

The Gadfly Experiment. Noel Dolan, Villanova University, May 25, 2008

I. Day One. Read and discuss the "Apology" and the "Crito" (if there is time for both)

- A. In the "Apology," track charges (2 sets) and arguments against
 - 1. Lay out the charges on the board with student help in defining
 - 2. Have students work in small groups to find and explicate Socrates' arguments against (give each group 1-2 charges to seek)
 - 3. Have students present their findings and find any similarity between the old charges and the new
- B. Discuss the nature of these charges and what they represent about the culture, its principles, and its fears
- C. Discuss whether the verdict was just or not (show of hands). This has always ended up for me with a majority voting that Socrates was unfairly sentenced to death, but with 1-2 students arguing that, given the charges and Socrates' behavior, the finding was just. It's a good basis for the experiment to come in which not everyone will agree.
- D. In the "Crito," examine Socrates and his principles. Hold this character portrait up to that of the Socrates charged in the "Apology": does Socrates stand by what he believes? What about him might have created the charges? Is he right to abide by the (unjust) sentence?

II. On a new class day, hold the gadfly experiment. The goal of the experiment is to set the students a seemingly possible task that is actually impossible and to watch how they treat the dissenter: to re-enact, in other words, the basis of the "Apology."

A. You will need to prepare a "mole" in advance: choose wisely. The student should be subtle in his/her objections to the group, smart enough to think on his/her feet to create new challenges, and patient enough to wait before beginning to disrupt. I have also found that if you choose

- 1) a big young man, his physical presence will inhibit the group from vocalizing their frustrations with him or
- 2) a young woman, her gender will cause the group to be more polite in their handling of her objections (and that often she will be too polite in how far she is willing to push the group) or
- 3) someone who already has cast himself or herself as the outsider/dissenter in class discussions, students will already be fatigued by this role and will be harsher in their reactions to this person.
- 4) That is not to say that you should not make these choices; the responses the group generates to the mole are the objective here, and all of this makes for great post-experiment analysis.

B. The role of the mole is to keep the group from reaching consensus in their task.

C. For the experiment, the class should be told that they must decide on five principles of government for the ideal polis (you can use the word "laws," but it will provoke discussion among students of whether these ideals are enforceable). They are given a time limit (in a 50 minutes course, 30 minutes works well; you need to reserve time to set up the experiment and discuss it afterwards); for a 75 min. class, lengthen the time, but up the number of principles from five to 10.

D. Tell the class that at the end of the time, they must unanimously agree to these rules to earn an A for the activity. If they cannot agree, they will fail. Make it seem like this is an easy task.

E. Give a whiteboard marker to one student to write down suggested rules.

F. Seat yourself outside of the circle and take notes (or pretend to—heighten their awareness of what they are doing). Check your watch and give them time reminders at 10, 20, 25, etc.

G. The mole should not push hard in objections until towards the end of the experiment. When you ask for a vote for or against the rules at the end, give each student a chance to explain his/her vote. Work from the side of the room farthest away from the mole.

III. Post-Discussion

- A. After the vote, relieve the tension by explaining it was a set-up. Reveal the mole, and you will find that students very quickly vocalize what they were really thinking about this person who was going to cost them a grade. They are happy to not have to be angry with this person.
- B. Talk about how they felt and why, and how the mole felt as this was all happening. Was it easy to continue going against the group when he/she realized the frustration of the group and felt the pressure to change an opinion?
- C. Segue to Socrates: ask them how the experiment relates to the “Apology.” They should be able to see how they acted as the jury did out of fear for the common good, and the mole was like Socrates in his/her stubborn insistence on an ideal.
- D. You may also discuss the real work that was done: the principles they selected to govern and why they made those choices. This is an opportunity for the mole to express real beliefs, too.
- E. As expressed above, you may address issues of gender, size, etc. in how the group handled the mole if you feel this is appropriate and if it would add to your discussion in a positive way.

Note: this experiment works best if the students in the class are comfortable with one another. I would therefore not advise it as an activity for the first two weeks of class.

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