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Can citizens captain the ship of state? Saving the Titanic, or going down with the ship

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This article introduces a problem-based learning activity based upon the sinking of the Titanic and discusses its surprising effectiveness (activity materials are available from the authors)[1]. Rich in themes and lessons related to civic education and history teaching, this activity provides some insight into how we might approach three of the most important and challenging tasks for developing citizens, whether in middle school or in teacher-preparation programmes.

First, Tom Vontz's research revealed that even the best civics programmes struggle to develop students' democratic dispositions (Vontz, Metcalf and Patrick, 2000). How can we make such experiences more enlightening, so that students gain more than an instrumental ability to pursue their narrow self-interest more effectively? Second, words alone have a limited capacity to overcome anti-social attitudes and behaviours. This became clear to one of the authors when his frequent criticism of xenophobia and sexism did nothing to undermine the racist attitudes of a student who later shot eleven people. What kind of education would be necessary to transform such a student? Third, pre-service teachers, when confronted with problems of poverty, drugs, violence, alcohol, pregnancy, sexual harassment and the like in schools can be driven to despair, feeling powerless to bring about positive change. How can we develop a sense of self-efficacy, a confidence that something can be done about seemingly overwhelming problems by individuals, in our future citizens? Like the activity discussed, the questions are to our minds not idle musings, but can mean life and death.

The Titanic activity, used in the manner described here, has the potential to subvert the three great enemies of civic engagement - ignorance, apathy and powerlessness - by generating a sense of confidence, competence and creativity, an appreciation for collaboration, diversity and multiple perspectives.

This imagined re-creation is conceived as an ideal lead-in to service-learning programmes and programmes such as Project Citizen that engage in real-life, policy-related problem-solving. After a brief outline of the activity, we explore some of the exercise's themes and lessons for civics and history teaching, and discuss models that bring together policy, problem-solving and creativity.

[1] Initially conceived by LeRoy Franklin, a business professor, this exercise was fully developed by Jonathan Plucker, an educational psychologist and creativity expert, who introduced it to Doyle Stevick, who has adapted its use for use in teacher-training's social foundations courses as well as civic education. The timeline is based largely upon Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember*. If you have interest in this activity, in translating it for use in another language, or particularly for doing comparative research with it, please contact the first author at estevick@indiana.edu

Preparation

Before describing the Titanic's design and the fateful night's events, we prepare students to reflect on the activity by telling one of Aesop's fables, suggesting that every story has its own lessons or morals, if only we think about them. They are told that they will have two tasks: first, to develop life-saving solutions to problems facing the ship and second, to derive lessons or morals from the actual event and from the activity.

The short account of the night's events centres on the officers and their attempts to save passengers. Once this narrative is finished, participants are asked to imagine that they have been convened into small groups by Captain Smith, soon after the iceberg was struck, to brainstorm solutions to one of four major problems:

1. What, if anything, can be done about the water filling the ship?
2. Once initial attempts to communicate with a nearby ship (by radio, Morse lamp and flares) fail, how might it be contacted? (It never was.)
3. When the half-empty lifeboats refuse to return for more passengers, what can be done (at least 473 available spaces went unused)?
4. The imminent danger will probably lead to a dangerous panic; what can be done to prevent or manage it?

Working in small groups to address one problem for no more than 10-15 minutes, participants come up with ideas to reduce or redistribute the weight on board the boat, to try the ship's unused resources (pumps, whistles, etc.), to send a life-boat with strong rowers and flares to the nearby ship, to fashion ad hoc rafts from the wood and ropes on board, to use a second lifeboat and a pistol to compel the half-full lifeboats to return for more passengers, and much more.

Naturally, some ideas are useless and others dangerous, but many would have merited consideration or even an attempt, and every class we have encountered made suggestions that would unquestionably have saved lives. Some are open-ended: we cannot know if some would work, while we would have needed more information to see if others could have been attempted (e.g., was there a central power control for the whole ship, allowing the Titanic to act as a giant Morse lamp?)

Principles

After discussing the different proposed solutions, students take several minutes to reflect silently on the lessons of the activity. Experience itself is not transformative: it must be thought about and then discussed. This activity draws on Dewey's idea of providing appropriate experiences, then structuring in time for individual reflection (recorded in a journal) followed by group discussion. The experience provides the 'stuff' with which to think about ideas and concepts, the reflection allows students to work up their own interpretation and derive meaning from the experience, and the discussion allows students to see the events from other perspectives, in all their nuance and complexity.

Learning from the past

The story of the Titanic is a human tragedy, one of the worst losses of life at sea in human history. How does one appropriately honour the poor souls lost? It is a given that we must

learn from the mistakes of the past to prevent them in the future. Justice, blame and punishment vie for attention with prevention.

We can criticise the captain, particularly in terms of time management, but he was a consummate professional with a flawless record of 30 years of service. We would not have found a better-qualified officer. He had to evaluate options, give orders, process information, make decisions, deal with shock and despair, manage officers and a ship of 2200 people facing the depths; is it reasonable to expect him to identify and to analyse numerous problems and generate a wide range of creative solutions as well? No matter how well trained or creative, one human's capacity is limited. This provides an opportunity to move beyond finger-pointing to the systems that we live under, the structures in which we function.

A necessary extension of the requirement to learn from the past is to imagine how it could have been different; this is the task of the exercise. When we acknowledge that changing the captain would likely not have been sufficient, we must then ask, what conditions would have been necessary for the ideas students developed to have been generated and implemented? Though developed under different conditions, the clear feasibility of many student suggestions invites the intriguing conclusion that a more open and collective process including non-experts - as in a democracy - might have been able to generate and implement additional ideas to save lives.

This conclusion has profound implications for governing structures as well as teacher-training.

Open questions

The Titanic becomes a metaphor for the ship of state, and a rich source of questions for philosophic discussion: what kind of governance is best and most effective? What is the duty and responsibility of the passenger/citizen? Must governance be transparent and must information be freely and widely distributed to permit citizens to act in their own interests? How can pursuit of the common good conflict with, threaten or be threatened by mass pursuit of individual good? What constitutes good leadership? What role has trust? Is society (or even the Titanic) too complex for one leader to handle? Should problem-solving or policy be top-down, bottom-up, or some mix? When is delegation or devolution appropriate?

The list of themes that can be drawn out over a civics course goes on and on. Is an authoritarian system necessary and better in states of emergency? What is the appropriate role of authority in its two senses of expertise and power? Can citizens captain the ship of state? Under what conditions could the solutions we developed have been applied? What are the dynamics of the monopoly vs. the free flow of information? What should be left to the hands of governing bodies and what should be handled by individual initiative? What level of trust is appropriate with experts and governing bodies?

Specific lessons

Students produce a great variety of lessons, among them ones we try to bring out for all to hear, particularly that one need not be an expert or have all the answers in order to play an important role in common concerns, and that it is possible to have an impact on the most overwhelming and intractable problems - particularly through cooperative effort (we

don't need to solve world hunger to save lives or to reduce suffering.) These points contributed to a new orientation or approach to problems, both a sense that they could, and should, do something about problems they felt to be important, and a desire to discover how to effect these changes. This orientation is invaluable when launching a problem-based learning policy programme.

A healthy scepticism, deriving in part from our own and other's fallibility as humans, and personal responsibility also feature prominently in student conclusions. When the initial damage assessment of the Titanic was made, minutes after collision, the engineer asserted that the ship had 'one-and-a-half hours, maybe two.' His proclamation was apparently accepted as gospel, and with it a sense that the ship was doomed and nothing could be done about it. But the engineer and the captain were only human, and though expert were fallible, particularly in this horrifying and high-stress situation. In fact, the ship lasted two hours and forty minutes with no additional attempts to slow its sinking. A terrible parallel occurred on September 11th. Soon after the first plane struck the World Trade Centre, a voice on the intercom told the people in the second building that they were safe and should go back to their offices. Just as the authority of the engineer was accepted too readily, this voice persuaded many to go back up the building. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that a group of recent Russian immigrants - whose experiences in the Soviet Union had taught them to be suspicious of official pronouncements - was working on an upper floor in the second tower, and when they heard the announcement said 'we have to get out of here' and escaped just in time. Those who learned to be sceptical of authority - to ask, 'how could she possibly know?' - often left, because there was no way that she could have known they were safe. That announcement, and the authority it embodied against all common sense, took many innocent lives.

The power of collective action becomes clear, the capacity of free and equal individuals working co-operatively towards common goals to bring about positive change. In addition, the value of diversity shows itself, as people from different backgrounds, with different experiences and ideas make new contributions that help the whole and contribute different points of view, helping others to see the situation in new ways. Two heads are better than one, we might say, only if they are not the same. The choir may be a good metaphor, where one voice might not be noticed if it dropped out, but where people play different roles and there is only music if almost everyone sings.

Students inevitably point out that they are not facing the same circumstances and so it is not 'real,' but become persuaded that if we keep our heads in threatening situations, there is often (although not always) something that can be done, while if we panic our situation often becomes hopeless. Once students believe that it might indeed have been possible to do something about a truly intimidating problem under the right governance, it is good to remind them how powerless they would have felt under the circumstances.

Beyond words

The physical experience of the Titanic's size evokes the sense of helplessness passengers must have felt, but also brings home that even the most intimidating problems are not beyond influence. When we explain that the water is -2° Celsius, the information can pass through one's mind without making an impression. Attempting to hold one's arm in freezing water for even ten seconds, which we demonstrate, can bring home much more precisely what it meant to face those temperatures. It is one basic illustration, particularly

valuable for pre-service teachers, that words are no substitute for the reality of experience. Similarly, but only after the activity, we measure off the 271 metres of the Titanic's length, stretching the students from one end to the other. Then we stand next to a building of approximately 23 metres in height, the distance from the life-boats to the water-line. Imagining the sheer size of the Titanic from this perspective reinforces the point that appearances of hopelessness can be deceiving.

Understanding history

This activity is particularly useful in history courses. Too often, students learn history as if it were an inevitable series of events taking place, one inexorably after another. This activity reveals how things could have been completely different, that each moment had countless possible directions, that history is shaped by a series of decisions big and small, that there were countless opportunities taken and lost. Other insights abound. Participants sometimes try to prevent the boat from splitting in half, which no one had any basis for anticipating, but we read backwards as a perfectly logical and predictable outcome; we often read history with a knowledge of what follows, forgetting that the actors involved could predict the future no better than we can.

Finally, this activity offers a sophisticated understanding of causality. If we ask 'What caused the Titanic to sink?' there are many possible answers. Striking the iceberg is the first. But was it the First Mate's conflicting orders that effectively neutralised each other? Was it pressure from White Star Lines to get to New York a day early to gain publicity? Was it the full slate of messages sent by rich passengers to friends about their presence on the famed boat that caused the testy reply of the Titanic's radio operator to warnings of ice floes that drove the California's operator from his radio? Social events are very complex; numerous factors play roles in their unfolding, and any number of slight variations could have changed history considerably. This exercise helps students to understand the complexity of causality and social events, the opportunities available to us to change history's course, as well as the failure of imagination that constrained what was possible.

Creative problem-solving

What makes participants of the Titanic exercise act with so much motivation and enthusiasm? It is the specific quality of the Titanic case: *a problem*. Problems provoke those involved to improve their situation, to *solve* their problem by reflecting and, step by step, developing, implementing, and evaluating effective solutions: 'Thinking begins in...a *forked-road* situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives' (Dewey in Benson & Harkavy, 1997: 17).

This basic idea of problem-orientation, outlined by John Dewey almost nine decades ago, has lead to various strategies of problem-based learning. One of the most prominent approaches is the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) model of Isaksen and Treffinger, introduced in the mid-1980s, and continuously developed since. This model consists of three 'activity' components (understanding the problem, generating ideas, planning for action) and six stages (mess finding, data finding, problem finding, idea finding, solution finding, and acceptance finding) (Isaksen *et al*., 1994: 58). McIntosh and Meachem adapted the CPS model to the classroom, stressing the idea of 'creativity' as the 'heart of innovation' (McIntosh/Meachem, 1992: 9)

'We the People ... Project Citizen' (CCE, 1995) and its German adaptation 'Projekt: aktive Bürger' (CCE/Koopmann, 2001) feature a problem-centred learning strategy in the context of civic education. This programme for middle school students actively engages students in learning how to monitor and influence public policy and encourages civic participation among students, their parents, and members of the community. As a class project, students work together and accomplish the following main steps:

- Students identify a problem in their community that they think is important.
- Having selected the problem, the class wants to study it. They gather and evaluate information about the problem from a variety of sources.
- Students then examine possible solutions.
- Next, the class develops a public policy that they think the government should adopt to solve the problem.
- Finally, the students will develop a plan of action to show how they might influence their government, governmental agencies, public administration, etc., to adopt their proposal.

Another wide-spread variant of problem-solving learning is community-oriented and classroom-linked service-learning which deals with 'learning by strategic community problem-solving and real world reflective doing' (Harkavy, 1996: 66). This approach aims at the investigation of authentic public problems in the environments of schools and a contribution to their (political) solutions.

Political scientists apply a specific problem-oriented method to policy analysis, consisting of these components:

> A political problem gets caught in the machinery of the political system (input or definition of the problem) and is placed on the political agenda (agenda-setting). This is the beginning of policy formulation that usually results in political projects or programmes (described as output performance by Easton). This is followed by the phase of carrying out the policy (implementation), which by itself causes specific reactions, has specific consequences and effects (impact, outcome). Generally, these are compared with the intended targets, which results either in a reformulation or in the accomplishment (termination) of the policy (Thiery, 1994: 233).

From this policy analysis cycle, Massing developed a pedagogical variation, a model accompanied by guiding questions that seems appropriate for the construction and analysis of political problem-solving processes. This (actually endless) cycle consists of the following steps: problem–discussion –decision–evaluation and reactions–problem...(Massing, 1995: 87).

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