

# Level up: Games for socially just leadership education

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## Abstract

Games are increasingly being used as a creative pedagogical tool for socially just leadership education. Game facilitators benefit from proper sequencing and heightened self-awareness during both the game session and debrief of the experience. While scarce, examples of social justice games are provided for the reader's consideration.

## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations defines social justice as “the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth” (United Nations, 2006, p. 7). Social justice theory recognizes that “society is stratified (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 20). In recent times, the concept of social justice has become politically charged and polarized (Applebaum, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). As a result, leaders who are entrusted to resolve issues related to poverty, racism, and inequities are often confronted with competing and contradictory sets of values and potential solutions.

Social justice and leadership are inextricably linked. Guthrie and Chunoo (2018) wrote, “To us, socially just leadership education begins with the acknowledgement that we cannot have relevant leadership education without social justice nor can meaningful social justice efforts exist without leadership knowledge, skills, and values” (p. 2). As social justice leadership instructors, we understand that social justice education is an experiential approach to analysis of social constructs through an interdisciplinary lens (Bell, 2016). Furthermore, when using games to teach leadership development, it is important to understand social identity and power (Lasley, 2020) as it allows leaders to tackle these concerns holistically.

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## COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERSHIP

College campuses provide students with ample opportunities for leadership development and social justice activism through participation in student government and clubs, community organizations, and residential life (Eich, 2008; Komives et al., 2013). Higher education settings allow students to have “meaningful involvement” experiences with peers that allow them to develop individual leader identities (Komives et al., 2005, p. 598). College students who take on leadership while advocating causes they are passionate about is a developmental experience (Wang & Rodgers, 2006). As students participate in college leadership development opportunities, they often shift their perspective of leadership from being hierarchical and leader-centric to one that embraces collaborative, relational processes (Komives et al., 2005). Games are an interactive tool that can serve as a bridge between leadership and social justice, while shifting one’s understanding of leadership to be a process and not role specific. This shift in understanding leadership as a process allows students to relate to others in a manner that promotes collaborative work toward social justice.

## GAMES AS A PEDAGOGY

Learning about oppression and systemic structures that privilege some and oppress others can be cognitively, intellectually, and emotionally challenging due to an individual’s own socialization (Adams et al., 2016; Harro, 2010). The priority of social justice education is to affirm, model, and promote socially just learning environments for all participants (Adams et al., 2016). When creating a learning environment to promote social justice leadership education, it is important to foster reflection and action to create positive social change. This is based on explaining the praxis, or practice, of what and how individuals learn (Freire, 1996). This allows learners to distinguish practice from theory. Social justice leadership games can create such a learning environment, especially for college students.

As previously described by Egan in this issue, a game has a simple or complex system with rules that provides feedback to players. Games elicit some type of conflict involved either between players or between players and the system. To qualify as a game, there is a quantifiable outcome or winning state experienced by the players. Games are an accessible way to approach difficult, emotionally charged subjects (Hermann, 2015) and as such, we support the use of games as a pedagogical approach to learning about socially just leadership.

Games as a pedagogy can create a unique learning experience that allows participants to grow in their own self-awareness; critiquing themselves, others, and systems in a constructive way. Games can be experiential, inclusive, participant centered, collaborative, and democratic (Adams et al., 2016; Der Sahakian et al., 2015). Games can promote identity development and sociocultural growth (Plass et al., 2014) by allowing participants to explore their own positionality in the greater system depending on the types of scenarios and situations the game presents. Games also promote an environment in which participants can develop their leadership practice, as play creates a safe environment to try new skills in a psychologically safe situation (Kark, 2011; Winnicott, 1989). At the group level, games can facilitate group interactions that provide opportunities for focusing attention, experimentation, ongoing reflection, and learning about cultural aspects of an organization (Küpers, 2017).

Curricula can include game facilitation alongside other learning activities with the goal of providing contexts in which leadership learners can develop new awareness (Sousa &

Rocha, 2019). Although this article focuses on games that promote socially just leadership learning opportunities, we see *games* as being distinct from *activities* that facilitate social justice and leadership development. Some examples of activities include Tie-Dyeversity (to explore identity: adding dye to fabric for different identities the participants hold) and Step-on the-Line (to explore privilege and oppression: have students step forward when statements related to privilege, oppression, marginalization, etc. are read), or others found in various social justice resources.

## EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE THEMED GAMES

Games made to entertain, whether table top, board games, card games or video games, are a booming industry (Winkie, 2021). Although not many, a variety of games address critical social justice issues and allow players to understand and experience the situation of others in a manner that is not only educational and enlightening, but also enjoyable. Games allow for the complexity of addressing the tension of various social injustices in an approachable, lighthearted way that holds the attention of the gameplayer and fosters heightened awareness and shifts in perspective. It is important to pair games with lessons that explicitly define learning objectives. This practice enhances the transfer of learning. Some mechanisms within games may also lend themselves to be converted to learning outcomes through intentional facilitated debriefs.

The selection of games we highlight engage participants in experiential learning about social justice issues. These include *Arranged!*, *El Rio De Dichos*, *Rise Up*, and *Road to Racial Justice*. These games were created with the intention to offer deeper understanding of issues that are important to the creators. Designers of social justice themed games must have insight about game mechanics and creativity as well as a leaning towards community action and change. Any social justice topic or issue can be developed into a game. Many of the games mentioned in this section can be purchased from the creators' websites.

*Arranged!* is a game developed by Pakistani designer Nashra Balagamwala that invites participants to understand the constant pressures South-Asian women face when confronted with arranged marriage proposals. The objective of the game, as explained in the documentary *Gamemaster*, is to avoid the matchmaker by "trying to come up with creative ways to avoid this auntie, so they don't get married off and end up in a loveless marriage" (Mruz, 2020, 0:28:09). Scenarios include secret relationships, skin whitening, dowries, and the roles aunties play in arranged marriages (Balagamwala, 2017). Balagamwala (2017) expresses "I realized how powerful it could be, that it could really serve as a platform for people to be able to discuss this issue. I'm making it for all the women in Pakistan that have been forced into an arranged marriage, for the women that believe that they don't have a choice" (Mruz, 2020, 0:56:54).

*El Rio De Dichos* is a facilitated leadership development card game that incorporates *dichos* (Spanish idioms) cards to demonstrate the struggles Latinas face in professional settings. Players compete for scarce resources using an assortment of *dichos*, which also represent the cultural dissonance encountered by Latinas in the workplace (Pedroza & Mendez-Morse, 2016). The game is intentionally designed to explore how the intersectionality of gender and culture impacts Latinas, and ultimately, their ability to exercise leadership within the context of a dominant culture. Latinx game players are able to deepen their understanding of how their identity impacts their career trajectories. Non-Latinx players gain insight into the barriers Latinas face professionally with the hope they become more informed allies (Padilla et al., in press).

*Rise Up* is a board game intended to practice building social movement and change (Tesa Collective, 2020). It is a cooperative game that allows new activists to learn the concepts, strategies, and tactics for activism with the objective of scoring more victories than the system. The game itself comes with both an introductory, simpler version of the game and a more complex version centered around community organizing depending on the level of experience, knowledge, age, or awareness (Peters, 2016). *Rise Up* demonstrates the various movements, decisions, and strategies involved in grassroots change. *Rise Up* would pair well with lessons focused on activism, community engagement, and social movements.

*Road to Racial Justice* is a free, downloadable board game that utilizes critical thinking, social analysis, and team-based discussion to address racism and white privilege (Kivel, 2021). It is described as “encouraging cross-cultural understanding and compassionate action in order to help create a more loving and just world” (Kivel, 2021, para. 2). Players explore various forms of individual and institutional racism and ways to respond to racist behavior.

These selected games are an alternate and engaging form of educating student leaders about social justice themes. In the author’s experience, using games to highlight social justice education provides an engaging and stimulating teaching modality. Another game-like tool for eliciting discussion and dialogue among students is the use of card decks such as *Visual Explorer* and *Climer* cards. These cards have assorted random images in the form of photographs or drawings that facilitators can pair with prompts to creatively use as metaphors and symbols of their own lived experiences, values, and beliefs.

## LEVELING UP AS A PRACTITIONER

Incorporating social justice leadership educational games into curriculum can be valuable as it presents material in an accessible, experiential manner; however, we have found value in the integration of various skills, awareness, and systems level thinking as facilitators in the learning environment. Leaning into Freirean pedagogy, a facilitator identifies and organizes resources to initiate dialogue that allows participants to move to the center of their own learning and develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1996). This enables teachers and students to learn alongside each other. To promote this learning, we present a few recommendations for facilitators, the group, and the role of debriefing in using games for social justice leadership education.

### Facilitators and participants

There are a handful of principles for social justice education presented by Adams et al. (2016) that are important for all individuals involved. These include:

- fostering inclusive and welcoming learning environments;
- having everyone acknowledge their own intersectional identities;
- balancing affective and intellectual learning;
- drawing upon the knowledge and experience of the participants in the learning environment;
- active engagement and collective work amongst the group; and
- recognition and acknowledgement of progress

To meet the aforementioned principles, it is valuable to create and assess the learning outcomes of your sessions.

Additionally, all participants in a game environment are encouraged to practice humility and active listening. Humility allows all to learn, to be taught, and to have teachers. adrienne maree brown (2017) encourages learners to “listen with all senses” and to have teachers from multiple perspectives, which takes humility to listen to the critiques and “unexpected” invitations of learning. Unexpected moments arise in experiential learning, whether it is a reaction to a game mechanic or a passing comment from a peer while playing a game, or during debriefs.

## Facilitators

For facilitators, we recommend developing heightened self-awareness and being attuned to the skills and strategies needed for the experience of the game and post-play facilitation. Building awareness of your positionality, your preferred styles to facilitate and teach, as well as your own biases, triggering situations, and learning edges (Adams et al., 2016) is valuable to enhance your effectiveness in facilitating experiential learning for students. Make sure to engage in self-work, practice compassion, and self-care. This allows facilitators to appropriately navigate activating moments during learning with grace and to role-model how to sensitively address injustices.

Developing your own self-awareness allows you to better facilitate the group’s experience. Additionally, have an awareness of the group’s level of understanding of social justice, leadership, and their motivation to change to scaffold learning as needed. Some important skills to develop include, but are not limited to,

- sharing your own observations in an authentically curious manner;
- being intentional with your timing, tone, and word choice;
- modeling how you navigate privilege and/or oppression;
- asking for different perspectives and voices that have not been heard;
- challenging inaccurate information;
- addressing avoidance; and
- using silence as a tool (Adams et al., 2016).

Provide observations both while being in the game as a participant yourself and larger group observations during the game debrief as facilitator, much like balancing dancing on the dance floor and simultaneously watching the dance from the balcony in leadership practice (Heifetz et al., 2009).

We acknowledge the gaming and tabletop culture as an additional consideration for you as a facilitator. The game design industry is seen as lacking diversity of “new points of views, different classes, different ethnicities, different languages, different parts of the world that aren’t known for making games” (Mruz, 2020, 0:40:23). Do not assume that all students have been exposed to or have played board games. Board games can be cost-prohibitive and tabletop culture has been very male, white-centric in the United States (Mruz, 2020; Winkie, 2021). Make sure to be inclusive in how you are setting up and describing board game rules, mechanics, the objective(s) of the game, etc. Also consider if the games you choose to use in the classroom are diverse and representative of your participants. This can be a tricky task as the tabletop gaming community has opportunities to expand representation in the games available (Winkie, 2021). This is also an invitation for you to create inclusive, representative games that expand to the social justice concerns addressed in games. Your passion, knowledge, awareness, and experience can be translated into a game much like the games presented in this article.

## Debriefing

Debriefing the participants' experience of playing a game is vital for promoting reflection, learning, and connecting the play experience to societal dynamics. Der et al. (2015) identified six required skills for simulation learning and debriefing. As a facilitator, it is important to be aware of your own identity and leadership. This allows the facilitator to recognize personal biases, privilege, traumas, and behavior that perpetuates systems of power, etc. To promote psychological safety, establish ground rules for simulations. Allow participants to be vulnerable and lean into the experiential nature of the game by setting time boundaries, roles, and expectations of one another. In the context of debriefing, ask questions that prompt reflective observation that can lead to abstract analysis (Adams et al., 2016). If able to do so, consider teaching in a co-instructor model to assist in managing unexpected events while balancing intended learning outcomes. This also allows one facilitator to jump in if the other is activated. Pairing co-instructors intentionally allows them to role model negotiating privilege and oppression, when the co-facilitators hold different identities. For example, if a woman of color is paired with a white male, they can use their own lived experiences as co-instructors as examples to dissect privilege and oppression and role model vulnerability.

Maintain the balance between emotion and teaching by decontextualizing the experience. Hermann (2015) states:

seen from a systemic-constructivist view, group conflicts often mirror those in organizational, contextual, or social settings. These conflicts and contradictions can be made visible through emotions. Connecting emotions and simulation dynamics makes the insights for participants more relevant and easily transferable to real life situations. (p. 209)

Pay attention to different learning styles to determine the process to debrief. This could look like allowing participants to debrief in pairs or smaller groups before sharing out with the larger group (Adams et al., 2016). And finally, manage the input from participants during the debrief so they do not derail the learning process (Der et al., 2015).

In addition to the aforementioned recommendations, we recommend sequencing learning activities and games in a series or in more than one interaction when possible. Some things to consider in the sequencing: the level of risk, the knowledge and awareness of the participants, and level of socio-ecological context. Sequence the learning activities and games from low risk to high risk. This builds and promotes psychological safety. Experiential social justice learning is deeply intersectional, emotional, and affective. Facilitators help build resilience, learning edges, and build a stronger container by starting with low risk and building up to higher risk activities. Also gauge the appropriateness of various activities and games that appropriately reflect the learning and awareness of the participants. As you scaffold the learning, games, and debriefs, consider the value of starting at the personal level building up to institutional, then societal, and cultural perspectives or vice versa.

## THE END GAME

This article provided an overview of how games can be used as a pedagogical tool to teach in social justice leadership education. Effectively designed games can be a creative instrument for engaging participants in learning and dialogue about issues pertaining to social



justice. Furthermore, thoughtful game facilitation and debrief allow for deeper connections and insights for both students and educators. Games for socially just leadership education can provide an accessible and innovative platform to reconsider social issues and gaming alike.

As you enhance your own use of games as a tool for social justice leadership learning, concentrate on a select number of the presented recommendations to deepen your capacity as a facilitator. Consider games that address topics of interest and relevance to your students and community. Like mastering a game, effective game facilitation and debrief comes with practice and experience.

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