Entrepreneur & Innovation Exchange
Published online at EIX.org on October 25 2016
DOI: 10.17919/X98593

A Simulation for Teaching Empathy in Social Entrepreneurship

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The Star-Power simulation helps students experience inequality, power and marginalization while building empathy for people affected by social problems.

Ashoka Founder Bill Drayton said, “No one can be a changemaker without empathy.” In the rapidly emerging field of social entrepreneurship, both current and future entrepreneurs must strive to achieve it.

What does this mean for those who teach social entrepreneurship? Unfortunately little research has focused done on empathy or on how to teach social entrepreneurship (Brock & Steiner, 2008). This is troubling given the *distinctive challenge* of educating future social entrepreneurs (Tracey & Phillips, 2007). To educate students about social entrepreneurship, scholars have suggested a number of pedagogical approaches, ranging from in-class cases to co-curricular creation of social ventures (Tracey & Phillips, 2007; Smith, Barr, Barbosa & Kickul, 2008; Brock & Steiner, 2008). Some are more hands-on than others, and are more or less doable within a course's time constraints.

However, nobody has suggested simulation -- an approach that can not only reflect real-world problems, but also make students feel as if they are personally affected by these problems and develop empathy for those who deal with them every day. Simulation gives teachers an innovative tool for exploring the complexities of social entrepreneurship in a learning environment, and for sparking rich discussions. Rooted in realism and face validity, the technique engages experiential learning while accommodating the limits of space and time constraints imposed by a typical classroom setting. And it also resonates with students who are very comfortable in the gaming world.

The Role of Simulation in Social Entrepreneurship Pedagogy

No simulations have been developed specifically for social entrepreneurship, but games developed for other purposes can still be used to address the most salient issues in this field. One such simulation is Star-Power, which has been used in a number of fields, including management, for more than three decades. Star-Power's purpose as a pedagogical tool is to combine the increased interest, involvement and enthusiasm of simulations, with the broader experiential learning environment (Kinnear & Klammer, 1987; McGrath, 1982; Keys & Wolfe, 1990) in which social entrepreneurship is embedded.

During the Star-Power simulation, students are arranged into three initial groups. Once they are in groups, they are handed a bag to randomly draw chips from the bag. After each player has drawn five chips, a round of trading occurs, when players can trade chips of differing values in an attempt to increase the value of their chips. Once a round of trading is completed, three groups are established: circles, squares, and triangles, based on their point value in the game. Pins of each shape are handed out. As one player explained, "By wearing different pins, there is a visible representation of the groups." After each round of trading, bonus chips are awarded to the groups, and the groups must decide unanimously how to allocate the chips. After two rounds of trading, the triangles are given the right to establish their own rules for the next round of trading. The circles and the squares are able to suggest rules to the triangles for consideration.

According to the director’s instructions, Star-Power is: "A game in which a low-mobility, three-tiered society is built through the distribution of wealth in the form of chips. Once established, the group with the most wealth is given the power to make the rules of the game. Almost without exception, they make rules which secure and enhance their position of power. The other two groups generally consider these rules to be unfair and

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often label them dictatorial, fascist or racist. Sometimes, there is an open revolt against the top group, other times the other two groups give up and drop out. When the frustration and conflict reaches a certain level, the director ends the game. The experience is then analyzed and discussed (Shirts, 1993: 3)."

The teaching innovation consists of the use of Star-Power simulation, a written reflection paper and a class discussion. The simulation must be purchased from the game manufacturer. The following link is one place to acquire the game: http://www.simulationtrainingsystems.com/corporate/products/starpower/ The simulation takes about an hour to an hour and a half to complete. The class discussion also takes about one hour.

The rationale for the innovation is based on Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984). The written reflection paper asks the student participants to answer two questions: 1.) How did you feel during and after the simulation? 2.) Why did we play Star-Power in a social entrepreneurship course?

The class discussion generally begins with the two questions used in the written reflection paper. After asking these questions, other questions specific to the game are asked. These questions include:

- What were some of the emotions experienced during the game?
- Why did some people feel excitement or achievement?
- Why did others feel disappointed or frustrated?
- Do you think the bags were evenly distributed at the start of the game?
- How were some people able to improve their position during the game?
- Were these improvement opportunities available to all players? Why or why not?
- How did the groups assign the bonus chips after each round?
- Why did they allocate the chips in this way?
- What did the individuals or groups hope to achieve by this allocation?
- What rules were made by the triangles?
- How much consideration did the triangles give to rules proposed by the circles and the squares?
- How does the game apply to the real world?
- What does the game teach you about why people become social entrepreneurs?
- Why do social entrepreneurs need to tackle the "system" of the problem?

Other topics include the range of issues listed in the following section. For a list of specific questions used in a social entrepreneurship course, please contact the author(mailto:smithbr2@miamioh.edu) .

Lessons Learned

There are many lessons learned during the Star-Power simulation, reflection paper and class discussion that are pertinent to social entrepreneurship. Following is a brief overview of some of the key lessons learned, and a representative quote from a student participant. Each of the quotes come directly from the reflection papers submitted by the students on the class period following the simulation:

- **An increased awareness of the role of social structure**

"It did not matter as to the skill of the individual or their entrepreneurial genius…In a way, this directly relates to the way our society works today. The majority of the time, the economic class you are born into is the one that you will remain in for your entire life. No matter how hard you may work, if you are working minimum wage jobs and have a family of four to feed, it is nearly impossible to save any money to invest in the future. Based on the opportunities available to you as an individual, mainly in regards to your education, the scope of your financial future can be determined. "

"The most important lesson I learned about social entrepreneurship is that a change in behavior cannot simply be how we do things or how we give things but must account for the system and how the system works."

- **A greater understanding of emotions experienced by those who are marginalized**

"Originally, I felt embarrassed that I had done so poorly. I became even more determined to work my way out of my situation. However, after the second round, I took into account the factor of chance and opportunity…As the embarrassment began to subside, I started to feel frustration and anger towards my situation and those in the upper-class…This emotion was fueled by the fact that someone in the upper class implied they were more successful because they were better negotiators and we

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EIX.org (2016)
DOI: 10.17919/X98593

were in our situation because we were less intelligent."

"This game was a great lesson in personalizing the feeling of being marginalized by an oppressive system. I felt feelings of intense frustration, anger and inequity."

"The simulation did its job; I felt alienated, powerless, and uncreative because I had the least amount of control. When I failed at strategically trading chips in the first round, I lost the motivation to do well because I could see how large the gap was between my group and the highest group."

- **The development of empathy particularly towards marginalized groups**

"The simulation allows us to experience the feelings of oppression rather than simply hearing about it. Throughout the semester, I will remember the experience of what it feels like to walk in these people's shoes."

"It's one thing to know intellectually about social classes. It's another to spend an hour and a half experiencing the rage of a Circle, the self-righteousness of a Triangle or the frustration of a Square."

"It was emotional and frustrating as the members of our group began to realize that there would be no social mobility within the ranks, and the lower you were the less likely you were to have any voice or say in the rules of the game whatsoever."

- **The reaction to charity by those who are in need**

"Those from the Circle group didn't want charity, they wanted a more level playing field."

- **An understanding of social categorization (and redefining categories)**

"Something about that Triangle button made it difficult for those in other groups to trust me."

"We were divided into groups and being among the top point holders, I became a Triangle. For some reason at that point, the game took a new light. I wanted to win – I knew it was achievable."

"The most profound connection between the simulation and reality is the fact that people are just people. It does not matter what color you are or where you were born or what you do for a living. It doesn't change the fact that the little boy in Nairobi is born with the same potential as you. I may have felt smart and powerful and all those things that…rich people feel about themselves, but what is truly intelligent is the comment made by the Circle: 'It could have been you.'"

- **The role of human agency in social entrepreneurship**

"Based on the simulation, I think social entrepreneurs have the ability to be the X-factor that play a small but important role that facilitates movement between classes."

"Each one of us is a Triangle in the real world."

"The simulation helped me better understand social entrepreneurship because I learned that as a powerful individual I can make a difference."

Linking to teaching and research

While simulations have long been used in areas such as strategic management, leadership and decision making, the use of simulations in the area of social entrepreneurship is rather new. The use of Star-Power represents an opportunity to utilize some of the unique learning aspects of simulations in the context of social entrepreneurship. One of the most significant benefits of the simulation, reflection paper and class discussion is the opportunity to have students truly experience the feelings associated with different classes of society and to have the students recognize the ability to make a difference. In both cases, these objectives can be realized in a very compressed length of time.

While the focus of this innovation is on teaching, the use of simulations has also been found to offer great utility in the area of research. One of the great challenges in the study of social entrepreneurship is identifying a large sample of social entrepreneurial ventures. One possible way to address this issue is through the use of simulation. While very preliminary, the use of the simulation provides at least one fruitful path for using simulations to conduct research in the area of social entrepreneurship.

Critical Thinking & Outcomes

As demonstrated in the quotes from student participants, the use of the Star-Power simulation, a

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written reflection paper and class discussion provides real-world learning in a stimulating, experiential environment. This teaching innovation allows students to move from the concrete experience of the simulation, to the observation and reflection of the paper, to the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations as suggested by experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). It offers an opportunity for instructors to highlight a range of theoretical constructs (structuration, social categorization, relative deprivation, procedural justice, empathy, etc.) that underlie some of the issues related to social entrepreneurship. It also allows students to recognize more clearly their own ability to make a difference through social entrepreneurship.

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DOI: 10.17919/X98593