

A Bus Ride across the Mason-Dixon Line during Jim Crow

John A. Stokes with Steven S. Lapham

In this classroom simulation, students travel back in time to 1945, when racism was institutionalized in many states through segregation. Though students cannot literally travel back to the Jim Crow era, teachers can create a situation that brings home the point of injustice and the choices individuals are faced with in such situations. Suddenly, a period of history that seems “ancient” to many students feels immediate and personal.

In this exercise, participating students are given different colored cards (e.g., blue or yellow) that serve as their bus tickets, and then experience arbitrary treatment based on the cards they were dealt, so to speak. As the imaginary bus (rows of chairs in the classroom) travels from New York to Maryland, it crosses the Pennsylvania-Maryland border. This was part of the Mason-Dixon Line, a border symbolizing differences between the North and the South. At this pivotal moment in the simulation, the bus driver (the teacher) directs passengers to segregate themselves according to the color of their cards (as Jim Crow laws in Maryland and many states across the South required passengers to do based on skin color).¹ Suddenly, in the simulation, only those with blue cards may sit in the front of the bus.

The exercise, and subsequent discussion with the whole class, can bring history to life in a meaningful way for students and foster a greater awareness of social injustice.

Tailoring the Developmental Level

As a guest lecturer over the last decade,

I’ve (John A. Stokes) conducted this simulation with students in middle and high school classrooms and auditoriums. I’ve conducted it with adult educators in various settings, and before an audience of 2,000 college students. I’ve been a featured speaker at meetings of medical doctors and lawyers. Interesting and unique things happen on each occasion. At the 2009 NCSS Annual Conference in Atlanta, a teacher chose to “go to jail” rather than submit to absurd Jim Crow rules. That had never happened before! So I quickly grabbed a spare chair and called it “the jail.”

I’ve even conducted the activity with elementary school children, although I generally don’t recommend this simulation for students below the sixth grade. Now, it is true that many activities first designed for high school students can be done with younger students if the teacher slows down the action and keeps the vocabulary and concepts appropriate to the developmental level of the children. But I was surprised and worried, not long ago, when I learned that the students in the simulation the next day would not be fifth graders, but first

graders! And that the principal had arranged for the entire student body to watch the simulation in the auditorium! Was it fair to expose a six-year-old child to an act of “racial prejudice”—even if only imagined—in front of a large audience of his or her peers?

A Brave Volunteer

Well, I said a prayer and went ahead with it. I heard later from the teachers that the tiny girl who got to play the pivotal roll in the auditorium that day was a mild child who would never cross a teacher.

When, acting as the “bus driver,” I told this six-year-old to take her yellow card and give up her “bus seat,” she was clearly unhappy. During the next pause in the action, I switched my role to that of the kindly “teacher” and asked her, very slowly, but loud enough for the audience to hear:

“Well, what do you think about what just happened to you?”

She glared at me fiercely and said nothing for a full 20 seconds. Then, she declared in a firm voice,

“I’d rather not talk about it!”

We went on with the simulation (which was an abbreviated version of the lesson plan below). At the conclusion, I invited the young participants to reflect on the activity. Again, I turned to this little girl, wanting to give her another chance to share her internal

experiences, and asked,

“So, would you like to talk with me now about what happened, or would you like to talk to somebody about it later?”

She looked at me and, with great dignity, stated, “I’ll think about it.”

I was hoping she might say more, but I was happy with this response. Indeed, many adults who volunteer for the simulation have a hard time finding words to describe what has just happened or to explain their own actions. This is a part of how oppression works. Witnesses and victims often feel shocked when they witness unfair discrimination for the first time. Events leave them slightly confused and speechless. Those who benefit from discrimination are also likely to be quiet, perhaps for different reasons. I don’t think that this young student was traumatized by the activity, but she had been moved.

This is not a prescribed drama that instructs students on what to say, think,

or feel—or what will be the “right way to act” in a future confrontation. Rather, the simulation presents students with some of the actual facts and conditions that are part of our nation’s history. Then, the teacher asks students to discuss what happened, think about what it all means, and write about it. After all, it is a history that belongs to them.

Note

1. Maryland repealed its transportation and public accommodations segregation laws in 1951. In the case *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state-enforced segregation laws imposed on interstate passengers were unconstitutional, a violation of the interstate commerce clause. The decision was not vigorously enforced, however, and it was ignored in many Southern states. This fact was displayed through the “Journey of Reconciliation,” a direct-action effort sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1947 to test the impact of the decision. In this precursor to the more famous “Freedom Rides” of the early 1960s, black and white activists traveling on buses through the upper South were arrested, imprisoned, and in some cases beaten for violating state and local segregation ordinances. See Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

The Student Strike of 1951

The 1951 Student Strike at Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia, in which I was a leader, has been written about elsewhere.* I just want to point out here that the organizers of that strike were high school students. The twentieth-century social revolution known as the “Civil Rights Movement” had not occurred yet. Martin Luther King, Jr., was an unknown divinity student in Pennsylvania at the time we decided—without direct advice from parents or teachers—to defy the law and refuse to attend classes.

We were not mad at our African American teachers, many of whom were excellent. No, we were angry about the appalling conditions of the buildings in which we studied. The concept of “separate, but equal” was not working for us. We wanted the government of Prince Edward County, Virginia, to construct a modern school building to replace three tarpaper shacks.

Children can understand and confront an injustice like racism. Unfortunately, some children still experience racism of one variety or another on a daily basis. Students at my high school resisted racism in the spring of 1951. America has made some real progress since that time. I hope that the simulated bus ride described here can allow students to discuss the issue of racism in a creative and emotionally safe environment under a teacher’s guidance.

— John A. Stokes

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* John A. Stokes and Lois Wolf, *Students on Strike: Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Brown, and Me* (Washington, D.C.: Random House/National Geographic, 2009.)



Bus station in Durham, North Carolina, May 1940. Photo by Jack Delano/FSA/Library of Congress

A Bus Ride across the Mason-Dixon Line in 1945

A Classroom Simulation by John A. Stokes

Background for Students

Most teachers will probably use a simulation like this to reinforce or recap a unit of study on the history of segregation, including the creation of the Mason-Dixon Line (1767), the “separate but equal” doctrine established by the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), Rosa Park’s protest and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), and the Freedom Rides (1961) that tested the enforcement of Supreme Court rulings that declared segregation in interstate travel facilities unconstitutional. Other teachers might wish to introduce the whole topic of Jim Crow with a memorable activity such as this.

Learning Goals

This simulation recreates conditions that existed during the Jim Crow era. It also demonstrates how racial discrimination affected many aspects of civic life: social, economic, and legal. The activity aims to convey a sense of how it felt (from various perspectives) to be in the middle of a situation where racial discrimination was occurring, and to challenge students to think about what that history means for them today.

Grade Level

As described here, the simulation could be run with students in grades six through college.

Time Required

20 minutes for the simulation, and 30 minutes for debriefing and discussion.

Materials

20 chairs arranged in pairs; one “bus” of 10 chairs at the side of the room, and the other “bus” at the front of the room.
5 yellow and 5 blue cards
2 extra blue cards, one with “Annapolis” written on it, the other with “Salisbury.”

Preparing the Setting

Place five pairs of chairs in two long rows at the side of the classroom, representing the first bus. (Riders may face the back of the room.) Make the same arrangement of 10 chairs at the front of the room. (Riders’ faces should be visible to the audience). An initial activity (passengers move from the first to the second bus) raises suspense and slightly disorients the passengers. The more serious challenge follows.

Procedures for the Simulation

Follow the 12 steps below, developing your own narrative for the drama. Suggested dialog is in *italics*. The actual dialogue will vary depending on what volunteers say and do. The card colors and seating arrangements will “force” at least three dilemmas or “crises” for “passengers on a bus,” pressured by Jim Crow laws.

Do not rush the action. Usher students through the various activities on their travels from a Northern to a Southern city, with some stops along the way. About halfway through, begin to involve members of the audience by asking them questions about what is happening.

The Teacher’s Roles

Once the action begins, the teacher alternately assumes three roles: (1) Teacher, (2) Bus Driver, who might double as a station manager or police officer, and (3) Facilitator. The teacher sets a classroom atmosphere of sincerity (reminding the actors that this is not a test), playful curiosity (allowing spontaneity), and inclusiveness (inviting members of the viewing audience to comment on the drama at various moments).

Volunteers & Audiences

Student responses to this simulation will vary. Some nervous giggling is natural at the start. On the other hand, some audiences watch this simulation with great solemnity, and that is okay too. Work with your volunteer actors, as well as with members of the class who will reflect on what they are witnessing.

Debriefing and Discussion

This simulation is not a test of students’ knowledge of history. The value of it is in how students come to understand what has happened in the simulation. After the drama is over, engage the class in a discussion to analyze the events—and to relate it to actual historical events. Some prompting questions are suggested on the next page.

Assessment

On the following day in class, it may be appropriate to quiz students on basic facts with regard to the Jim Crow era, such as the significance of the Mason-Dixon Line and *Plessy v. Ferguson*. But most important is to challenge students to reflect on the simulation through a group discussion and in an individual writing assignment about one or two questions such as these:

- Did anything surprising or unexpected happen during yesterday's simulation? If so, describe that event.
- Were there options for the volunteers, or outcomes, that did not happen, but that you would have liked to see happen? What were these?
- What causes people to establish such rules and act in this way?
- How do people act when they have power . . . or feel powerless?
- How would you respond if you were treated unjustly . . . or if you witnessed unjust treatment?
- How can situations like this be changed?

Extension Ideas

This simulation might inspire students to investigate writings from the civil rights movement as well as memoirs written in later years. One controversial classroom simulation from that era was Jane Eliot's third-grade "brown eyes/blue eyes" activity of 1968. Download the PBS Frontline documentary about that event, "A Class Divided" (46 minutes in five chapters) free at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/etc/view.html.

Dr. Sam Hampton, Hampton Films



Students participate in the bus ride simulation at Longwood University in Virginia, March 30, 2010.

Dr. Sam Hampton, Hampton Films



John Stokes, left, with students at Longwood University, March 30, 2010.

A Bus Ride across the Mason-Dixon Line in 1945

A Classroom Simulation by John A. Stokes

Procedures for the Simulation

Step 1. Begin the Trip

Explain that today's activity will be a simulation, and that you are seeking volunteers to be passengers on a bus traveling from Rochester, New York, to Ocean City, Maryland in 1945 (or select any appropriate North-to-South cities on the East Coast).

Choose 10 volunteers from the class, randomly handing out 5 yellow and 5 blue cards.

[Spoken:] *Please come aboard. Tickets are \$11.50.*

Choose two volunteers who will remain at their desks. Give each a blue card, one labeled "Annapolis," and the other "Salisbury."

Invite the passengers to seat themselves in the 10 chairs (in pairs) at the side of the classroom. Describe some of the scenery as you "travel" through upstate New York and Pennsylvania. Engage the rest of the class with a question:

What historical "line" on the map is crossed as the bus enters Maryland? (The Mason-Dixon Line, which was drawn in 1796.)

Step 2. Change Buses in Baltimore

On arrival in Baltimore, direct the passengers to step off, walk to the rows of chairs in the front of the room (which represent a different bus), and find seats there. Wait as they choose their own seats.

This movement disorients your volunteers a little. They have to walk about, decide where to sit on the new bus, and face a new direction.

Step 3: Segregate by Color of Card

Standing at the front of the "bus," face the seated passengers and ask them to hold up their tickets. Direct blue cardholders to move to the front of the bus, yellow to the back. Allow time for passengers to move and segregate themselves according to card color. Then face the class.

Did everyone see what happened? ... Our passengers are so quiet!

Do not invite discussion at this point. Move to Step 4.

Step 4: Dilemma for Seats 5 and 6

Although passengers attempt to segregate themselves, the new setting has "forced a dilemma." Seats 5 and 6 in the middle of the bus are now occupied by passengers with cards of different colors. Address these two passengers:

Hold your tickets up now, please, both of you. Up high.

Involve the whole class in the unfolding drama by asking everyone:

Ladies and gentlemen, is there a problem here?

Allow a student to explain "the problem": blue cardholders and yellow cardholders cannot sit in adjacent seats.

Step 5: Yellow Must Stand

Confront the yellow cardholder with a choice: to stand in the aisle for the three-hour ride to Ocean City, or stay overnight in the bus station, hoping for an open seat on a morning bus.

Whether this passenger decides to sit or stand, the teacher should move along in the script, which signifies that any decision taken by the actors is okay in this simulation.

Step 6: Yellow Cannot Stand Next to Blue

If, however, the student with the yellow ticket now stands in the aisle next to seats 5 and 6, then there is still a problem. Address the class:

Do we have a problem here?

Address this passenger.

Ma'am, you can't stand next to those seats. You have to step back a few steps. You have to be next to other people with yellow tickets.

Turn to the class.

It's part of the rules. They'll put you in jail for looking too hard at folks with cards of another color. Jim Crow was ugly. This is how it was.

Step 7: First New Passenger Boards

Address the class.

Who has the "Annapolis" card? Please come aboard.

This new passenger, arising from the class, has a blue card, and may occupy the empty seat (5 or 6) next to another blue

cardholder. Now all the seats are full.

Turn to the yellow cardholder who is standing. *How'd you feel about seeing someone else take your seat, while you have to stand?*

After the passenger has answered, you can turn to the class and say,

Let's give this young person a hand!

This gesture reminds volunteers and student viewers that the simulation is an educational event. Any reactions are okay.

Step 8: Second New Passenger Boards

Who has the "Salisbury" card? Please have a seat on the bus.

Both yellow cardholders in seats 7 and 8 must give up their seats and stand in the aisle.

There are now three people with yellow tickets who are standing. The new passenger, a blue cardholder, sits beside an empty seat.

What just happened here? Can anyone describe what just happened here?

Step 9: Plessy v. Ferguson

Turn to the class.

Can anyone describe the Jim Crow rules being enforced in this scenario?

1. Blue cardholders sit toward the front of the bus. (But that is just the beginning. . .)
2. A blue cardholder may sit in any seat, bumping out a yellow cardholder (or even two), at any time.
3. A yellow cardholder may not sit next to, or even stand next to, a blue cardholder.

Turn to the passengers.

What United States Supreme Court ruling provided a rationale for segregation, for Jim Crow laws in America? (Plessy v. Ferguson)

Step 10: Unspoken Rules

Does anyone who had to get up to give someone his or her seat have anything to say?

This might be a tough question for volunteers to answer. Sometimes passengers are very eager to speak. Sometimes they are silent, in which case you may pose the question to the audience. Provoke and guide the discussion so that some truths about racial discrimination are made manifest:

1. Privilege is silent.
2. Victims are often silent too.
3. When everyone complies, then everybody plays a part in racial discrimination.

Step 11: Economic Injustice

The sense of unfairness is palpable. But there is an aspect of injustice that students may not think of.

Did everybody pay the same price for a ticket?

Those who were forced to give up their seats, or sat all night in the bus station, received inferior service, but they did not pay *less* for their ticket. Everybody paid the same price, \$11.50. *Is that fair?*

Step 12: Protests to Come

During the simulation, you might have to improvise if a nonviolent protest arises. For example, you might quickly set aside a new chair, calling it "the jail," to hold a protester. During most simulations, however, passengers comply with the Jim Crow rules after very little instruction. In effect, they "enforce" these unfair laws themselves.

This simulation hints at the protests that evolved during the civil rights movement. Recall, for example, the Montgomery bus boycott (1955), the lunch counter sit-ins (1960), and the Freedom Rides (1961). If students do not point out these features, be sure to voice them yourself, and encourage discussion:

- What would happen if a yellow ticket holder, or a blue ticket holder—or both—stopped "playing by the rules?"
- What would happen if 4 or 5 passengers, or more, stopped complying?
- What was the cost of noncompliance in the Jim Crow South?
- Why do you think it took so long for the "separate but equal" doctrine to be rooted out of American life?

JOHN A. STOKES was one of many plaintiffs in *Brown et al. v. Board of Education*. A retired teacher and Baltimore school principal, Mr. Stokes lectures widely and has been a featured presenter at a number of NCSS Annual Conferences. He wrote, with Lois Wolf (a member of NCSS and CUFA) and Herman Viola, *Students on Strike: Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Brown, and Me* (Random House/National Geographic), which was a Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People in 2009. Write to him at jastokesbrownvsboard@verizon.net and visit www.johnastokes.com. He can also be reached at 301-306-5577. A documentary film about Mr. Stokes and the student strike of 1951 is in production at Hampton Films (www.hamptonconsulting.com).

STEVEN S. LAPHAM is an associate editor at NCSS.