



Role-play About Sustainable Transport (in Dhaka)

AIM OF ACTIVITY

Students research and then adopt different roles to learn about issues around urban mobility in Dhaka, particularly for rickshaw drivers, in an experiential way. This activity can be adjusted to focus on economic, environmental or social issues, depending on the teaching context.

I have not yet tried out this activity in my own classroom. It is based on a workshop given by Paul Gilbert and me at a conference on Innovative Undergraduate Pedagogies at the Tobias Center for Innovation in International Development at Indiana University in the US. Our workshop was focused in Dhaka, Bangladesh, based on Paul's research there, but the activity can be adapted to any urban context.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

1. Explain activity context

This activity is grounded in real-world situations, in this case the ongoing developments in Dhaka's transport infrastructure. The Japanese Development agency (JICA) is funding the development of a mass rapid transport system to make traffic more environmentally friendly, but the proposed plans will result in increasing restrictions on rickshaw pullers working in the streets of Dhaka.

In the role-play's scenario, a fictionalized stakeholder workshop is being organized by JICA & the World Bank, to get feedback on the proposed development and to manage the concerns of affected groups. Educators assume the role of workshop facilitators. Students will be provided with detailed background information about the proposed developments before the role play; for the Indiana workshop we designed a padlet with all the relevant information.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

2. Students select and research role

Students select the roles they want to assume from a pre-set list, which in our workshop included rickshaw pullers and users; JICA, World Bank and Dhaka government representatives; architects, designers and researchers; NGO representatives and activists. This list can be expanded and groups of students can assume a role together, depending on student numbers.

Students then need to research their roles in-depth to represent the position of the people and institutions they represent in an informed and realistic way. Ideally they have a week before the activity to undertake this research. As a result, they formulate their persona's position vis-à-vis the proposed development as a 1 minute opening statement for the meeting and a series of arguments to defend their position.

ACTIVITY OUTLINE

3. Role Play

Students come together for the role-play, guided by the educator-facilitator who ensures that the meeting mirrors power relations in international development, eg they can give more talk time to donor representatives or cut off speakers from marginalized background. After every persona has presented their opening statement, students discuss the changes based on their persona's position. At least one hour should be allocated to the actual role play to allow for unrushed interactions. At the end of the meeting, the educator-facilitator could announce that the development will go ahead or students could vote on their preferred outcome, based on whose arguments have been most persuasive.

4. Discussion

In order to draw out the activity's lessons, sufficient time needs to be allocated for students to discuss what they have learned from the role-play. This includes learning about transport issues, rickshaw drivers' livelihoods and development dynamics in Dhaka, but also students' own experiences with the role play. These can include possible (dis)comfort with embodying particular personas or assuming certain positions that might go against their own beliefs, discussing students' own ideas about particular subject positions and how they might have been disrupted by the role play. Sometimes, strong identifications with particular roles can lead to alienating experiences and it is important for students to be able to voice their insights and concerns.