

Gaming for Social Innovation

Thomas Mengel, Renaissance College, University of New Brunswick

Abstract

In this presentation I shared my experiences with and reflections on the highly engaging and effective Sarkar Game. The game is a one- to two-hour simulation foresight role-playing game I have used in the context of learning and teaching about social innovation and social change. The aim of the role-play is for participants to “uncover their assumptions about role, power and alliance that normally operate unconsciously in the background (personal, organizational and global paradigms). The Sarkar Game helps define personal and organizational leadership styles and comprehend power dynamics in cyclical change. Understanding social change and the strengths and weaknesses of each role group opens up the possibility of transformational leadership” (Howard & Voros, 2004, <https://library.teachthefuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Sarkar-Game.pdf>).

First, I framed the presentation by summarizing my research about the gamification of learning particularly in the context of social innovation and foresight strategies. Second, I briefly introduced introduced Sarkar’s model of social change underlying the game and its application. Third, I used a brief video sequence to demonstrate how, in the game, players first interact in a guided and role-specific way and then reflect on a personal and group level. Fourth, I offered reflections and recommendations based on my experience with the game in various contexts. Finally, participants were invited to share their own experiences with role-playing games.

Keywords: Gamification; Social innovation; Sarkar game; Simulation; Foresight; Role playing; Leadership; Transformational leadership; Social change; Change leadership

Report

Gamification – “the use of game-thinking and playful design in non-game contexts” (De-Marcos et al., 2014, p. 381) – motivates learners in higher education. Further, it increasingly captures the interest of scholars in various academic disciplines and fields (Dominguez et al., 2013; Faiella & Ricciardi, 2015; Lister & College, 2015). Particularly, gamification can help participants to experience the challenges of social change and to engage in meaningful learning activities (Hayward & Voros, 2006). Finally, gaming is one of the core elements of adult learning approaches in social-entrepreneurship education and social innovation and as such does make learning more effective (Mengel & Tantawy, 2018; Mengel, McNally, & Tantawy, 2018).

As the discussion with the audience of this workshop revealed, colleagues are using a variety of games in very different contexts. For example, the use of games *à la* Trivial Pursuit, tailored to various learning contexts, was mentioned by several instructors. Participants shared that playing in the classroom fosters engagement of learners and is also fun for the facilitators. Students in my courses and I are no different; we love to learn and play, and we love to engage in games as part of our learning process. In addition, gamification brings out the wisdom of the crowd and fosters innovation through the combination of meaningful experiences and critical reflection in the context of joyful and social learning activities (De-Marcos et al., 2014).

I have used the Sarkar Game (Hayward & Voros, 2006), which is based on *Sarkar's model of social change* (Sarkar, 1982). Sarkar (1921-1990) was an Indian socialist, activist, philosopher and historian. He presented a macro perspective on history in which – in simple terms – both power and change are cyclically dominated first by workers, then warriors, followed by intellectuals, and finally capitalists. Sarkar's 'Social Cycle' elegantly demonstrates how easily 'social roles' are adopted and how these roles bring forth partial and limited understandings of change and change processes. As a macro historical model of social change and as embodiment the process of social construction it is a pivotal learning element in the subject (Hayward & Voros, 2006, p. 709).

The futurist Inayatullah (1999, 2002) highlights Sarkar's suggestion that by fostering servant leadership, societies can accelerate the cycle and reduce or even remove exploitation. Inayatullah has observed this himself in hundreds of workshops he facilitated around the globe with the Sarkar game at its heart. During this Teaching Showcase session, we watched parts of a video recording of Inayatullah's workshop "Leadership for the university of the future" at Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi (AKEPT) in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, on March 25-29, 2013.

With its emphasis on social change and leadership, the *Sarkar game* is an excellent tool to engage learners in a course on "Leadership for social innovation" (RCLP 4002), which is a mandatory component of the Bachelor of Philosophy in Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies at the University of New Brunswick's leadership school, Renaissance College (Mengel & Tantawy, 2018). In the game and "by 'creating' the experience of the social cycle in the classroom, the students learn of their own social constructions and roles" (Hayward & Voros, 2006, p. 709).

During the winter 2018 run of this course, 34 students participated in this class. They were divided up into four groups including one person who volunteered as observer. Each group received a script explaining their role (worker, warrior, intellectual or capitalist). Students also received role-specific items that would help them act out their role (respectively: tools, weapons, books and writing material, and play money). After ten minutes of preparation for each group, the workers were invited to the centre of the room to act out their role. After a few minutes, when the interactions seemed to have come to a "stand still" (no further developments or progress detectable), the warriors were invited "to the stage" to play their part in response to the workers (or however they had envisioned to play this). Again, a few minutes later, the intellectuals were asked to join in and then finally the capitalists. As expected, the noise level and number of activities and negotiations among the four groups and their members increased significantly with each additional group joining in. Upon reaching a final "stand still," the acting part of the game was ended and the reflection phase was started.

In the reflection, first, the groups and the observers were invited to share their observations and thoughts on the process amongst themselves. In particular, the four groups shared and reflected on their experience within their group and with other groups (as individuals, as a group and in general);

they also discussed what they learned (again, as individuals, as a group and in general). The main observations and reflections as shared in plenary were as follows:

1. Engaging in this game was fun (loud and clearly visible)
2. Roles were taken very seriously by most
3. Many took on roles that they felt were foreign to them
4. Many were surprised by the level of one-sided behaviour they demonstrated
5. Many were surprised by the level of greed, power and violence they demonstrated
6. Social dynamics are powerful and not easy to “break”
7. Change is difficult, but possible if there is awareness, willingness to “break out” of socially prescribed, individually preferred or group-think behaviours

Reflections and Recommendations

Finally, I left the audience with the following concluding reflections and recommendations that may also serve as summary of this report:

1. Increasingly the term “gaming” is being associated with video or computer games. Hence, to manage expectations, in this context the term *role-playing* may be more appropriate.
2. Student engagement can indeed be substantially fostered and increased by introducing (more) elements of role-playing into the classroom. However, role-playing (or games in general) should still serve a sound pedagogical, or andragogical (Mengel, McNally, & Tanatawy, 2018), rationale and purpose.
3. Elements of gaming and role-playing need time, both in terms of preparation and of meaningful debrief and reflection. Student engagement can get out of hand and thus lose its pedagogical relevance if the activity is not well prepared and facilitated. Debrief and reflection are necessary to put the activity in context of the learning outcomes and to capture major lessons learned resulting from the activity.
4. Experiencing the social dynamics of power structures, within given (or assumed) roles, leads to rich reflections and deep learning about the challenges and opportunities of social change and social innovation. Together, experiences and reflections as offered by “gaming for social innovation” are powerful means of engaged learning. They can also prepare learners for reflective practice in the context of fostering transformative leadership and in service of social justice.

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Author

Thomas Mengel. The author is a professor of leadership studies at Renaissance College at the University of New Brunswick since 2005. He has been practicing, studying and teaching leadership for over 30 years. He holds degrees in theology, adult education (minor in psychology), history and computer science (minor in education and business). tmengel@unb.ca