

Why Simulation Activities Should Not Be Used



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Educators sometimes aim to use simulations or role plays when teaching about historical atrocities in order to engage students more deeply, build empathy and teach the topic in an interactive way.

We frequently hear news stories about a classroom lesson that set out to try to help build empathy for the victims of the Holocaust by having students role play situations of either being “persecuted” or “privileged.” We also hear about teachers who have their students participate in a role play to help them “see how it feels to be a slave.” Some of these simulations have gone so far as to have selected students wear a yellow star for a day and be subjected to enforced rules like forcing them to stand at the back of the class, the end of long lunch lines or

barring them from using some bathrooms. There are other stories in which teachers ask students to write essays to defend and advocate for slavery or the Holocaust in order to reflect on the perspective of the perpetrator.

In many cases, these well-intentioned efforts go awry, leading to upset, complaint and distress for students, families and the school community.

Why simulation activities are problematic

While simulation-type activities may appear to be a compelling way to engage students on topics and events involving genocide and oppression such as the Holocaust, slavery, racial segregation, Internment of Japanese-Americans, etc., we strongly caution against using such activities for the following reasons:

- They are pedagogically unsound because they trivialize the experience of the victims and can leave students with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they actually know what it was like to experience these injustices.
- They stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality by reducing groups of people and their experiences and actions to one-dimensional representations.
- They can reinforce negative views of the victims.
- They can put students in the position of defending and/or identifying with the oppressors.
- They impede critical analysis by oversimplifying complex historical events and human behavior, leaving students with a skewed view of history.
- They disconnect these events from the context of global history.
- They can be emotionally upsetting or damaging for students who are sensitive and/or who may identify with the victims.

While we want students to think about their own choices and decisions, asking students to consider what they would have done under the same circumstances is

an artificial question, as there is no way to know what decisions we will make until we are actually faced with them. Such an exercise also inherently judges the decisions that were made by individuals, decisions that were often “choiceless choices” where no decision was a good decision but a choice had to be made. Often these decisions—which had to be made very quickly—could mean the difference between life and death. There is no way to adequately or authentically replicate such situations, nor should we try.

Alternatives to simulation activities

Below are examples of effective and pedagogically-sound methods that can be used to help foster a sense of empathy and help students begin to understand the motivations, thoughts, feelings and actions of those who lived through atrocities like these.

- Provide ample opportunities for students to examine primary source materials, including photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, government documents, and visual history testimony. Such an exploration allows for a deeper level of interest and inquiry on a range of topics from many perspectives and in proper historical context.
- Assign reflective writing exercises or lead class discussions that explore various aspects of human behavior such as scapegoating or making difficult moral choices. These activities allow students to develop compassion and empathy, share how they feel about what they’re learning and consider how it has meaning in their own lives.
- Invite the voices (through a variety of strategies) of survivors and other eyewitnesses to share their stories with students.

One of the goals for teaching about these horrific historical events is for students to determine their own roles and responsibilities in the world around them. To advance this thinking and learning, we encourage teachers to give students opportunities to consider meaningful actions they can take in their schools and

communities when they see injustice or are faced with difficult moral and ethical decisions.