



Diversity: Passive Tolerance vs. Active Insistence (Salvador “Sal” Macias, III)

Purpose: The purpose of this activity is to have participants model a process of selecting “neighbors” according to certain “rules.” By moving about the classroom according to simple decision parameters they will see patterns both of segregation and integration develop from seemingly innocent decisions.

Learning objectives: Participants will learn from a clear demonstration that exclusion and isolation result from decisions that, though they may not intend to generate segregation, because they maintain a passive tolerance, necessarily lead to it. And, on the other hand, participants will also learn that a pattern of inclusion and integration is only possible if there is an active desire to maintain it.

Target population: This activity works well with undergraduates, graduate students in their first or second year, gatherings of non-professionals, and as a teaching demonstration for professionals and more advanced graduate students.

Group size: A class of about 20 to 40 works best; classes smaller than 20 will not generate a sufficient number of possible seating arrangements, and groups too large are unwieldy to manage.

Time required: As a demonstration it can be managed in about 15 to 20 minutes, but with lively discussion and a starting point for a lecture on population patterns, can easily be used to cover a typical 50-minute class.

Setting: A typical classroom with desks in rows works best. The students need to be able to move about and exchange seats readily, and this is not easily accommodated in seminar rooms in which students sit around a common table, in theater style seating, nor in standard lecture halls with fixed, room-length counter tables that function as writing surfaces.

Materials:

1. Five-inch square pieces of paper, two different colors, such that 50% of the class will receive one color, the rest the other color.
2. Overhead transparency and three sheets with grid marking, each square symbolizing one desk, made up to match the geometric pattern of desks in the class. That is, if the desks are arranged in a 5 x 5 pattern, the grids should have squares in a 5 x 5 pattern.
3. Two markers, one in each color of the pieces of paper. (Note, in the absence of an over-head transparency, a chalk board or a dry-erase board will suffice, but I recommend drawing all three the grids on the board before class begins.)

Instructions for conducting activity:

1. Ask the participants to arrange themselves in the classroom such that there are no empty desks among them. Distribute the colored pieces of paper in a haphazard order, one per student.
2. Draw the resulting color distribution on the overhead. I have found it easiest if the participants, in turn, call out their color and I mark my grid accordingly.
3. Once the pieces of paper are distributed, the class is ready for the first “rule” of relocation (see Figure 1 for sample “random” distribution).

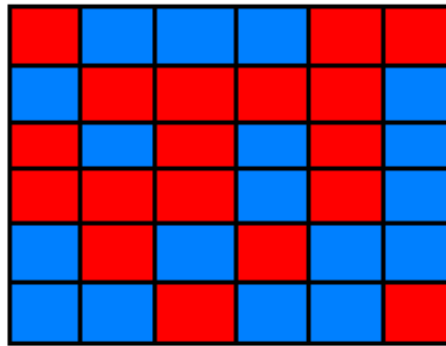


Figure 1. Typical “random” distribution.

4. Ask the participants to look to the pieces of papers held by their neighbors; their neighbors are to their front, behind, left and right. If at least two have the same color as they do, they should remain where they are and do nothing. If this is not true, they should raise their hand (with the paper in it) and change seats with someone who has the other color.
5. After these changes take place, ask the class, again, to look to their neighbors to check to see if one half of them now share their color of paper. If not, the same procedure should be followed (i.e., raise their hands, change seats, etc.)
6. When there are no more moves necessary or possible (it may be that one or two participants will be seated such that the rules are violated, but they may not be able to move because their colleagues with the other color are all seated according to the rule), ask them once again to call out their colors so that you can draw them into the second grid (see Figure 2 for sample distribution).

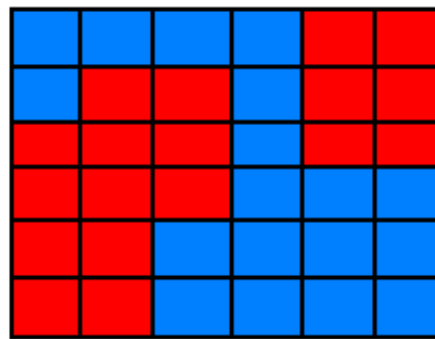


Figure 2. 50% neighbors same color.

At this point it is relatively easy to guide the class in a discussion (see the following section for recommendations regarding the lecture and conversation issues of relevance). After the discussion, the second rule should be introduced. Beginning from the seats they now occupy, ask the participants to seek at least one neighbor who has a piece of paper opposite in color to theirs. As before, they should examine their neighbor’s papers and raise their hands if they do not have at least one neighbor with a

different color. Also, as before, this may take two or three iterations. When complete, again draw this new distribution on the third grid (see Figure 3 for sample distribution).

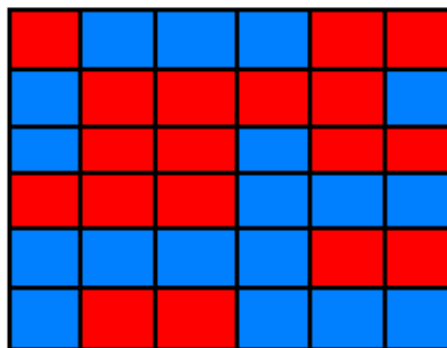


Figure 3. At least one neighbor the opposite color.

The first (i.e., “random”) filled-in grid will show a mixed-up order. Some colors will be bunched together, but just as likely there will be much mixing. The second grid (according to the rule such that at least one-half the neighbors hold the same color) will show a very strong segregation pattern that will have very little mixing. The grid can easily be compared to typical cities with ethnically pure neighborhoods, isolated enclaves of one ethnicity surrounded by another, etc.

After the first rule has been implemented, I recommend a short discussion. For example, this rule did not require segregation. If a person followed this rule in choosing where to live, where to work, where to sit in a restaurant, etc., no one would accuse him or her of being racist. Such a person would happily accept neighbors who are different from them; they just do not want to be “alone.” Thus, the point is made that a passive attitude (which tolerates separation) does not, nor can it result in diversity; rather, as this activity demonstrates, it creates the opposite – separation and isolation.

The second rule is only a mild insistence for inclusion – just one of four neighbors is required to be different. Yet, this rule results in an impressive amount (though not perfect) of mixing in the participants. Again, the point should be made that this diversity can only result from an active insistence.

Additional Discussion Points:

It should be noted that this demonstration begins with the premise that diversity is desirable and that it is our joint responsibility to work toward a society that respects and seeks inclusion. Since this may not be so obvious to our students, a certain amount of preparation may be necessary to create a working philosophy for this value system.

Many people already understand the principle of diversity and recognize the importance of an inclusive community; inclusion in the classroom, churches, the work place, neighborhoods, etc. Additionally, they easily “understand” when told that the world, by and large, is not inclusive, and that we all have responsibilities to work for positive change. What many people often do not understand is their (and

our) own complicity; that we contribute to and are often responsible for separation and isolation in ways we do not recognize in our daily lives. More specifically, failure to be active in insisting upon diversity is tantamount to a passive tolerance of exclusion and segregation

An easy demonstration of this very point may well exist in many classrooms where one may wish to utilize this demonstration. If the gathering is multi-ethnic, it is likely that the seating choices evidenced by members of the audience (e.g., students on the first day of class) represent a non-inclusive seating arrangement. In any case, it isn't difficult to suggest situations from our everyday lives that make this point, and to discuss potential irony in the behavior of people who supposedly value diversity.

References:

- Macias, S., III, (August 15, 2008). Diversity: Passive tolerance vs. active insistence. In "Teaching Take-Outs Symposium with Diversity Activities," (S. Macias, Chair), Annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, MA.
- Rauch, J. (April, 2002). Seeing around corners. *Atlantic Monthly*, 289, 35-48.