

Puritan Day: A Social Science Simulation

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Good teaching ideas have the potential to lead to many spheres of inquiry, as well as to bring a school community together. This is what happened when we initiated “Puritan Day” at the Village Community School (VCS) for our eighth grade classes who were simultaneously studying the trial of Anne Hutchinson in American history while reading Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* in English.¹ During the simulation, eighth grade teachers became Mistresses and Masters, enforcing an expressly-made code of behavior for one day that led to a subsequent day of “shaming” the transgressors, followed by a debriefing. In the process, students learned a great deal about forms of social control as well as the meaning of tyranny—ideas they could later apply to other time periods as well.

Most students assume that a thriving society runs smoothly because people abide by the laws. But there are various informal, as well as formal, means of social control such as gossip, ridicule, and shame that function even in complex societies to achieve social control, or conformity to group norms. According to anthropologists Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms,

Every society has some social mechanisms to deal with nonnormative behavior and conflict. Informal mechanisms such as gossip and ridicule are effective because most people value the esteem of (at least some) others. The shame of being gossiped about or ridiculed is a powerful way of ensuring conformity in face-to-face communities and in informal groups within complex societies.... Fear of witchcraft accusations is another informal control mechanism.²

My immediate goal in devising the

simulation was to help students feel the impact of what they were learning about Puritan society. Looked at in tandem, the New England trial of Anne Hutchinson (1637) and the trial of the accused witches of Salem (1692) provide students with the means to understand that when informal social control mechanisms fail to curb the behavior deemed offensive by a society, the behavior may become subject to formal means of social control (the trials).

Anne Hutchinson was prosecuted for her beliefs and accused of slandering the ministers of the Massachusetts Bay colony. The main evidence was what she said at a private meeting in her home. Later, she was also accused of heresy and excommunicated from the church. She and her most ardent followers were banished from the colony. She was prosecuted by the same men who were her judges. In *The Crucible*, the witch-hunt in Salem is initiated by a group of hysterical young girls. Puritan society viewed chil-

dren as inherently sinful. Miller writes that “[The Puritans] never conceived that the children were anything but thankful for being permitted to walk straight, eyes slightly lowered, arms at sides, and mouths shut until bidden to speak.” Since misbehavior was equated with sinfulness, the psychological strain on children was considerable. Adults, too, were under strict scrutiny, since the sin of one individual was regarded as besmirching the integrity of the entire community. Miller writes, “This predilection for minding other people’s business was time-honored among the people of Salem, and it undoubtedly created many of the suspicions which were to feed the coming madness.”³ In the subsequent trial, 19 people were condemned to hang.

I wanted students to experience what it was like to live under constant surveillance by their teachers and peers in both public and private, and thus I needed the support of many faculty members. My hope was that through this experience, students would understand just how powerful informal control mechanisms can be in molding behavior. In the simulated “legal” punishment phase, I wanted students to have little or no recourse if unjustly accused of breaking the community’s rules. The NCSS standards addressed by the simulation include **Ⅴ INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS;** **Ⅵ POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE;** and **Ⅹ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.**⁴ The



A fair Puritan / E. Percy Moran (c1897)

simulation could be adapted for grades 5 through 12.

Initiating the Simulation

Our kick-off for the simulation began in a Monday morning homeroom period, during which we assembled all sections of the eighth grade and their teachers. We explained that we were gathered together to implement an important part of the curriculum, something which all of us had been planning as a way to help students feel what it might have been like

to be a Puritan in seventeenth-century New England. Faculty then took turns reading out loud—with a good deal of solemnity—the following letter, which was subsequently distributed to the students.

The wording of the letter was designed to set the mood as well as to stretch the vocabulary of students. I was careful to take religion out of Puritan Day, as this would have made it inappropriate to simulate in a school setting. Puritan Day focused on matters of deportment

and not on serious offenses like lying, cheating, and stealing, which would have been subject to real, not simulated, repercussions at our school.

Implementing the Simulation

Any venture such as this one needs the support of the administration. Because we did not want students to be unduly upset or worried about Puritan Day, we needed to inform parents about it. At our school, the Upper School Division Director sent a letter home to parents (via email), which read:

Dear Esteemed Eighth Grade Parents,

This week, the eighth grade students will be participating in a special simulation that relates to their study of Puritan New England and the early colonists' quest for a highly ordered and dutiful society. In order to maximize what students will learn from their studies, we will be holding our own day of behaving like Puritans and experiencing a bit of Puritan justice. Students will be monitored and notes will be kept by their teachers regarding any "untoward" behavior, including lateness to class, dawdling, and similar behaviors discouraged in the community.

The project was presented to the students today, but with the vagueness necessary to make the experience authentic. I suspect that many of your children will comment on this project at home, and their feelings about the project may vary. If eighth graders feel that some injustices are being committed in the process, we hope you will bear with us, as the lessons learned from this experience are worth a bit of toil and trouble.

If you have any questions please feel free to call an eighth grade teacher or me. I encourage you to read the packet dis-

tributed to the students, which describes the project in detail.

Dutifully,

Jessica Spielberg—aka—The Very Honorable and Revered Mistress Spielberg (as I will be referred to throughout the project).

The day of the simulation, I distributed little black books to the participating teachers along with the following instructions:

Carry on with classes as you would; don't let the simulation interrupt anything. Do not stop and make a fuss about a transgression. Rather, carry your black book with you everywhere, including the halls and

lunchroom. Noticeably take the black book out and write notes in it while mumbling something like, "Well, I certainly have things to report about some students today." Better to leave students in suspense as to what is being written about whom.

Since VCS is a relaxed and informal working environment for staff and students, on Puritan Day all of us enjoyed being on a highly formal footing. The faculty understood that ultra strict application of the rules was critical; we wanted to make it as difficult as possible for students to obey all of the rules all of the time. Teachers relished their roles as strict disciplinarians while also remaining sensitive to the emotional needs of students.

A little tongue-and-check humor among staff and students did not spoil the tone of the day, and, in fact, actually made it more fun. Some of our wittier students enjoyed engaging in repartee like, "May I ask the esteemed Mistress Schur if I may forthwith sharpen my pencil?"

Enhancing the Simulation through Homework Assignments

The night before Puritan Day, students read a selection of primary-source documents from the colonial era in preparation for writing their own diary entries. These included excerpts from the diary of Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), who was a judge in the Salem witchcraft trials.⁵

It may be surprising to realize that the habit of keeping diaries is relatively

Missive To: The Honorable Community of Eighth Grade Members of the Village Community School.

From: The Honorable and Esteemed Elders of Your Community

Witness this Day of Monday, November 7th in the Year 2006 the following pronouncement:

On the Day of Tuesday, November 8th the aforementioned eighth grade class of our respected Community will be in a state of heightened self-reflection regarding their duties to this Community such that they will be assiduously watched by the aforementioned Honorable and Esteemed Mistresses and Masters and all Elders of their Community concerning the following **untoward behaviors**:

- Lateness to school
- Lateness to any class whatsoever for any reason
- Lateness in regards to turning in homework for any reason whatsoever
- Lack of tidiness of all material matters, including lockers and notebooks
- Dawdling in idle play on the way to classes
- Speaking in an untoward manner toward any member of this Community of Eighth Graders
- The gluttonous and avaricious imbibing of drink and food other than at the designated hour for communal repasts.
- Failing to address an Elder as Mistress or Master
- Speaking without respect to any Elder of this Community
- Blasphemous and profane language of any kind spoken in a foul tongue.

- Dressing in a manner that lacks modesty and proper deportment. (Restrictions include the wearing only of solid, dark colors, the covering of arms and legs with shirts tucked in.)

Let it be noted forthwith that all Masters and Mistresses will be especially assiduous in their **surveillance of such behaviors** that besmirch the good name of our Community.

Let it be forthwith noted also **that to ensure that Good Behavior** graces our Community in every corner and cranny of our building, that the Reverend and Honorable Mistresses and Masters shall also **appoint four highly Honorable and Respected members of the Eighth Grade** to spy on the behavior of their peers when they are not in sight of their Elders. These Highly Respected Eighth Graders shall make note of all ill behaviors to their Elders. They are under absolute instruction **not to divulge** who they are.

However, insofar as it is impossible to keep watch over the entire flock of eighth graders we ask each class member to **keep a diary** in which they self-reflect on their own behavior during this Especial Day. The diary form is attached forthwith.

On the morning of Wednesday, November 9th the Honorable and Revered Mistresses and Masters shall hold **General Court** with the Community to make public announcement of who has transgressed and thus besmirched this Community with any foul actions or deeds. **Punishments will then be meted** out accordingly and will be in force throughout the day of Wednesday, November 9th. At the end of November 9th all members of the Community shall once again self-reflect in their diaries on the state of their worthiness.

On the afternoon of Thursday, November 10th the Community shall hold court with their Elders to discuss further matters of interest to this Community. [This time was used for a debriefing.]

new, dating only to the seventeenth century. The Puritans took to diary writing largely to assess the state of their souls. As Rose Wilde writes in “Chronicling Life: The Personal Diary and Conceptions of Self and History,” on the website of Rice University:

Journals of conscience provide deeper insight into the inner life of the diarist, as their main preoccupation is the state of the soul. This genre achieved widespread popularity with the Puritans, continuing with the Quakers and other groups.... They analyzed every thought for signs of impurity, with the purpose of perfecting the soul. Although the Puritans may have popularized the journal of conscience, others quickly adopted this self-critical form of examination. ... Remnants of this form of diary keeping have crept into modern practices: counting calories in a daily log, recording the details of a work-out, each of these represents a kind of record keeping with the intent of self-improvement—the values have changed, but the method of self-policing has not.⁶

Thus historians believe that the Puritan penchant for religiously motivated self-reflection led to the subsequent American craving for “self improvement.” One of America’s first advocates of the power of “self-improvement” was Ben Franklin (1706–1790), who wrote in his autobiography about his endless attempts to improve his moral character. He was concerned more with what we might call “character building” than with the state of his soul. I assign the section in which he designs a chart to keep track of his ability to live up to the virtues to which he aspired such as temperance, order, frugality, and industry.⁷

The night after Puritan Day, students were assigned to keep a diary about their behavior and that of their peers, as well as to answer the following questions with honesty and self-reflection:

- Did you do anything that transgressed the rules of the Community?

If so, do you think either a teacher or student observed you? Reflect on how you felt about the situation.

- Did this form of informal social control improve your behavior? Explain.
- What does it feel like not to know who may be reporting to the authorities about you?

In their diaries about Puritan Day, students commented on a number of things:

At first I was wondering why we had the dress code of solid dark clothes but then I realized that it made us feel more like Puritans.

Today, I didn't only think about how I was acting around others, but about how others were acting around me. It was a little strange because everyone was thinking about the activity but didn't want to say anything about it since everyone suspected everyone else was a spy.

Because we were told that there were four eighth grade spies watching us we felt very uncomfortable, and people who were my friends that I trusted, I didn't know if I should trust them for that day. I was definitely on my best behavior because of the situation.

Not only did I have to act perfectly flawless around people, I had to act flawless in front of my closest friends. Because we did not know who the spies were we were all caught up in trying to find out. The students needed to know so we could feel some sense of security.

I know I was written about in the little black books three times. All of them, I thought, were unfair. First Mistress Spielberg wrote me down for calling out. I wasn't calling out; I was talking. Class hadn't started yet. Then Mistress

Shearer wrote me down for having my shirt un-tucked. My shirt was not un-tucked; one side was just sticking out a little. The third and final time was from Mistress Schur. I was leaning back in my chair. I admit to that one, however the rules never said we couldn't lean back in our chairs.

A final diary entry was assigned for the day after Puritan Day, when the faculty meted out punishment, described below.

The Simulated Retribution

Students find it fascinating to learn about the stocks, pillory, and other quaint forms of colonial punishment, but it was the wearing of the “scarlet letter” that best suited our needs. It was simple to employ, and it clearly exemplified the basis of Puritan justice in which public shame is used as a form of social control. According to anthropologist Robert F. Murphy,

Shame operates best in communities in which there is a face-to-face interaction among all members and in which the miscreant can neither hide one’s deeds nor escape their consequences; it is thus the means par excellence of social control in small towns and primitive societies.⁸

Who should be made to wear a letter, and for which transgression? At the end of Puritan Day, I formulated a chart (next page) and distributed it to teachers.

Then teachers consulted their little black books and recommended which students should wear letters to a small faculty committee that met after school. The committee’s goal was to have no more than one quarter of the class receive a letter. We wanted the miscreants to have company, but also to stand out. We were careful not to typecast students. Rather than receive a T for lack of tidiness, a notoriously messy student might receive a C for entering the classroom one second late. We wanted to find fault with some of our “goody-goody” students as well.

LETTER	KEY
L	Lateness to school
C	Lateness to class
H	Lack of Homework
T	Lack of Tidiness
D	Dawdling—hanging out in the hallways, etc.
S	Speaking without respect to a classmate
G	Gluttony, eating other than at snack and in the lunchroom
E	Neglecting to respect an Elder
P	Profane speech and swearing
I	Immodest dress

While in each case we had a record of misbehavior on which to base the punishment, we wanted our highhanded justice to feel as arbitrary and unfair as possible.

I then created placards for students to wear. On the front of a large index card I wrote down a “scarlet letter,” and on its reverse I wrote down what the letter stood for. The cards were hole-punched with a string attached so that they could be worn around the neck.

The day after Puritan Day we held General Court during which the Elders distributed the letter placards in a formal “legal” ceremony. The following written instructions were given to all eighth grade students:

The decisions of the Elders, fair or not, must never be questioned.

If you have been judged at fault and assigned to wear a letter badge by your elders, you must wear your placard in a visible and prominent place throughout the day.

All members of the eighth grade are entitled to ask any class member wearing a letter placard what ill behavior earned them this punishment. The placard wearers are required to respond to this question and explain what

behavior earned them this letter.

Members of the eighth grade are prohibited from teasing one another.

If any member of the school community other than an eighth grader asks why someone is wearing a letter the response must be: “This relates to an eighth grade project and I am not allowed to discuss it with you.”*

(*This avoided a sense of shame in front of a public who would not understand the context of the simulation.)

I was initially worried about this phase of the simulation in case it proved psychologically too stressful for some of our students. But other teachers persuaded me that our students were ready to handle it in the right spirit, and they were correct. Wearing the placards did not prove too disruptive to school life. Some students actually seemed to enjoy wearing one because of the attention they received from their peers!

However, if you initiate Puritan Day at your school, you might want to drop this phase of the simulation if you feel that students would be upset by it or take advantage of it to tease one another.

A second diary assignment ensured that students would process and reflect on the punishment phase of the simu-

lation as they answered the following questions:

- If you were punished, do you believe you earned your just desserts, or do you think you were the victim of injustice? Explain.
- If you are someone who was not punished are you surprised, and if so why?
- How did it feel to look at students who wore a scarlet letter? How do you think they felt?
- How do you think school life would change if we utilized this form of social control throughout the school year?
- How did this experience enhance your understanding of *The Crucible*, the trial of Anne Hutchinson, or Puritan life in general?

Debriefing

The overwhelming feeling among students as the simulation ended was the sadness engendered by a loss of trust in one another. It was therefore important to reconvene the entire community of students and participating teachers for a debriefing session to defuse the emotionally-charged atmosphere. We also wanted to help students see how they could apply what they had learned about social control and the Puritans to other historical eras. We started by asking students to share some excerpts from their two diary entries. The following written comments are typical of the connections students made to their curricula in both history and English:

When I was called up to receive a letter, I was pretty mad just because I didn't know what I did to justify getting one. I wanted to say something in my defense but we were not allowed to. It was like the trial of Anne Hutchinson in that the judge also happened to be her prosecutor. So to me it

was very unfair, but after the day ended I got over it.

It could get really embarrassing to wear a letter in front of your friends. We kidded each other about the letters and made jokes about our crimes to make the best of them. But in Puritan times it would have been no laughing matter. Imagine if today you had to wear a letter to a job interview. Most likely you would not get the job you were applying for.

I felt guilty that I doubted all of my friends, not knowing whether they would turn me in or not. I couldn't trust anybody, just like the citizens of Salem during the witch trials. If you don't know something about someone you get scared and start creating stories about him or her. From this situation, rumors are born, like in Salem. Hysteria can often be fed by some type of fear or paranoia.

I think this simulation made me realize how lucky I am to be in a free country and to be allowed to speak my opinions and thoughts.

I will remember this project forever because, by taking away our trust in each other, it actually taught me how much I value friendship and community.

The faculty then dropped a bombshell: We asked all student informants to raise their hands. No one did—because there were none. This news stunned and relieved the class and was the cause of both laughter and disbelief. When students asked us why we did not appoint any, I shared Ben Franklin's adage, "Three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead." We had decided not to appoint informants for this reason: what mattered most was that students believed there were informants without being able to detect who they were.

Faculty members then posed a variety of thought-provoking questions to the class, which led to a powerful and fruitful discussion. Students understood the flaws in the "legal" phase of judgment and punishment, and it justifiably outraged their sense of justice: no jury of their peers, no ability to produce witnesses or even to speak on their own behalf. But the most interesting insights they made concerned the power of informal social control. Believing that authorities can monitor your public and private actions is a powerful deterrent, but at great cost to privacy, trust, and freedom of expression. We found that students could speak with new insight about a number of books they had read both independently and for school. These included works like *The Wave* by Morton Rhue (Puffin Books, reissue 1994), which is based on a true incident in which a teacher demonstrates to his class how the power of peer pressure can lead to fascism, and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, in which a lack of privacy leads to a totalitarian regime, as it does in George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. Other students were reminded of what they had learned about slavery from reading *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in which Douglass talks about the stratagems used by slave owners to convince their slaves of their owners' omniscience. New connections await those students who will no doubt read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in high school.

We concluded the project by taking the class to see *Goodnight and Good Luck*, the 2005 film directed by George Clooney. It was a fitting way to end their reading of *The Crucible*, which was written by Miller during the 1950s Communist witch-hunt with the intent of drawing parallels to the Puritan witchcraft trials. The movie is about Edward R. Murrow's brave fight to challenge the fear-mongering tactics of Joseph McCarthy. Watching the film, students could identify with the feelings of rampant paranoia among journalists and its chilling effects on social relationships. In turn, we used the movie to further classroom debate about the justification

and effects of the current surveillance programs of the U.S. government in its fight against terrorism.

One of the unexpected benefits of enacting the simulation at our school was the way it brought faculty and students together. Together, we had taken an unusual journey without knowing what the outcome would be. We had interacted in new ways, shared an emotionally memorable experience, and, as a community, processed what we all had learned from it. 📖

Notes

1. To teach about the trial, we used *American History Recreations: The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, published by Interact/Highsmith.
2. Serena Nanda and Richard L. Warms, *Cultural Anthropology, Eighth Edition* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2004), 257.
3. Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 4-5.
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1994).
5. Mel Yazawa, *The Diary and Life of Samuel Sewall* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998).
6. Rose Wilde, "Chronicling Life: The Personal Diary and Conceptions of Self and History," Rice University, www.owlnet.rice.edu/~univ302/StudentWork/S97/blondie/main.html (accessed February 26, 2007).
7. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 78-88. To access this work on the web, see the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Fra2Aut.html.
8. Robert F. Murphy, *Cultural & Social Anthropology: An Overture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 164.

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