

Action Teaching Award

For 10 years, Social Psychology Network held an international action teaching award competition with two main goals: (1) to honor creative action teaching, and (2) to freely disseminate effective action teaching techniques to a wide audience. See below for award-winning examples.

EXAMPLES BY CATEGORY

AWARD RECIPIENT:

- Winning Entries
- Honorable Mentions

TYPE:

- Classroom Activity
- Student Assignment
- Field Experience
- Web-Based Resource

LEARNER LEVEL:

- Grade School
- High School
- College/University
- Graduate School
- Work Setting

FOCUS:

- Violence Prevention and Peace
- Social Justice and Prejudice Reduction
- Environmental Protection and Sustainable Living
- Civic Engagement and Social Activism
- Developing Empathy and Compassion
- Promoting Health and Well-Being

The "O" Train: Teaching the Power of Ostracism

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Please note: Instructors are welcome to use or adapt these teaching ideas for their own classes, provided the use is noncommercial and appropriate credit is given.

Objectives

To show students the powerful consequences of ostracism firsthand using an engaging, validated teaching tool: the "O" train

Abstract

The "O" train is a role-playing exercise in which students are either the target or source of ostracism during a five-minute simulated train ride (the "O" stands for ostracism). To create a mock train in the classroom, instructors arrange several rows of chairs with three seats per row. Within each row, students holding an S-ticket ("sources" of ostracism) ignore and exclude a student holding a T-ticket (the "target" of ostracism) who sits in the center seat between the S-ticket holders. By showing students how powerful ostracism can become after only a few minutes, the demonstration naturally leads to a discussion of how ostracism might be reduced in society.

Description

Ostracism (to be excluded and ignored) often pervades our interactions with loved ones, coworkers, and friends. Research suggests that ostracism can have negative physiological, psychological, and behavioral effects ranging from elevated blood pressure to alienation to aggression. The "O" train ("O" stands for ostracism) is an action teaching exercise in which participants play the role of either a target or source of ostracism during a five-minute simulated train ride. During the ride, the sources ignore and exclude the target after a one-minute discussion.

Creating an "O" Train

To create a train in the classroom, instructors should assemble a make-shift train car by arranging several rows of chairs with three seats per row (the number of rows depends on the size of the class). During the demonstration, targets of ostracism should occupy the center seat of each row and be flanked by the sources of ostracism. Instructors may also add to the train's authenticity by using props or set pieces (e.g., signs such as "Don't put your feet on the seats").

Preparing the Tickets and Instructions

Before the exercise, instructors should prepare train tickets with a "T" or an "S" indicating each student's role as a target or source of ostracism. In addition, instructors should prepare an instruction sheet for students about the nature of their role during the ride. These instructions should tell students that they're on a train ride home from school and find themselves sitting beside two classmates. The instructions then differ depending on the assigned role. Targets are told to talk with the students in their row for the duration of the ride, whereas sources are told to include the person in the middle seat until the instructor blows a whistle, then ignore that person and speak only to the other classmate for the rest of the ride. To give sources a rationale for ostracizing the target, they might be told that they're privately upset with the person in the middle seat for not inviting them to a recent party.

Sample train tickets:

Sample instructions:

[PDF format](#) | [Word format](#)

Procedure for Conducting the "O" Train

We typically tell students that they'll be participating in a role-playing exercise but keep them uninformed about the purpose (e.g., we don't explain what the letters "T" and "S" stand for). After a brief introduction, the instructor hands out tickets and asks "T" ticket holders to sit in a center seat and "S" ticket holders to



sit in a side seat. Once all students have boarded the train, the instructor then distributes the scenarios, giving students time to read the instructions. The instructor then shouts "All aboard!" and blows a whistle to begin the ride. After one minute, the instructor blows the whistle again, signaling sources to begin the ostracism. At the end of five minutes, the instructor blows the whistle one last time, signaling the end of the ride. Students can then remain in the train during the subsequent discussion about ostracism.

Overall, the exercise takes approximately 20 minutes, including classroom preparation (5 minutes), introductory comments (5 minutes), handing out the tickets (2 minutes), students reading the scenarios (3 minutes), and the train ride itself (5 minutes). The remaining teaching time is used for class discussion about the train ride and current research on ostracism.

Students' Responses During the Exercise

Having used many classroom exercises over the years, we are struck by how absorbing the train ride is for students. Once the ostracism begins, students show dramatic differences depending upon their assigned role. Whereas sources energetically play their role for the duration of the ride, targets usually remain animated only for the first minute or so of ostracism, after which they tend to slump into their chairs, defeated.

This reaction suggests that being excluded, even during a role-play exercise, is not a particularly pleasant experience. Hence, it is necessary to remind students afterward that their actions, and those of the people in their row, were prompted solely by their assigned roles. The instructor should also acknowledge that some people in the train probably experienced a rougher ride than others (we often get students to "group hug" the people in their row, or at least pat each other on the back, to ensure that there are no hard feelings).

Because the ostracism in this exercise is brief and is counteracted by the instructor's remarks afterward, we have never witnessed a long-lasting adverse reaction. Indeed, research suggests that most people encounter at least one episode of ostracism each day (and ostracize others once per day, too), so this activity falls well within the realm of students' daily experience. Nonetheless, instructors should always look for signs of disengagement or sadness, and should encourage students to consider both source and target perspectives. If anything, we have found that momentary negative feelings tend to fuel rather than impede active discussions.

Post-Ride Discussion

After the train ride, students have an opportunity to compare their experiences, share their reactions to the ride, discuss real-world examples of ostracism, and learn from each other. This dialogue helps students understand the hurtful impact that silence and exclusion can have, not only interpersonally (e.g., receiving the "silent treatment" from a loved one), but on a societal level, such as when ostracism occurs between groups (e.g., the exclusion of others based on race).

Assessment of the "O" Train Exercise

To assess the "O" train exercise, we asked 304 first-year psychology students to evaluate their experience with the demonstration. Afterwards, they also received three other ostracism teaching methods: a class discussion about ostracism, a lecture on ostracism research, and an assignment on the nature of ostracism (asking students to write about a personal ostracism experience). Students were then asked to rate the effectiveness of each method in teaching them about: (a) how it felt to be a target of ostracism, (b) how it felt to be a source of ostracism, and (c) their own ostracism experiences with loved ones or peers. Students were also asked to rate how much they liked participating in each of these methods as a way of learning about ostracism.

Overall, the results suggested that students perceived the "O" train to be an effective way of learning about ostracism, reporting that the "O" train provided them with better insights into being a target of ostracism than the other teaching methods (compared to a class discussion, $t(302) = 15.9, p < .0005$; lecture, $t(302) = 22.4, p < .0005$; or assignment, $t(301) = 18.0, p < .0005$); and provided them with better insights into being a source of ostracism than the other teaching methods (compared to a class discussion, $t(299) = 17.3, p < .0005$; lecture, $t(300) = 23.4, p < .0005$, or assignment, $t(298) = 19.9, p < .0005$). Students also reported that the "O" train gave them more insight into their own everyday experiences of ostracism than did other teaching methods (compared to a class discussion, $t(299) = 8.6, p < .0005$; lecture, $t(298) = 15.1, p < .0005$; or assignment, $t(299) = 11.7, p < .0005$), and that they preferred the "O" train as a way of learning about ostracism (compared to a class discussion, $t(299) = 8.0, p < .0005$; lecture, $t(298) = 13.3, p < .0005$; or assignment, $t(298) = 16.2, p < .0005$).

In addition to these student ratings, ten first-year psychology teaching assistants who conducted the "O" train evaluated the demonstration as a teaching tool, rating the extent to which they liked using each of the methods as a means of teaching students about ostracism. In these evaluations, teaching assistants reported a significant preference for the "O" train exercise (compared to a class discussion, $t(9) = 2.9, p = .017$; lecture, $t(9) = 7.6, p < .0005$; or assignment, $t(9) = 9.0, p < .0005$).

Conclusion

Given the prevalence of ostracism in daily life, it's important to show students the harmful effects of silence and exclusion. By taking an action teaching approach, the "O" train offers an engaging and memorable way to demonstrate the powerful effects of ostracism, and to spark a discussion of how ostracism might be reduced in society.

Further Reading

Williams, K. D. (2001). *Ostracism: The power of silence*. New York: Guilford Publications.

Williams, K. D., Forgas, J. P., & von Hippel, W. (Eds). (2005). *The social outcast: Ostracism, social exclusion, rejection, and bullying*. New York: Psychology Press.

Zadro, L., & Williams, K. D. (2006). How do you teach the power of ostracism? Evaluating the Train Ride demonstration. *Social Influence, 1*, 1-24.

Zadro, L., Williams, K. D., & Richardson, R. (2005). Riding the "O" train: Comparing the effects of ostracism and verbal dispute on targets and sources. *Group Processes and Interpersonal Relations, 8*, 125-143.