

Teaching Methods with Off-the-Shelf Board Games
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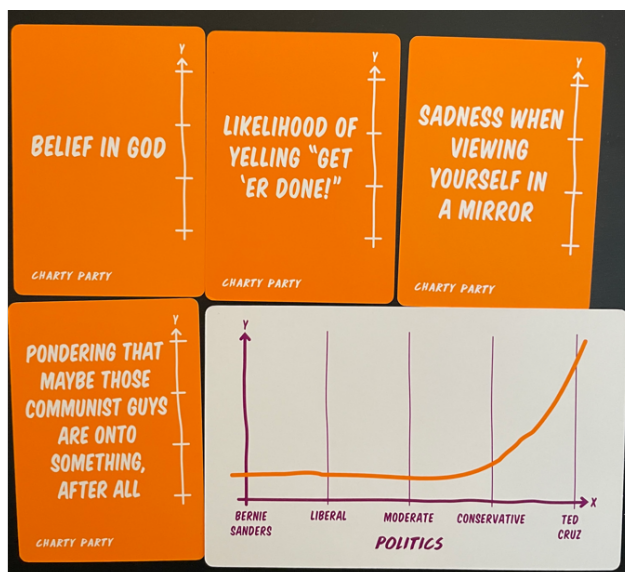
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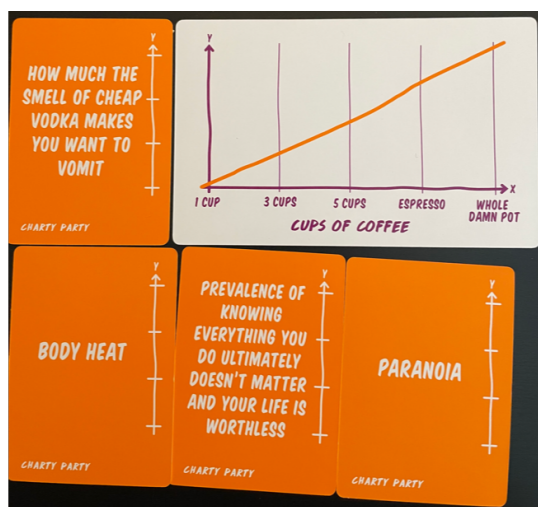
Overview: Active learning exercises are often synonymous with traditional role-playing simulations. Typically, they place students in a negotiation setting where players bargain and negotiate over some final settlement. Peace negotiations, legislative simulations, city government portrayals—most pursue the same objective with different facts, settings, and roles. Other activities exist, though, including the use of off-the-shelf board games. We propose that political science instructors consider using board games to teach about methods. We offer three examples.

Charity Party

Charity Party is an Apples to Apples-type game. The game moves through rounds in which one player is the judge and has to choose which of the other players has made the best play. After that round, the judge changes. The game is rule-bound, but also subjective in that the judge can choose his/her favorite play based on any criteria they deem worthy. These types of games are typically humorous and simple. Since many students are familiar with Apples to Apples (or other games like it, such as Cards Against Humanity or Wits & Wagers), they grasp the gameplay within minutes, if not seconds.

Whereas other games use words or pictures on the cards, Charity Party stands out for using graphs. The X axis has a label and units. There is then a line on the chart; it can be increasing, decreasing, parabolic, or straight. Non-judge players play cards that would describe what accounts for the shape of the line. *In other words, students are given a dependent variable and they must choose a card that makes for an appropriate, absurd, and/or funny independent variable.* Below are two examples.





Some cards are explicitly political, but many are not. Indeed, the point is not to make political connections. The point is demonstrate the effect that one variable has on another. The official instructions even stipulate that the judge must ensure those playing cards understand the chart. The judge must describe the dependent variable and the points at which it rises and falls. Some of the best charts are parabolic, which require students to think about the conditions under which an independent variable has the same effect at *both* its extremes. Imagine if the line in the politics card above was U-shaped. Students would have to identify what makes someone have a high value for both Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz. In total, the game is a low-cost way not only to explain dependent & independent variables, and directionality & slope, but also to have students practice—in a humorous and competitive setting—with social science.

Pandemic

Pandemic is an off-the-shelf board game that has won many awards. It was the first cooperative game to garner attention from the gaming community. In the game, all players work together to cure four diseases that affect the entire world. The board is a map (see below). The rules call for the game to begin with infecting nine random cities by drawing nine cards (each with a city name on it) from a deck with all the possible cities. Players then have to contain those diseases while they traverse the map and collect & trade resources to cure the diseases. The complication comes from the fact that cities already experiencing infection can spiral out of control if they become reinfected. Reinfection takes place by occasionally taking all of the discarded cards of the infected cities, shuffling them, and placing them on the *top* of the deck, where they are now more likely to be drawn. *In sum, those cities which are initially infected at the beginning of the game have a likely to guaranteed chance of becoming reinfected; and infections are harder to contain as they grow.*

players aggressively seek the resources to cure it. Sometimes, students even conclude that the seat in which they sat in—and who was to their right and left, the order in which they played, and the cards their teammates drew—was the defining point of the game.

After debriefing about the game itself, we then move into a discussion about the classic examples of path dependence in markets: the QWERTY keyboard. We describe how another keyboard, the Dvorak keyboard, has a more efficient layout of keys. It places the typer’s fingers on keys that are more likely to be struck (e.g., on vowels, or the letter S). Nevertheless, because society is used to the QWERTY keyboard, it continues to be the dominant one. We then move the discussion to politics, and ask students to supply examples of how certain political events kickstart intended and unintended pathways. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand to start World War I is a common response. Passage of Obamacare is another. Here students talk about how it created a new responsibility for the government and that it became very difficult for the opposition to entirely do away the institution. Instead, the parties have bickered on how best to manage it. Regardless of its operation, its introduction was a major inflection point in American public policy and electoral politics. Other examples abound, and students often identify relevant and creative explanations.

Bells Hells Caper Cards

Bells Hells Caper Cards is a cooperative game for 2–4 players. It has BlackJack style rules. Let us assume a four player game. Each player holds 4 cards in his/her hand. Each must play 1 of those four cards. Cards are played sequentially. They range in value from 1–10. The four cards cannot add up to more than 21. In addition, the aggregate total must be equal to or larger than an unknown figure (in BlackJack parlance, “the house”), which is between 16–19, but only revealed after players have played their 4 cards. If players can beat the house 4 times, they win the game.

The complication comes from the ways in which the cards interact with each other. The table below shows all the possible cards that players may hold in their hands.

Value	Suit	Comment
2	Clubs	Must rotate a Diamond in play (i.e., a 6 must become a 9—or vice versa; or a 10 must become a 1 (or vice versa))
3	Hearts	+1 for every other Heart in play
4	Spades	Next player may peek at the house’s cards
5	Hearts	-1 for each Spade in play
6/9	Diamonds	May be played as a 6 or a 9
7	Spades	Must discard another odd-numbered card from play
8	Clubs	Lowers the House by 3
9/6	Diamonds	May be played as a 6 or a 9

10	Diamonds	Must be played as 10 (but can be rotated to a 1 by a subsequent player playing a 2)
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After each winning round, another complication is added. These calculations are made the aggregate score of the four cards before they are put up against the house:

- 4 if no Spade in play
- +2 per Spade in play
- 2 for each Diamond in play
- +1 for each odd-numbered card in play
- Discard the lowest numbered card
- Remove all Diamonds
- +1 for all even-numbered cards in play if a Heart is in play
- The house wins a tie

If players reach the fourth round, then three of the added complications all come into play on top of the aggregate score of the four players' cards.

The game models Mahoney and Thelen's typology of institutional change. There are two dimensions. First, change agents' discretion in interpreting rules can be low or high. When they hold high discretion, they have more of an ability to affect change through their own choices. With low discretion, they are more hamstrung by the rules in place. Second, change agents will almost always meet some level of resistance from status quo defenders. These defenders can be weak or strong in their ability to protect existing policies. These dimensions produce four environments for institutional change, all of which carry their own strategy.

	Change Agents' Discretion		
		Low	High
	Weak	Displacement	Conversion
	Strong	Layering	Drift

In Displacement, change agents will overcome weak defenders. Seeing rules that do not allow them to use institutions for their own benefit, they will eliminate institutions and replace them with their own.

In Layering, change agents again have low discretion. Because status quo defenders are strong, change agents cannot displace existing institutions. Instead, they will layer new rules or institutions on top of, or alongside, existing ones. The new layers do not replace the old; instead, they add to procedures in a way that transforms the operational capacities, decision-making, or mission of an institution.

In Conversion, status quo defenders have weak vetoes and change agents have leeway in their rule interpretation. Thus, they will use old institutions in new ways. Here, more than in any other strategy, the law empowers change agents, who refrain from displacement because they realize the prospect of converting an unfavorable institution into a favorable one.

In Drift, change agents work within the existing system to exploit ambiguous rules. They avoid an aggressive attack in favor of an apparent public willingness to cooperate combined with behind-the-scenes exploitation of rules and norms to undermine the institution.

Bells Hells demonstrates these strategies. Discretion is modeled in selection of cards to play and how to play them (e.g., playing a 6/9 as either a 6 or a 9; or choosing which card to rotate). Some of the post-round victory complications (i.e., the bulleted list above) add status quo defenses. Some are relatively weak and some are relatively strong. There are examples of:

Displacement: removing a card when a 7 is played

Layering: adding +1 for every Heart when a 3 is played

Conversion: rotating a 6 to a 9 (or vice versa) or a 10 to a 1 (or vice versa)

Drift: the slow adding and subtracting of all of the mechanisms involved

By the end of the fourth round, after 4 cards have been played and 3 complications are introduced, the group's total against the house is hardly the simple sum of its four cards.

Imagine, say:

- 1) Adding all the cards together
- 2) Adding +1 for every Heart
- 3) Subtracting -1 for every Spade
- 4) Lowering the House by 3
- 5) Adding +1 for every odd card
- 6) Adding +2 for every Spade
- 7) Removing all Diamonds

The game models the cumulative effect of more than one change strategy in effect at a time. It models how one change can greatly affect another.