group performance as a whole, I still find it necessary to differentiate the contributions of



individual group members. I do this in two ways. First, I always require a short reaction paper from each student. This paper, (two - three pages) is to describe what the student learned from the project and how it related to a particular concept from the course material. Those students who free-ride are usually not able to draft a convincing paper of this type. The other device that I use to avoid free-riders is a peer evaluation. Each student turns in an evaluation sheet on which they indicate a score from 1-10 for all members of their group. Each student's grade is then calculated on the basis of the group grade, the reaction paper, and the peer ratings.<sup>1</sup>

The amount of intergroup cooperation needed to successfully complete such a project normally leads to an increase in community. Students who may have only rarely spoken otherwise, learn each others names and can gain an appreciation of the diverse attributes and capabilities of their peers. It is also important to recognize that the simple fact of interaction is not an automatic guarantee that the experience will create positive feelings between students. If the projects are ill-planned, difficult to understand, and unclear as to the instructors expectations, then tensions within the student group can develop and a negative experience can result. It is also unrealistic to expect that all people will get along even if the project is well designed, there are always potential personality conflicts and idiosyncratic difficulties in any social interaction. Well designed group projects can have the effect of mitigating these conflicts if the goals are clear and there is an opportunity as well as incentive for all group members to participate.

## **Role Plays**

While the previously described projects were designed to culminate in a formal class presentation, I have also used intensive role-play projects which combine virtually all

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid a group making an agreement to give each other all the highest scores, I tell the students only that they will be evaluated by each other at the end of the project. I do not indicate how that evaluation will take place. Thus there is little opportunity for coordinated action at the moment that the peer ranking sheets are handed out. I have not found this to be a problem in any event as the students who have worked the hardest on the project are rarely willing to allow free-riders to get full credit for work they did not do.

of the group-based activities mentioned above. The ideal role play project combines rigorous demands that students understand the substance of the course material with an enjoyable way for them to interact with their peers and with the instructor. I have used the following role play in mid-level and upper-level undergraduate courses on Comparative Politics of Development and African International Relations. Many students indicated that this project, (which was graded as the mid-term exam in one of the classes) was the highlight of their semester.

### **Structural Adjustment Negotiations Role Play**

**Group 1)** You are the members of a World Bank/IMF mission who have just flown into Bangui, Central African Republic (C.A.R.) to conclude negotiations on a new Structural Adjustment Program. Your objective is to get the C.A.R. government to accept your plans to improve their economic performance.

Your SAP has three major goals and a handful of additional components:

1) You want the CAR government to cut its budget expenditures by 25% over five years, you must persuade them to do so and decide in negotiations how this will be done, which sectors will be cut, which will remain constant or grow, or will there be global reductions?

2) You want the CAR government to reduce and then eliminate export tariffs on their chief agricultural export products coffee and cotton. You want them to eliminate marketing boards. Finally you want them to reduce import tariffs on cigarettes, textiles, and other manufactured goods and to tighten credit. Again you must provide compelling arguments as to why these steps need to be taken and negotiate with the CAR officials as to how to implement the steps.

3) You want the CAR to privatize/sell off the state owned timber processing firm, textile production firm, cigarette factory and diamond mine. Many of these are losing money and you feel they could be better managed by the private sector. You must convince the officials of the benefits of privatization and come up with steps to accomplish this.

Additionally you are to press CAR on governance issues by insisting on legal and judicial reform, and progress on moves toward multi-party elections.

You must also consider that you want to maintain the political stability of the CAR and that if there is a coup or major civil unrest, your entire mission will fail. Finally, if you are successful in getting a Letter of Intent signed which is favorable and reflects IMF/WB policy, your own reputation will

soar, you will earn a handsome raise, and your career will be given a great boost.

Your assets are as follows:

90 million dollars US in long term loans to be linked to various aspects of the SAP

10 million dollars US in immediate funds available as “targeted” aid to relieve various social problems associated with implementation of the SAP

An unknown, but likely minimal (\$5-10 million over five years) amount in private and unilateral aid and loans that may be available to the CAR if and when you sign an agreement with them.

An unknown, but likely minimal (\$2.5-5 million over five years) amount in direct foreign investment that the CAR may be able to attract with your assistance due to the successful adoption of the SAP.

**Group 2)** You are the highest ranking officials in the CAR’s Ministries of Finance, Agriculture, and Administrative Affairs. You are preparing to meet with an IMF/WB mission to negotiate the final details of a SAP which will allow you to meet your budget goals for the next five years. Your overarching goal is to negotiate an agreement with as much flexibility for your government as possible while getting enough loan money to meet your annual budget obligations .

Your current budget is as follows:

**Table 1 - Role Play Budget**

Central Government Expenditures		Central Government Income Sources	
Military	2.3		
Transportation	3.7		
Agriculture	6	6.9	Income and Property Taxes
Health	9	17	Coff., Timber & Cotton Export Tariffs
Civil Service & Govt. Operations	16.5	15	Agriculture
Industry	12	6	Industry
Mining & Timber	10.2	17	Mining & Timber
Education:		2.2	Receipts from Abroad
Primary	2.1	18	Mining Export Tariffs
Secondary	5.4	6	Hotel Taxes
Post-Secondary	8.3	1.8	Tourism/Entry Visas
Pension and Social Service	4.5		
Tourism	2		
Debt Service	18		
<b>Total Annual Budget</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>89.9</b>	<b>Total Annual Government Income</b>
<b>Total Annual Shortfall</b>	<b>10.1</b>		
All amounts in millions of dollars			All dollar amounts are strictly hypothetical

In negotiations you must juggle a number of competing goals and keep in mind numerous other issues. These include, but are not limited to the following goals.

- 1) Your highest priority is to balance your national budget.
- 2) You must avoid politically impossible compromises with the WB/IMF. Labor unions and student movements are both active in your country and they have a history of civil unrest when they are displeased. The military, though small, exercises a great deal of political power and must not be antagonized, a budget cut for them could provoke a coup. Most of the directors of the state owned and run firms belong to the inner circle of friends and family of the President. If you cross them, your job might be on the line.
- 3) You must consider both the short term and long range impacts of all the policy changes required by the IMF/WB and be prepared to argue against any policy changes that you judge to be unwarranted or unfeasible in your particular case.

If you are successful at negotiating an agreement with the IMF/WB which meets your nations needs and does not cause unmanageable civil unrest or provoke a military coup, you will be amply rewarded with both financial and political success. If the long range effects of the SAP are positive, you may have an even greater political future in store. On the other hand if you defy the WB/IMF, (which you are free to do) you must come up with a reasonable alternative plan to meet the budget deficit of the CAR as well as attain long range economic growth.

### **Project Expectations & Time Line**

**-Monday, Oct. 6** we will work all day in class on this project-  
**-Wednesday, Oct. 8** we will hold our negotiations, your group must be prepared to achieve its objectives, this will likely take some extra research on your parts -

**-Friday, October 10** you (the class as a whole) need to have come up with a letter of intent which describes the loan agreement in some detail. Both groups will then present the letter to me (IMF Managing Director) and answer any questions or objections that I have to the agreement.

**-There will be no readings notes due next Friday.**

**-Wednesday, Oct. 15** your reaction paper is due in class. Papers turned in late will lose one letter grade per day. Grade deductions will begin for papers turned in at any time after class on Wednesday. This means a late paper turned in Wed. after class will earn a B if it was an A paper. On Thursday, Oct. 16 it will be a C and on Friday, Oct. 17 a D. Any papers received after that date will be an F.

## **Grading**

Each team will be evaluated on your efforts as a whole. You decide how best to present the letter of intent, but the quality of it will impact on the grade for the whole class. There should be at least two or more students directly involved with the presentation. All members of the class need to have some input into the presentation. This may mean that some students are assigned to find a map of the CAR and get it blown-up for the use of the presenters. Others might want to put together charts, overheads or other visual aids to help the Managing Director see the wisdom of this loan agreement. Other students could take primary responsibility for drafting/typing the agreement and still others may share the task of doing the primary research. It is up to you to make the presentation one that will convince me that the loan should be extended and further that the class as a whole gets a good grade.

I will also provide a sheet including the names of each student in your group. You will all be asked to fill out this sheet and return it to me anonymously - you will indicate a score for each of the members of the group on a scale of 1-10 rating the participation/effort of the individual members.

Finally, I want you each to turn in a two page typed reaction paper for this assignment in which you describe what you learned from this exercise. This should focus on the insights and ideas about the negotiation process and the content of the role play itself. You may also wish to comment briefly on your experience in working as a group. This will be graded.

I will then tally the scores of your peers, grade your in-class performance, factor in the quality of the "letter of intent" and your grade on the reaction paper. These will be averaged to provide you with your grade on this assignment.

The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) role play has been successful in a number of different class settings because it provides a clear link to course readings and class discussions. It helps to clarify the dilemmas and difficulties of both the bi-lateral lenders and the countries that are under adjustment. The role play brings these conflicts directly into the classroom and then demands that the students themselves find compromises that will serve the interests of all actors involved. Because there are conflicts of interest between different members on the same teams, it provides a realistic view of the politically volatile consequences that SAPs can produce.

## **Conclusion**

As academics who spend most of our intellectual lives engaged in theoretically complex and sometimes arcane debates, it is sometimes easy to forget that our students are being introduced for the first time to many of the concepts we take for granted. As my spouse likes to remind me, “Political Science is dense.” In fact, she is correct. It takes time and effort to process many of the concepts that we teach our students. The methods suggested in this paper are designed to aid students in making sense out of sometimes difficult material.

I have found that the use of a variety of group activities in courses serves the basic instructional goals of 1) subject mastery, 2) building critical thinking, writing and speaking skills, and 3) helps to promote literacy in social scientific method. The fact that the group activities described in this paper also promote community both inside and outside the classroom is an added benefit. The descriptions of these activities are offered as a modest contribution for college level instruction and the use, modification, and improvement on these projects is warmly invited.



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