In Defense of Simulating Complex and Tragic Historical Episodes: A Measured Response to the Outcry Over a New England Slavery Simulation

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Abstract

A slavery simulation that took place as part of a field trip for students of a Hartford junior high academy led a father to file a human rights suit against the school district, and for one official to comment that simulations of complex and tragic human phenomena have "no place in an educational system." In light of these conclusions, this paper explores this case in the context of other similar simulations in order to offer a more measured response to using them in classrooms, one that balances the value of such simulations with the hazards they present for teachers and students.

Introduction

Simulations and other experiential learning activities have long been part of the social studies curriculum. This strategy is often used to enliven discussion of complex issues and perspectives, particularly around topics which may be difficult for students to grasp conceptually or empathetically through other means (e.g. Arnold, 1998; Bloom, 2005; Byrnes & Kiger, 1990; Ganzler, 2010; Lay & Smaric, 2006). Simulations may be ideal for this purpose because they can help teachers bring students' subjective experiences to the surface in order to draw out further learning (Lederman, 1984; Lederman & Kato, 1995). For these reasons, simulations can elicit strong emotional involvement from the students participating in them. And while such emotional engagement can be a strong affordance for learning, it may be problematic if students are not properly prepared and debriefed. Moreover, when their parents are not appropriately informed about the nature or purposes of the simulation in advance, their children's experiences may raise serious concerns that need to be addressed retrospectively. The recent failure of a school in Hartford, Connecticut to address these needs in advance put simulations under a spotlight when a parent filed a human rights complaint against their daughter's school district after she participated in a slavery simulation as part of a four-day school trip.

Controversy Surrounds a Slavery Simulation in Connecticut

According to the story reported in the *Hartford Courant*, the parents of the 12 year old girl "were not informed that students would be part of a slavery re-enactment" (De La Torre, 2013). The girl's father, James Baker, testified to the Hartford Board of Education that he was present to "make you aware of the sanctioned social and emotional abuse my daughter and her

classmates suffered during a field trip with the HMTCA [Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy]" (Baker, 2013). He explained how students were put in a dark room and packed uncomfortably together to simulate being in a slave ship. Later they were taken into the woods to pretend to pick cotton and to participate in an Underground Railroad experience. During these experiences some students were demeaned by having their teeth checked, were called names, and threatened that "if I were to run away they would whip me until I bled on the floor, and then either cut my Achilles so I can't run again or hang me" (p. 2). Baker argued further that the school:

> Practiced cultural insensitivity by placing African American students in simulations of slavery and racial bigotry. If the school placed Jewish kids in a harsh re-enactment of Nazi death camps that would be equally problematic. Why, because the Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971 demonstrated the power of role play on identity and behavior and how mind and body reacts negatively to simulations. (p. 2)

In their own defense, *Nature's Classroom*, the organization that runs the simulation argued that students have been attending the program for many years and that the goal of the simulation was for students to develop an "awareness of physical and emotional and cultural supremacy over another….It's a very, very, heartfelt understanding of an underclassed group" (De La Torre, 2013). Vanessa De La Torre also reported that a "social worker and interventions specialist" at the school "debriefed dozens of students who participated in the Underground Railroad exercise" finding that students took away some positive lessons, like not taking the freedoms they have for granted and better understanding what slaves went through (De La Torre, 2013). More troubling, however, is that students were at times not clear whether the threats of simulation leaders were real or part of the experience, and that "students verbally reported that they felt uncomfortable and confused with the statements" these leaders made (De La Torre, 2013).

"No Place in an Educational System"

These events have led the executive director of Connecticut's African-American Affairs Commission, Glenn Cassis, to state that such simulations "[have] no place in an educational system" (De La Torre, 2013). The argument that simulations of complex and tragic episodes of the human experience should be out-of-bounds is not new. The rationale is derived from two key arguments. The first, hinted at by James Baker in his testimony wherein he referred to the Stanford Prison Experiment, highlights the degree to which participants within an artificial framework can psychologically take on the roles of the dominators and the dominated, thereby losing sight of what is performance and what is real (Baker, 2013). Simulations hold within them the potential to exacerbate these very human tendencies. Thus, Baker is right to be concerned about the potential for a poorly run simulation to devolve into a situation that is confusing and scary for students like his daughter and her classmates.

The second line of reasoning holds that simulations "provide an unrealistic view of tortuously complex and horrific situations that serve to minimize the significance of what victims experience" (Totten, 2000, p. 165). Totten and Feinberg (1995) argued that the pedagogical goal of fostering empathy for those who lived through the Holocaust did not compensate for the potential of such activities to trivialize the activity. As such, the Holocaust (and by extension,

slavery) should, he argued, be considered out-of-bounds for simulations, which "will almost inevitably end up being simplistic and bereft of the historical accuracy that is desired. The end result is that they will not further the educational objective for studying this history, but rather retard it" (p. 330). Totten's and Feinberg's concerns are not without merit. One of the key struggles simulation designers face in creating simulations is verisimilitude, or the near representation of reality. Simulations must strike a balance between representing the phenomena realistically (Baranowski, 2006), while doing so in a simplified manner such that participants can derive meaning from the activity without undue interference from the noise of reality (Aldrich, 2006; Leigh & Spindler, 2004). That is to say that "reality is not always the best learning environment" (Aldrich, 2006, p. 49). What can be concerning is when the simulation is so simplistic that it leaves students with an inaccurate or uncomplicated view of history, or conversely when a simulation is so complex that students fail to derive any coherent meaning from the experience. Simulations of the variety discussed in this paper have the added layer of balancing student discomfort within the context of verisimilitude.

Situating Simulations of the Complex & Tragic

Not all simulations, even those dealing with reverential topics like the Holocaust appear to be as problematic as Totten and Feinberg (1995) would have their readers believe; nor do they degenerate into chaos as the spectre of Zimbardo's prison experiment would suggest (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). Simone Schweber's (2003) self-described bias against simulations was challenged by one teacher's deft execution of a Holocaust simulation, based on the *Gestapo Game*. In her rich account of the simulation, Schweber argued that the simulation remained morally complex, which enabled students to garner deep insights into the Holocaust. Specifically, she noted that students, particularly a young woman named Calypso, who continued to lack certain amounts of knowledge about the Holocaust, nevertheless demonstrated a "moral learning" that "dwarfed her informational gap….Calypso had learned about Jewish victimization, if not in all its historical complexity, at least in meaningful, moral depth" (p. 180). Moreover, she posited that students' sense that they were having fun could more accurately be interpreted as their attempt to describe their productive engagement with the topic, and that "it did not mean they weren't taking the subject matter seriously; they simply lacked the language to express respectful, wholehearted engagement" (2004, p.106).

Schweber (2003; 2004) continued to be torn over the fact that students feel some emotional stress resulting from their experiences within this simulation. Of specific concern to Schweber was that the success of the simulation and the care over students' psychological wellbeing were at times difficult for the teacher to navigate, particularly given that in this context, the teacher played the role of the persecutor. Her role helped to shield students from the dominator/dominated quagmire when students are pitted against each other; however, it also obscured from view some of the needs this teacher's students may have expressed to her had she not taken on this role (Schweber, 2003, pp. 181-182). At the same time, Ben-Peretz (2003) argued that the stress produced by the simulation described in Schweber's (2003) account may have enabled students to care more deeply about the Holocaust through the process of collective, emotional catharsis.

In this way, there is a twofold burden on educators who choose to engage their students in simulations of complex and tragic human episodes. First, they need to help ensure the activities are rich enough and emotionally fraught enough not to trivialize the historical human

experience. At the same time, they need to prepare their students to grapple with the emotional depth of simulations and to be cognizant of students' emotional needs throughout the experience. Without these capacities, the challenges students face in navigating these simulations become more problematic. Schweber (2003) concluded:

> Done well, they allow students emotional and intellectual access to past events; done poorly, they pose miseducative, indeed harmful, opportunities galore. Although Ms. Bess's Holocaust simulation was not morally uncomplicated, it was nonetheless impressive enough to change this researcher's biases against the possibilities of the genre (p.185).

When simulations are used in order to engage students affectively such that they empathize with historical actors, teachers enter a space that is rife with hazards, but also potentially rich with rewards like those described by Schweber. Others too, have noted such positive outcomes.

Byrnes' and Kiger's (1990) research on Jane Elliot's brown/blue eyes simulation demonstrated that this deeply emotional exercise led to positive shifts in students' views of African-Americans compared to more traditional approaches to teaching that aimed to reduce prejudice, albeit at a university level. This activity was, however, arguably a positive learning experience even for young students in an elementary context. In the *PBS Frontline* documentary *A Class Divided* (Peters & Cobb, 1985), Elliot had a chance to interview her former 3rd grade class, who were by then adults, about the simulation. At one point she asked them "is the learning worth the agony?" The former students' immediate response was "yes." One of the former students elaborated saying, "it made everything a lot different than what it was. You, ah, we was a lot better family, even in our houses we was probably, because, ah, it was hard on you. When you had your best friend one day, then he's your enemy the next, it brings it out real quick in you" (Peters & Cobb, 1985).

Similarly, the *Yellow Bibs* discrimination activity observed by Maitles and McKelvie (2010) inspired students to take up the defense of those who suffered the indignities of discrimination by the Genocide Awareness Day speakers. Several students approached the principal, protesting the treatment of their peers, which is precisely the kind of sensibilities we want our students to embody, namely standing up against injustice. Together, the works of Schweber (2003; 2004), Byrnes and Kiger (1990), Maitles and McKelvie (2010), and Peters and Cobb (1985) provide cases that contraindicate the assertions that such simulations are necessarily miseducative and thereby have no place in the curriculum.

Proceed with Care

Nevertheless, students' participation in such simulations should be carefully considered. Age is one important factor, and surely plays a role in the debate over the appropriateness of the slavery simulation conducted by *Nature's Classroom*. The younger the student, the more carefully educators must evaluate whether students have the personal tools to deal with the moral and emotional complexities of these simulations. In an interview, Brenda Trofanenko argued that the study of such events that require students to grapple with "difficult knowledge" should be reserved for high school because younger students lack certain critical capacities to navigate these issues (Ciciora, 2009).

At the same time, in a world in which students' constant access to desensitizing media may callous them to images or descriptions of human suffering (Signorielli, 2005), it may be all the more necessary to instigate opportunities for them to express and engage in relevant

empathetic experiences and discourses. Thus, experiences like simulations that aim to increase empathy and care may constitute inoculations against media desensitization. In this light, it is easy to see why waiting until high school to expose students to simulated experiences may pose its own moral perils—ones of omission. To be sure, the question of readiness is not clearly demarcated, nor agreed upon; nevertheless, it is one factor that social studies teachers should be cognizant of as they plan their curricula.

Beyond the question of student readiness is the fact that those who run these simulations should be well prepared, not just in the orchestration of the simulation but also in recognizing the emotional hazards that are part and parcel with the kinds of experiences described above. Baker (2013) is right to be concerned that, in his words, "no one in this school administration was conscious of the potential psychological and physical harm this activity might pose for all students. We trusted the principal and teachers and this administration to protect our daughter" (p. 2). Educators need to approach these activities with emotional and cultural sensitivity, be wary of early signs of psychological distress, have the tools to support students as they navigate any stress and strain they may feel, and know how to prepare both parents and students to make sense of the experiences before, throughout, and after the simulation is enacted. To be sure, this demands a lot of teachers, and so it should. Teachers must be amply prepared to engage in such simulations effectively.

To say that these activities have no place in an educational system is an understandable, reactive response, but one that clearly lacks discrimination. There are clear and defensible educational benefits that students derive from their participation in social studies simulations, even ones that attempt to address complex and tragic episodes of the human experience. To do away with them is to carelessly dispose of the good with the bad. The Connecticut case does, however, bring to light the challenges that such simulations may pose, thus illuminating the high standard to which simulations and those who implement them must be held, particularly when dealing with scenarios such as slavery or the Holocaust. As a simulations researcher, I continue to see valuable growth in the area of simulations in educational contexts. At the same time, I also acknowledge that the lack of training many teachers receive for running these complex, dynamic activities is highly problematic.

In this way, the debate about whether these simulations are appropriate is misplaced. Research demonstrates that in well prepared and caring hands, they are powerful and memorable additions to the social studies curriculum (Schweber, 2003; 2004). These simulations may also enable students to wrestle with notions of historical memory and the acquisition of difficult knowledge by asking students to embody this knowledge. In this way, educators can help to circumvent the desensitizing effect that has made the imagery of human tragedy commonplace, even banal, in the eyes of our media-soaked youth (Lehrer & Milton, 2011). Our reticence to utilize activities that may cause students emotional discomfort is perhaps just as concerning, insofar as our aversion to doing so may further contribute to the sanitization of human history. To introduce opportunities for students to wrestle with the rich and, at times, troubling emotional landscape of history deepens what social studies has to offer, and, potentially, opens up the past to more textured dimensions than more traditional forms of historical analysis. Both have a place in the social studies curriculum and both are accessible to children in different ways.

The more pressing issue for the social studies community to explore is the manner in which teachers are prepared to undertake complex activities like simulations. Anecdotally, teachers appear to receive very little training of this variety. As a result of this gap in their learning teachers, even experienced ones, who elect to teach by using simulations may be left to

develop their capacities through trial and error instead of under the tutelage of a mentor. As such, the provision of professional training around the use of simulations may help to ensure that teachers are well equipped to employ simulations and able to manage effectively the controlled chaos that these activities require for their success (Wright-Maley, 2013). Such training may also enable them to traverse the moral landscape through which they and their students must navigate, and to see clearly the ethical boundaries across which their curriculum should not venture.

Simulations should, and do, allow students to get close to historical experience. This emotional proximity helps to foster the kind of "caring for" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 234) and "caring about" (p. 229) history that drives students' desire "to care for people in the past" that may help to support other learning goals (p.236). At the same time, these experiences, run amok, have the capacity to wound students. Teachers must therefore be present to help ensure that students can approach the historical experiences as they would a fire: Close enough to feel the heat, but not so close that they get burnt[1]. Thus, the issue at hand is more correctly a question of implementation: For whom are these simulations appropriate and how can they be appropriately included in the curriculum? As a profession we must consider that if simulations of this kind are going to be included, educators need to be prepared to use them effectively. In doing so, we will help to enable educators the ability to use a potent tool that can help, in turn, to advance students' critical and empathetic capacities. At the same time, simulations must be wielded skilfully so that parents can rest assured that their children will reap the benefits simulations have been demonstrated to provide such that their learning is "worth the agony" (Peters & Cobb, 1985).

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[1] Thank-you to Parag Joshi for this metaphor

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