



Received: 22 October 2015
Accepted: 06 January 2016
Published: 01 February 2016

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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Their definition of rigor is different than ours”: The promise and challenge of enactivist pedagogies in the social studies classroom

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Abstract: The theoretical justification for enactivist approaches to learning is just beginning to emerge, and remains largely theoretical. Enactivism conceptualized as play brings us closer to the heart of the question about how play-based social studies might look. Recent research in simulations and games—forms of play—help to reveal some of the potential of the enacted domain. This paper attends to the (inter) subjective perspectives and lived experiences of two veteran middle school teachers who use play as a regularly occurring feature in their social studies teaching classes, which they co-construct and co-teach. Using a basic interpretive approach to research, this paper serves to highlight these perspectives and experiences as related by the participants in an effort to contextualize a highly theoretical approach to learning. Throughout this study, participants revealed their perceptions that the pedagogies of play are challenging but invaluable tools with which to approach social studies teaching. In doing so, this paper will help to illuminate some potential promises and pitfalls that an enactivist approach to social studies presents for the teachers.

Subjects: Classroom Practice; Curriculum Studies; Education Studies; History; Middle School Education; Secondary Education; Teaching & Learning; Teaching & Learning - Education; Theories of Learning

Keywords: enactivist; play; teaching; middle school; social studies; simulation; gaming; embodied learning; teacher perspectives; history education

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Because social studies centers on teaching about life in the real world, it makes sense that we should strive to learn about ways to teach students about how the real world works in ways that are authentic. Scholars who study play point out that it is a common human experience. To play is to be human, and it is one of the earliest mediums of learning as we begin to interact in and with our environment as babies. If play is a natural form of learning, then play might also help older children and adolescents to learn about the world. In this case study, I share the perspectives of two veteran teachers who have spent their careers incorporating play into their classrooms. Their wealth of experience is invaluable for social studies teachers and researchers as we begin to think about play as a model for teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of two veteran middle school teachers who co-teach social studies and English to urban and suburban middle school youth using simulations. What I found is not, however, particular to the use of simulations. On the contrary, only one of the activities they referred to as simulations met my criteria to be considered simulations (2015a). As the study developed it became clear that what the two participants, George and Jerry, we calling simulations did have something in common. All of them could be considered enactivist pedagogies—play-based learning. In fact this was the central pedagogical feature in their shared classroom. Play as an organizing feature of social studies classroom does not appear to have captured the attention of social studies scholars, at least not in terms of their publishing. In this paper, I have chosen to focus on participants' perspectives about their experiences in the hopes that their experiences might be instructive for other practitioners. More specifically, I will document participants' reflections upon the challenges and benefits they attribute to their play-based approach to social studies.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Play-based social studies

Enactivism is a theory of the mind that encapsulates the full human system. That is to say that the human mind consists of—and is informed by—the complex and chaotic interactions between the brain, body, and environment in a process the process of sense making (Colombetti, 2014). These interactions, according to Hutto and Myin (2013), are “loopy, not linear” and responsive to one another in ways that would be difficult to map (p. 6). In this way, enactivism reveals a theory of being that expresses an internal life and external world that cannot be separated and thus provides a framework to bolster Dewey's claim that school should more closely resemble life itself (Dewey, 1938). Within the enactivist frame, the concept of mind and one's engagement life are interwoven—not interacting—concepts. Thinking and acting, feeling and responding, engaging and reflecting, are all activities of mentality mediated by phenomenal situations (Hutto & Myin, 2013). In this way one may suggest that the division of cognitive, physical processes, and embedded contexts that allow students to engage in environments that resemble life at the nexus between chaos and order, is a denaturalization of learning; mentality, separated from life. What enactivism implies is that learning must occur within an environmental context that facilitates physicality and mentality in concert, as we come to know worldly phenomena only when we synthesize corporeal and intellectual understandings of these phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1996). This is of particular relevance to the social studies; to fully understand the world requires that one attends to a fully embodied experience of and in the world (Miller-Lane, 2006). One way to attend to the world is through the paradigm of play.

Play, is “a mode of being human,” one that “is not tied to objects but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life” (Sicart, 2014, pp. 1–2). Sicart (2014) correctly points out that play is a slippery concept to define, and provides instead a conceptual frame for play as the confluence of structure and chaos. He argues further that the rules and structures we create provides the context in which play can happen and the extent to which chaos and destruction play out. As Wright-Maley (2015b) has pointed out, the chaordic nature of activities signal the limits of play such that the actors engaging in play have the freedom to pursue their goals within those confines. Play is, therefore, the generative space between order and chaos.

Although play has not been given much consideration in the enactment of social studies, its incorporation into teaching and learning of social studies may make learning more enjoyable, and even valid, given that play is a natural medium for learning social phenomena. Stockard (2006) noted that “*playfulness*, rather than grim, humorless drudgery” was a key component of Maslow's conception of the process of self-actualization (p. 68, emphasis original). Further, scholars such as Holden et al. (2014) have argued that play is both engaging for students and teachers, while it also provides spaces for students to take chances, learn to improvise, and to be social with peers. Further,

Moore (2013) describes how play around complex systems “like big-box retail development and transnational labor make the classroom a safe space for explorations of the inner-workings of big business rather than assuming that such workings are de facto oppressive and leaving it at that.” In this way play can mediate deeper understandings by being able to bridge experiential and cognitive perspectives that enrich student learning (Wright-Maley, 2015). From a professional standpoint, Gay (2014) argues that teachers who embrace a playful approach to social studies are more likely to “discovering less common sources of knowledge” with a focus on how rather than what to think, describing these as features of “powerful pedagogy” (p. 27). In a similar vein, social studies scholars like Crocco (2015) and Zevin (2015) argue the merits of play, pointing out that play is essential component of experimentation and discovery that can transform the nature of work and the ways in which students engage in learning and should be promoted within schools to effectuate the positive role it can play in the lives of learners.

In this paper, the concepts of enactivism and play are used to contextualize the approach to teaching my participants ascribe to. It is a form of social studies in which they provide the context for play through games, simulations, reenactments, musicals, and plays. These are the media through which students play with history in a play-based space of work and play. To better understand this approach, it is important to recognize that the philosophical and phenomenological understandings held by the teachers creating such spaces undergird this approach to engaging with social studies content. As such, I will root the findings of this paper in the messages conveyed to me by the participants in the study that inform why they have invested so thoroughly in this approach.

2.2. Teacher perspectives

Goal-oriented decision-making theory describes the role that teacher orientations (i.e. beliefs, dispositions, values, tastes, and preferences) play in impacting actual practice (Schoenfeld, 2011). Scholars have long understood orientations and beliefs often dictate practice (Lortie, 1975; Nespor, 1987; Sockett, 2006). As Kagan (1992) remarked in her work on teacher beliefs, “the more one reads studies of teacher belief, the more strongly one suspects that this piebald of personal knowledge lies at the very heart of teaching” (in Pajares, 1992, p. 329). The trouble is that these orientations are difficult to quantify, or even to delineate clearly from each other. As Vagle (2006) notes that the world is not fixed, but an experiential space that is revealed to us as we become conscious of it. In order to understand teachers’ pedagogical choices, writ large, we must therefore give more credence to their subjective perspectives related to their practices (Nespor, 1987). Before we can come to understand teachers practices, we must first embark on illuminating the subjective experiences of teachers so that we may become more capable of understanding the phenomenon—in this case play-based social studies—in question (Husserl, 1970).

Thus, before we can answer the question of how teachers might best make use of play-based social studies, we must first understand the purposes and experiences of those teachers who are in the best position to articulate them. For the purposes of this study I am defining teacher orientations as the conceptual system of teaching and learning (Nespor, 1987) that teachers use to consider, explain, and ultimately direct their teaching practices (Ruys, Van Keer, & Aelterman, 2010). I will be using this construct for two purposes: First, to reveal how my participants think about their use of pedagogical enactivism. And second, to illuminate their perspectives about the promises and pitfalls of simulations for use in the social studies classroom.

3. Context

3.1. Participants and setting

The discussion of whether play-based social studies is an effective vehicle for learning content is moot if teachers cannot understand why they might choose to base their teaching around this pedagogical domain. By understanding the perspectives and experiences of veteran teachers, other practitioners are better positioned to envision themselves in that position. Thus, those who have spent their careers developing play-based approaches can help to contribute to the field by illuminating

practices that are possible within this framework. It is for this reason why I have focused on this study solely on the lived experiences as they are perceived by my participants.

I used convenience sampling to select my participants based upon their experience, dedication to enactivist approaches to teaching social studies, and their reputation for excellence in teaching social studies. Jerry Stone taught social studies for 32 years, and his partner George White taught English for 27 years (pseudonyms). For “at least the last 20 years” they have co-taught their classes both at their former school and at Central Academy,¹ where they currently teach 7th and 8th grade classes that combine social studies and English components. Currently, they teach two double-sized classes, one 7th grade and one 8th grade. Rather than alternating between subjects, George’s and Jerry’s classes have a solidly social studies-based curriculum that is deeply infused with reading and writing. Relating to Grant’s (2003) framework of the ambitious teacher, George and Jerry have, faced resistance from colleagues and lower level administrators; in contrast to this framework, however, they have received strong support from their principals both at their former school site and at Central Academy. To illustrate this point, my participants were recruited by the principal at Central Academy because of their experience and their ambitious approach to teaching social studies.

Central Academy is a magnet middle school serving grades 7–12 located in a midsize urban city in Connecticut, USA. Students who wish to attend the academy apply to the school through a lottery. As such, the school houses a diverse population of students in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and level of educational readiness.

3.2. Play-based projects

Jerry and George used a number of different kinds of projects as central features of their units, in addition to many small-scale daily activities not discussed here. The one they are by far proudest of is their Battle of Bunker Hill simulation. In this activity, students are put into groups (the British and Colonialists forces), who are equipped with foam balls—the British have bigger projectiles to represent their superior fire power. The “British” students are tasked with capturing the hill, while the “Americans” are tasked with keeping it. Subsequently they have students perform the musical *1776* (Stone & Edwards, 1970). Following this students get to play with music and lyrics to develop parodies to tell the story of historical events of the post-revolutionary period. In other units students play a task-based game to represent the voyage of Lewis and Clark, which included creating hand-crafted goods. Students also reenacted the trials of John Brown (an anti-slavery crusader) and Anne Hutchinson (a puritan dissident and advocate for religious tolerance), played colonial games and took part in a kind of colonial Olympics. These elements of play are heightened by the vast trove of costumes and props George and Jerry have accumulated over the years.

These veterans are clear that these are not “just fun and games,” but that the play is the vehicle for learning. These activities often have high-stakes performance elements; they are frequently performed in public and without scripts. Finally, they finish their year with an Academy Awards ceremony, by providing their students with Oscars for their performances across the year. Thus, there is a great variety of playfulness embedded into their teaching.

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

To understand how experienced middle school social studies teachers perceive the purposes and value of simulations in their practice I used a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2009). This design is treated as a single-case because even though my participants have certain distinctions in their perspectives, their long-entwined relationship as friends and colleagues whose co-constructed teaching practices have long been melded together, makes it difficult to fully separate the two lived experiences and perspectives. I employed an interpretive approach to research (Merriam, 2009) which draws from phenomenology (e.g. Seidman, 2006) to derive meaning from their beliefs and

their subjective and intersubjective perceptions about their experiences with simulations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Husserl, 1970; Van Manen, 1990).

Because this study focused on the perspectives of teachers around their perceived value and the challenges they face in their use of simulations, observations of classroom activities were not used. The data for this paper were derived from a protocol of three semi-structured interviews which was adapted from Seidman's (2006) phenomenological approach to interviewing, in order to bring to light the lived experiences of my participants. He calls for the first interview to establish the context of the participant's experiences and beliefs, the second interview to focus directly on the phenomenon, and the third to act as an exercise of reflection on their experiences with the phenomenon. Because my participants taught as a team, I conducted this final interview with both participants simultaneously. In addition to the interviews, I also collected documents relating to their teaching context.

4.2. Data analysis

A preliminary analysis of interview data was conducted soon after each interview, by listening to and transcribing the audio recording, and making notes to determine what, if any, modifications should be made to the interview protocols in advance of subsequent interviews with the participant. I used an inductive approach to analyzing interview data that allows patterns and themes to emerge from the data (Ruona, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Thomas, 2006).

Using *Coding Analysis Toolkit* software to organize my data analysis, I employed open-coding to allow trends and themes to emerge from the data (Thomas, 2006). For example, when Jim said "I think kids engaged", I coded the passage "Engagement". Following the initial coding, I combined like codes and divided dissimilar ones. In one example I merged several open-codes as follows:

Know thy kids—Caring for students—Building Relationships—Respect your students

This set became "know thy kids" and later became "Relationships", a code that included relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators. Using the clarified codes I recoded the data. As another example, I combined the following into the category higher order thinking (and Not):

Critical thinking—Analyzing—Interpreting—Problem solving—Thinking on their feet—
Historical thinking—Student creation—Use information productively—Making Connections—
Not-memorization—Not-Coverage—Others not learning

Although I had initially considered separating the last three codes from the other codes listed above, I realized that my participants were making these points to illustrate that their use of play-based learning contrasted with other pedagogies that were not driven by higher order thinking, and so chose to include them in this revised code. Throughout this process I worked with two critical friends who critiqued my codes after I had gone through two rounds of coding. They both confirmed and challenged codes that I had developed and I made changes accordingly.

Subsequently I utilized analytical coding to develop categories (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, I used concept maps to develop categories, arranging and rearranging codes until I was satisfied with the categories in which they were organized (e.g. Jackson & Trochim, 2002; Kinchin, Streatfield, & Hay, 2010). As more transcripts from my second participant and from the concept mapping exercise were completed I revised my categories to accommodate new data (see Figures 1 and 2). Additionally, I used constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in the identification of salient themes and patterns across participants (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 2002), which included checks across both my data and research memos (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

In terms of my findings, I used several methods to improve credibility and dependability. First, I provided "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomena and triangulated findings across

Figure 1. Challenges: first-run organization for theme development.

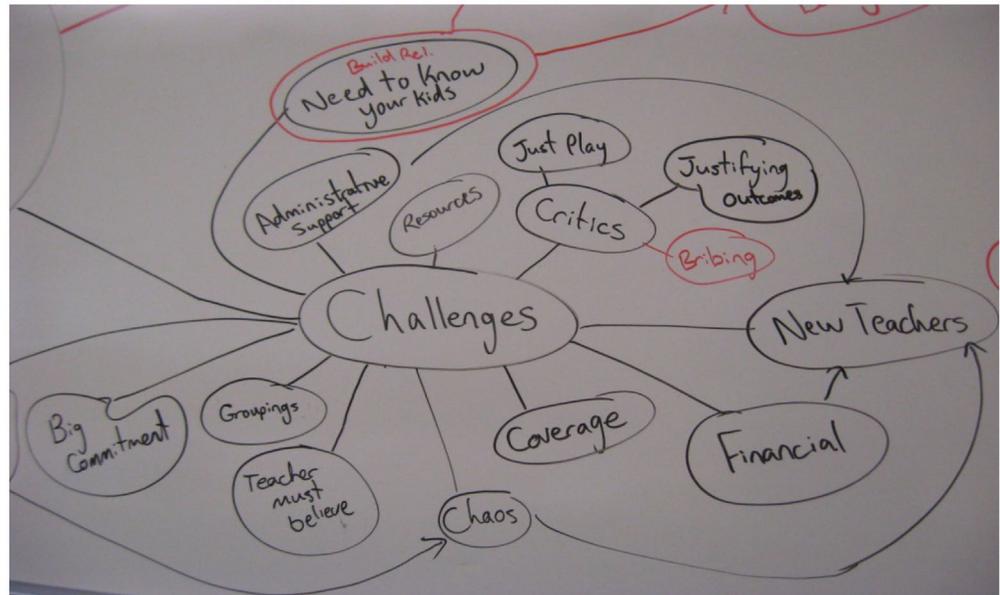


Figure 2. Challenges: second-run themes.



interviews and the think-aloud from the concept mapping exercise. Doing so ensured that I did not over-represent certain findings. For example, the code “palpable” (namely that the experience of the simulation could be felt or touched by students) appeared to be an important finding initially; however this finding was unique to a single participant in a single interview, and so it was not reported. Second, I enlisted critical friends to review and critique my findings and I made changes where necessary. During these reviews session, it became apparent that most of my codes were clear, however, there were a few codes that were unclear and needed to be adjusted. For instance, the code “personal dynamics” was broken down; I changed the code to “classroom dynamics” and moved some sub-codes to fit under the code “relationships”. Third, I asked my participants to review my findings and to “confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). My participants were satisfied with my interpretation in all but one detail; I made the change which contained a factual error. Finally, I searched for disconfirming evidence to be used in the formation of my categories and to define the limits of my conclusions (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). To use the same example of the theme challenges, I realized that “curricular” challenges and “limitations of own beliefs” were not appropriate categories. Although they were ideas that seemed clear to me as I developed the concept map, I did not have adequate data to support their presence as key challenges identified by my participants. As such, I removed them from this part of the analysis.

One semantic clarification that I have to account for is that Jerry and George, the veteran teachers who participated in this study, refer to all of their play-based activities as simulations. Although this is a common limitation in simulations research to date (Wright-Maley, 2015a), I feel it is nevertheless important to bring it to the reader’s attention. Rather than to censor my participants use of this term, I leave it to the reader to recognize the misattribution of the term to describe their activities.

5. Findings

Participants saw a balance of promises and challenges inherent in developing and enacting play-based pedagogies in the social studies classroom. Among the benefits include perceived positive changes in academic performance, affective dispositions, and behavior. This was counterbalanced by the challenges they identified which suggest this approach can be resource intensive, require support from peers and administrators and patience on the part of the teacher. In addition, teachers may have to withstand criticisms of their peers.

5.1. Perceived promises & challenges of play-based social studies

George and Jerry communicate a positive vision of social studies pedagogies of play as a central feature of their professional practice. Their perspectives and experiences reveal a multifaceted portrait of the promises and challenges inherent in the use of these practices in their social studies classroom.

5.1.1. Promising outcomes

The analysis of my participants’ thoughts about their approach reveals that they perceive three prominent positive impacts that result from students’ participation in these activities: Academic attainment, positive affective outcomes for students, and shifting social dynamics within their classroom and throughout the school

5.1.1.1. *Academic attainment.* For George and Jerry, academic success is a moving target, one that is particular to each student. They described a number of ways students achieve academic success through play-based social studies, such as meeting academic yearly progress goals on standardized exams. Achievement on the statewide tests is an important marker for the state and for administrators as to whether a teacher is effective. By this standard, even though some of their students enter George and Jerry’s classes far behind, participants articulated that they succeed in helping these students to achieve at a level that is in-line with the state average on standardized reading and writing tests (their state does not test social studies).

Although they recognize that this type of achievement “is important,” they also believe that a larger part of academic attainment lies in their students’ achievement of personal success, which may look different for each individual. For one student, Jerry explained that, when he arrived at the school “he couldn’t even write. He wouldn’t even attempt [to] because he was embarrassed. At least [now] he feels enough to write.” Likewise, George and Jerry argue that this approach allows them to “position students for success” and to provide them with a variety of opportunities to shine. For example, referring to the same student, who they affectionately refer to as Little Lion,² who could not read nor write, being able to speak even once during the activity was, from George’s perspective, a big step.

For other students, personal achievement is being able to grapple with complex content knowledge. Jerry related the experience of Dennison, who he described as, “a very bright kid.” During the Anne Hutchison trial reenactment, this student provided a coherent explanation of the *Covenant of*

Grace before the court. “You know, here’s a kid, an eighth-grader, explaining something that scholars try to explain. But he’s getting the message across.”

Referring to other students, the participants point out that their initial achievement may be found simply in engaging with the activity to reveal hidden talents. Jerry discussed a difficult student named Duncan: “I mean this kid can be a pain in the butt throughout the day, and he drives us crazy at times.” They described how this student arrived in their class out-of-control. He would run atop the desks, had loud outbursts, and would draw other students off track. Jerry went on to explain, “then he does the play and you see his creative ability and how he thinks.” Not only was he a talented actor, according to Jerry, but that his creative abilities also extended to handcrafting. Jerry continued saying, “He’s sewing and designing his little pouch, or his beads,” a task for the Lewis and Clark game, and “you’re like, okay, this kids got some talent here, like who would know?” George joined Jerry, adding, “and plus then you say well, so he’s making beads but so what? Then you look at some of things he writes and talked about what’s going on in these daily dilemmas that we do; [they] are very telling.” Thus, from their perspective, play-based social studies enables the creative space necessary for some students to shine, which in their view bleeds over into more traditional forms of academic achievement.

5.1.1.2. Affective outcomes. Jerry and George described a number of affective impacts they perceive that their activities have had upon their students. They observed a number of shifts in students’ demeanor, confidence, and body language which they argue is indicative of affective changes. George explained that “the reaction of the kids is enthusiasm for learning; the reaction is being happy, glad to be in school, glad to be in class, taking an active part in class.” He sees that some, like a student named Juan, soon change how they conduct themselves differently during these activities: “They’re more willing to take chances, and they’re more willing to express what they have to say or what they think in front of other people.” Juan, for his part, either couldn’t or wouldn’t perform at the beginning of the year, and now “carries himself different[ly].” Over time, these students begin to come out of their shells.

Similarly, Jerry described the affective changes he noticed in their students. He described that “all of a sudden they’re coming to class a lot, they’re not coming in late, they’re coming on time, they’re right there.” Jerry also referred frequently to a student named Jeremiah who had been “written off” by the school system he came from. They just “put him on a computer and let him play all day This kid did nothing for six years [They] sold him off This is a kid that had so many issues.” But “he doesn’t have a negative view of school these last two years ... he loves his school, he says This kid calls me father. He calls George uncle.” To solidify the point, he later reached into his bag to retrieve the stack of the day’s writing assignments and flipped through the pages searching for Jeremiah’s paper. Finding it, he pulled it from the stack, directing me to the bottom of the page where Jeremiah wrote in large capital letters, *I LOVE YOU DAD*. “Do simulations work?” says Jerry, pointing to Jeremiah’s words. “That says it all right there.”

Both George and Jerry believe they’re not alone in attributing some of students’ affective changes to their “simulations.” Jerry explained that when the representative who was sent by the state to evaluate the middle school approached him, “she said, ‘they’re talking about what you were doing in class in the cafeteria’. That’s, I mean that’s [students] don’t do that, [students] don’t talk about [their] class[es] positively.” George, too, noted that outside stakeholders recognized these shifts. He explained that at a recent school meeting focused on the search for a new principal, parents advocated for,

a principal that would be supportive of the type of things that we do. And one said, ‘my kids are going to school longer The expectations are so much higher and he’s doing well, and he’s coming home excited and animated about school and about the rest of the day; where when he came home from his old school he was just exhausted and bummed out’. So those type of comments that they’re making says [to us] okay, this is the right approach.

According to George and Jerry, their play-based approach leads to positive affective outcomes for their students that lead to greater happiness, excitement, confidence, and satisfaction with their school experience.

5.1.1.3. *Shifting social dynamics.* My participants described two significant social outcomes that they see resulting from the use of play-based social studies practices. First, that they have a positive impact on student behavior; and second, the experiences connected to these activities serve as relational adhesive that may help to bring students closer together because of their need to work together, while also fostering trust among members of the classroom community.

In terms of students' initial behavior, Jerry described how students "were running on top of the desks at the beginning of the school [year] ... we are like pulling our hair out at the beginning." George attributed their reduced behavioral issue to this approach to social studies which "helps not only with keeping kids motivated and doing the work, it keeps behavior issues at a minimum." He explained further, "your behavior issues diminish ... you have your regular 'come on, let's get to work' type stuff. But the principal and the vice principal ... they're not seeing kids come down [to the office] ... because kids are engaged" and because the simulation itself becomes "a bargaining chip" that they can use to coax students "to behave in the way that [students] know how [they] can behave." It is difficult to substantiate whether it is the simulations, their personalities, or the students' developing comfort in the classrooms, but George and Jerry are convinced that simulations provide students with a catalyst for behavioral change by providing both internal and external sources of motivation to behave in ways that are conducive to learning.

In addition to helping to regulate behavior, the participants hold that this approach helps develop social cohesion. Jerry explained, "I say they're the glue." He related to me how a teacher in another subject area who told him he should start his simulations on day one, because, "she said it like glues them together. 'It's like an instant wand.'" Jerry is the first to admit that this cohesion is not instantaneous. He recalled telling her, "I was like, it's a process; it didn't happen that way." Here Jerry hints that it is more than just the approach that alters their students' behavior.

Both George and Jerry point out that their success is built upon the foundations of strong relationships with their students. This is a process my participants begin at the start of the school year. As George explains, "we're pretty successful ... [and] we can do that because of connections that we start [on] day one with the kids, making connections with them and letting them know that they are loved and no matter what they do, [that] we're still gonna love them, but they have to come into the fold." These relationships enable my participants to build upon the foundations of trust they have already developed. Their "simulations" may act as "the glue" in this behavioral process because their willingness to entrust students to engage productively in them may represent a believable gesture of trust in the eyes of their students. Jerry elaborated on the point.

You trust the kids that they're going to be part of their learning ... you're trusting them that they're going to be part of their learning process ... that [they're] responsible and not just to sit there and not to do anything ... you're giving them the power to make decisions.

Thus, in their classroom, play-based pedagogy acts to develop and to reinforce the process of social cohesion and mutual responsibility that Jerry and George begin to establish from the beginning of the year.

5.2. *From promise to challenge*

George and Jerry regard play-based pedagogical activities as valuable, even essential, tools for achieving the academic, affective, and social outcomes described above. So far as my participants are concerned, they "haven't seen too many downsides. I don't think there's any downsides for the student." But in the same breath, George acknowledged that simulations are not without their

challenges, which fall squarely on teachers' shoulders: "The downsides are all from our perspective because we have to get everything put together and run it."

5.2.1. *Challenges for teachers*

My participants were forthcoming with the challenges that this approach presents for teachers. They shared some challenges in common and others that were of particular importance to them individually. Some of these challenges are connected to a teachers' willingness to dedicate both material resources such as finances and immaterial resources such as time and energy. Others are more complex and interpersonal. Among these interpersonal challenges is the ability to garner support from colleagues, the necessity of becoming comfortable with classroom dynamics that may be fluid and chaotic, and the courage to withstand disparaging remarks from critics who may never see the value of this pedagogical approach.

5.2.1.1. *Resources.* For teachers looking to adopt this approach, they should know that for all the payoffs, there is a cost to the teacher in terms of time, energy, and—in my participants' case—money. Although teaching generally requires these resources, my participants believe that play-based approaches may be more taxing than most. George and Jerry agree that teachers using these activities "have to be organized" and that they take "a lot of [up] front planning because ... we have to make arrangements [for all] ... the logistical things." Moreover, "you really need materials for any kind of simulation project," as well as costumes which "take it a step further." Additionally, teachers need help to ensure that students have access to the academic materials they need to be successful. So "you're getting materials and you're getting books on [the characters] that are available to the kids ... you've got to make sure you get things." All of these resources cost money, and "money is always a challenge Simulations are not cheap, although you can do them inexpensively." Simply put, "it costs more money to do simulations." Finally, it takes a lot of energy for teachers to employ these activities effectively. Jerry put it best: "Can you do this every minute of every day? No. God, you get tired. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of work to try to make it right."

5.2.1.2. *Support.* Another common challenge for Jerry and George was the need for collegial support, which included both administrators and other teachers. In this regard both of my participants also cautioned first-year teachers away from trying to undertake this approach. George put it this way, "I would probably caution a first-year teacher from doing something [like] that by themselves I would say you have somebody who's been there for a while and has a little social capital and has a little trust from those around you, [you] are much better off." Jerry said cautiously that if a new teacher wanted to try, they should at least "talk to the principal, let them know what you're doing." My participants said that support from those around them "is crucial ... because, let's face it, when I send my students out in the hall to practice ... that's going to impact somebody else's classroom." Moreover, there may be a bias among administrators "that want a quiet, always quiet [classroom]." Thus, "you also have to have support from administration. And they have to be [able to] trust you to know, okay you can have your kids out at twenty different locations, but you're going to know what your kids are doing in those twenty different locations." And if you don't have that kind of support? "I think if you don't," Jerry said, "you better get your résumé out there."

5.2.1.3. *Classroom dynamics.* For George, classroom dynamics was the challenge he discussed most frequently and at most length. At the heart of issue is a teacher's willingness to trust students to "take care of the business that they have to take care of." Even after several decades of teaching, George described his anxiety about this concern, stating "honestly, sometimes it drives me nuts because we'll be moving along through this process and I'll be thinking they're never going to do it You know the first couple of times I was thinking 'nah, this isn't going to work'. But now I know better." As he later explained, "that's another thing with simulations, that there's a lot of chaos that will eventually funnel in to a cohesive, coherent piece." This may be doubly difficult for novice teachers who can find this "very intimidating" because

“classroom management for a young teacher is a big deal. And you have to know your students, and know that the noise that is going on, the bedlam that’s going on is actually productive and not just kids messing around.” Thus, the challenge of trusting one’s students and trusting in the chaotic dynamics of simulations is an ongoing process, and for George, an ever-present one.

5.2.1.4. *Critics.* While both participants discussed their critics, this was, for Jerry, a challenge that he spoke to on multiple occasions. The primary criticism that Jerry railed against was that his critics often see their work with students as “just fun and games,” not as a rigorous course in US history: “There are a lot of teachers that feel that we are not rigorous enough, that we’re not preparing them for the high school, for their classroom.” But, he points out, “their definition of rigor is different than ours.” He argued that “there’s people [who are] not preparing them for my classroom too.” Sometimes these critics are people in the administration such as the assistant principal of the school who told a colleague of Jerry’s “these people, oh they’re just having fun, they’re not learning. But when kids come back and tell you years afterward what they did, they were learning.” For Jerry, he feels there is a double standard for teachers who undertake this formidable approach to teaching social studies. He elaborated, “it’s not fair: If our test scores drop just a little, [they’ll say] ‘Oh they just have fun and games’. If someone else’s does it’s, ‘oh kids are unmotivated’.” George seems a little less touched by the criticisms stating,

Our critics see the effortless part, they see the kids out there having a good time They don’t see the panting and exhaustion, and the work that surrounds that. So the part that’s visible to the community, that’s really visible, and especially to teachers who are old traditionalists and lecture style teachers...they tend to view it with a jaundiced eye.

In light of their experiences, teachers who approach social studies through the lens of enactivism may have to be prepared to withstand the criticisms of their peers and superiors who hold different visions of curricular practice.

5.3. Balancing promises and challenges

Jerry and George perceived several prominent challenges that they must face in order to enact their pedagogical vision. In addition to the demands that these activities place on teachers’ material resources, they have also required outlays of time and energy; necessitated that they garnered support from faculty and administration. Such activities, which exist in this liminal space between chaos and order, may also invoke unique classroom management demands that some teachers may be uncomfortable with (see Wright-Maley, 2015b); and this approach may provoke criticism from peers and superiors that some teachers could find daunting or dispiriting.

In spite of the challenges outlined above, George and Jerry have persisted in the belief that play-based social studies “is the right direction” for them, and that “it is something valuable, and it does work.” Even still, the use of enactivist pedagogy requires dedication on the part of the teachers using them. And that may be part of the reason for George’s and Jerry’s perceived personal success with them. George explained that because “it’s such a commitment” to approach teaching in this way, “you’re not willing to let it [fall flat].” In response, Jerry summed up their advice poignantly: “if you’re looking to just throw something at them and let them work in groups ... and just not participate [yourself] then you’re going to fail with it. It takes a big commitment.”

6. Discussion and conclusion

George’s and Jerry’s perspectives about play-based approaches to teaching depict a complex terrain for teachers to navigate. More than three decades of professional practice with simulations, games, and theatrical performances has provided them with the opportunity to develop nuanced understandings of the complexities that comes with using play-based pedagogy in their classrooms. My participants’ perspectives provide us with a glimpse into their lived experiences and perspectives

around their professional practice with such activities. Their views contain a mutual sense that these pedagogical devices are valuable. For George and Jerry, enactivism helps them to achieve a number of goals. They see the affective and social outcomes as the primary benefits. Their students learn to love school and gel as a group, both of which, they contend, contribute to pushing students to meet the academic aims Jerry and George have for them.

At the same time, they were quick to recognize the obstacles and difficulties teachers face when they choose to employ mimesis as a method to drive student learning. For all the promising outcomes, teachers should be aware that approaching social studies in this way comes with challenges that are not insubstantial, many of which are hallmarks of “ambitious” teaching (Grant, 2003). Interestingly, these challenges do not overlap with those revealed in DiCamillo and Gradwell’s (2012) study. They do, however, reflect some of the challenges identified by other researchers, echoing Glavin’s (2008), McNeil’s (1982), Kaufman and Moss’s (2010) concerns about teachers’ disinclination toward management, organization, and activities that strayed from teachers’ desire to have a tightly controlled classroom and the need to find managerial success in chaotic environments (Wright-Maley, 2015b). Additionally, the curricular demands described by my participants reflect similar challenges raised by Gilley (2004) who argued that simulations may require complex forethought and intensive planning. In the face of these challenges, Jerry and George articulated that through this approach they believe a teacher can produce impressive results that impact students both in terms of their academic and personal success which go beyond what one would expect from the typical social studies classroom.

Social studies teachers like Jerry and George have considerable latitude in how they present the curriculum (Thornton, 1991), but relatively few choose to do so through play-based activities, such as simulations, in middle and high school (Thieman & Carano, 2013) especially when compared to their elementary counterparts (Stephens, Feinberg, & Zack, 2013). Given an educational environment that some have argued has led to the “deskilling” of teachers (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 2010; Ross, 2010), many teachers have come to see themselves as implementers of prepackaged materials, rather than creators or tinkers of them (Segall, 2003; Yendol-Hoppey, Jacobs, & Tilford, 2005). For such teachers, steeped in an environment that does not effectively empower teachers to act as transformative intellectuals, the incorporation of enactivist pedagogies may seem too daunting (Giroux, 2010). Moreover, an educational culture that waxes hostile toward creative (i.e. non-traditional approaches to) teaching of social studies—in deed if not in word—may lead teachers, especially inexperienced ones, to teach defensively in order to maintain control over the class and minimize resistance by students (e.g. McNeil, 1982). This may even be so when they claim to embrace constructivist practices (Kaufman & Moss, 2010) that would suggest their inclinations toward the use of enactivist visions of teaching.

The pertinent question is if such pedagogies impact students in the ways that Jerry and George suggest—which appears to be emerging from recent scholarship on gaming and simulation (e.g. Parker et al., 2011; Young et al., 2012)—how then does the social studies community enable more social studies teachers to teach ambitiously with play-based teaching practices? In order to confront this task, teacher educators need to consider how to support the development of preservice, novice, and veteran teachers’ capacity to engage their students in simulations, as well as how teachers can be successful with them in the face of apparently daunting challenges. Moreover, they must prepare teachers to anticipate and meet those challenges, especially in an educational context in which they often do not see such pedagogies employed in the field (Meuwissen, 2005). At the same time, further research into the perceptions preservice and novice teachers have about play-based social studies may serve to reveal which challenges are of the most pressing concern to preservice and newly in-service social studies teachers. By approaching the problem through preservice training, professional development, and research, teacher educators may be better able to help these teachers undertake the use of formidable pedagogies successfully, rather than simply eschewing pedagogical tools like simulations that may appear, at least at first, too daunting to take on.

Thus, we may use the findings from this study of Jerry's and George's perspectives and experience with play-based social studies to illuminate both the possibilities for enactivist approaches to the social studies, while also helping to reveal the challenges they may face when attempting to adopt such approaches. Whatever the balance between challenges and promises others may see in play-based social studies, George and Jerry believe that the scale tips heavily in favor of the latter. For them, they are firm in their conviction that "this is the right approach" to teaching social studies.

Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: "Their definition of rigor is different than ours": The promise and challenge of enactivist pedagogies in the social studies classroom, Cory Wright-Maley, *Cogent Education* (2016), 3: 1140557.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used to refer to all schools and individuals.
2. Students' names and nicknames are pseudonyms.

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