

Role-playing “A State of Nature” and the Purpose of Government

This role-playing exercise was contributed by Lori Sherman. Sherman teaches American history, current events, geography, and reading/language arts to sixth-graders at Ute Meadows Elementary School in Littleton, Colorado. She was inspired to become a teacher after seeing the wonderful things that were happening at her own children’s school.

NOTE: This is an abridged version of the lesson plan. For complete simulation-game details, visit scholastic.com/juniorscholastic.



Lori Sherman

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BACKGROUND

The Framers of the U.S. government were greatly influenced by the works of John Locke, a renowned English philosopher during Europe’s Enlightenment period. Locke asserted that the purpose of government was to protect the rights of the people. Without a government or laws, he wrote, society could be considered in a state of nature.

Locke and many of his contemporaries believed that, in such a situation, stronger and smarter people take away the natural rights of others, and/or weaker people work together to defend themselves or take away the natural rights of the stronger and smarter people. In either situation, everyone would feel insecure and unsafe.

Locke believed that human reasoning would keep people from waging all-out war on each other. Another preventive would be a social contract by which people agree to give up some freedoms and, for the sake of order, follow the laws of government.

The Framers agreed with Locke’s belief that the purpose of government is to protect the natural rights of the people with consideration of the common welfare.

OBJECTIVES

- Compare and contrast various ideas about the purposes of government.
- Understand what the Framers believed the purpose of government to be.
- Describe different types of government: limited, unlimited, and absence of government.
- Explain the historical foundation of the United States constitutional government.
- Understand that great responsibility—and, hopefully, a sense of civic virtue—comes with the exercising of natural rights.

SIMULATION

I typically introduce this topic by asking, “What do you think our days would be like without any rules or expectations in our

classroom?” With sixth-graders, I can expect many levels of answers along a sense of levity. They usually focus on one aspect—that there would be no consequences. Anything would be OK. Rarely does anyone question how fairness would be determined or how a rules-free classroom would have adverse effects on them.

I then pose the same question for the school as a whole, and move from this micro level to a macro level of society at large. At this point I introduce John Locke’s concept of a state of nature. In order to better understand it, we role-play this exercise.

Goal:

To get as much money as possible by the end of the game.

Rules:

1. No leaving the room or boundaries of the playing field.
2. No physical contact (shoving, pulling, etc.) or threats of physical contact.

3. Everyone must maintain the role assigned.

Roles:

- **Educated** (15% of class): They must develop ways to acquire as much money as they can from the rest of the players, but they need other people (strong or uneducated players) to do the enforcing/execution of their plans.
- **Educated/strong** (10% of class): They must develop ways to acquire as much money as they can from the rest of the players. They may execute their own plans or hire other people (strong or uneducated players) to carry them out.
- **Strong** (25% of class): They can earn money only by executing the plans of the educated players, and negotiating a share of the money acquired.
- **Uneducated** (50% of class): They can do only the bidding of the educated players—either directly or via the strong. If they work for the educated, they must accept whatever payment the educated players pay. But because this “society” has no rules, the educated players may choose not to pay. The uneducated may resist if they have a group that is larger than those who are taking the money.

Establishing rules and roles:

The role percentages are intentionally disproportionate. For example, a class of 24 will have 4 educated players, 2 educated/strong players, 6 strong players, and 12 uneducated players.

I use these role titles because I don't want the players to personally associate themselves with *smart* or *weak*, which is Locke's terminology.

Roles are randomly assigned (by drawing sticks, pieces of folded paper, etc.). We discuss the roles as I display a poster that serves as a reminder of rules and role descriptions.

Starting Funds:

I have classroom bucks already printed for various purposes. The funds are intentionally distributed disproportionately.

- **Educated:** \$75 in various denominations
- **Educated/strong:** \$100 in various denominations
- **Strong:** \$50 in various denominations
- **Uneducated:** \$15 in one-dollar bills

Game:

I usually set a time of 20 to 30 minutes. I reserve the right to stop the game if any kids get silly, which often happens, depending upon the maturity of players.

The kids are free to come up with any way to get the money of other players. Soon, the educated and strong learn that they can simply steal the money, as long as they don't touch anyone.

During the game, you can expect a metamorphosis to occur as the strong and educated players become greedy and nihilistic. A change also comes over the uneducated. They either band together and resist, or withdraw and give up. If one of your sensitive students is assigned this role, be aware of how their emotions are being affected. I can count on one student each game to become very emotional about having his or her money taken callously or by the behavior that the educated

and strong players begin to exhibit.

After time is called, gather the kids together to count their money. Then we discuss some of the following questions:

- What were your feelings in anticipation of the game?
- Did those feelings begin to change? If so, how?
- At what point did your feelings about the game change?
- What caused this change?
- What was wrong with this game?
- Which players had the advantage and which the disadvantage?
- How did the players begin to change?
- What would you change to make the game better?

At this point we begin to make new rules to ensure that power is distributed more evenly. The kids often decide that a judge is needed to settle disputes about the rules.

After going through the process of discovering that the problems grew out of the inequity of power and resources, we return to and discuss Locke's state of nature idea.

- Can you imagine if real life were like the game?
- Where would we see situations like this?
- What would we feel?
- How would our lives be different?
- What can people do to prevent such situations?

ASSESSMENT

Have students create a chart that displays Locke's three natural rights: life, liberty, and property. Then ask them to attach illustrations or brief descriptions of violations of these rights that occurred during the game.