

## BIRD, BEAST OR FISH

Kay Hardman

Norine Dresser

George Enell

As part of the Folklore and Education section at the American Folklore Society meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, in November, 1973, "Project X" was unveiled. Described in the program as a "demonstration of a teaching experiment," Project X is an educational game which we call "Bird, Beast, or Fish?" Time limits within the session at Nashville did not allow us to describe the development, uses, and rationale of the game (except minimally by brief statement and a distributed written list of the game's rules), for our purpose was to have the participants play the game rather than merely to hear it described. In this article we will address ourselves to the questions that time did not permit at Nashville.

First, why use games in high school and college classrooms? The three of us who have used "Bird, Beast, or Fish?" in our classes, as well as games devised by others, find that a carefully constructed game situation can give students the opportunity to generate concepts for themselves from their experiences within the game, instead of simply being exposed to the same concepts developed through a series of lectures by the professor, and that the discussions following the game are valuable to both teacher and student.

We feel that both the experience of the game and the subsequent discussions make it probable that the students will be able to apply such concepts more readily to their subsequent reading and listening.

Since the students have been involved physically and emotionally in the game, they feel free to criticize both the game and its rules. As a result of these critical discussions, each participant can clarify his own values, particularly by comparison. A somewhat unexpected outcome of this is that many students in the class come to feel that they know one another better than they had before. The relaxation resulting from feeling more comfortable and at ease with each other is reflected in responsive class discussions as well as increased enthusiasm for the class and its subject matter.

"Bird, Beast, or Fish?" was developed for the purpose of simulating hypothesis-testing situations related to cross-cultural communication; such situations are particularly frequent in the experience

of fieldworkers in folklore, anthropology and interpersonal communication. Moreover, many disciplines taught at the undergraduate-college level or above require the professor to describe research methods which involve descriptions of human behavior as the data base.<sup>1</sup>

Having begun with an elaborate game which involved a mythological setting and a complex system of verbal directions, we tested the game with a group of non-student participants and altered the original design until it was drastically simplified. Among the principles for game-design to which we adhere is that of building on already well-known games. Thus, "Bird, Beast, or Fish?" utilizes the familiar games of both "Analogies" or "Categories" and "Charades."

Briefly, the game is organized as follows: the class stands in a circle and the game director selects three people to be "observers" -- their role is to function inductively. The other participants become the "observed" and their role is to function deductively. In advance of the game, the directors have chosen certain descriptive words to be given to the "observed," for example, "superstitious." After the three observers have left the room, the observed are given their word; they are encouraged to discuss among themselves how they would indicate such a concept non-verbally to an observer. For example, "If we label ourselves as 'superstitious' then we would behave in ways such as these: 'avoid walking under a ladder,' 'throw salt over our shoulder,' 'light only two cigarettes on one match,' etc."

The observers, who are outside the room, are told that they can interact with the observed only on the basis of hypothesis-testing questions, such as "If you are lighting only two cigarettes on one match, then you are probably 'superstitious.'"

From this example, it would appear to be very simple for the observers to categorize such behaviors when acted out by the observed group. However, the following example might indicate some of the complexities which arise within this apparently simple format. Within one group, given the word "religious," the following behaviors were acted out: hands folded in prayer, a crucifixion, swinging a censer, lighting candles, and one group who drew a sun on the chalkboard and knelt in front of it. One of the observers, coming into the room, immediately focused on the kneeling sun-worshippers and concluded that they were "superstitious." However,

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1. The original game was designed as part of the Simulation Use and Design Workshop, organized by R. Garry Shirts; Univ. of Calif. San Diego, May, 1973.

when this observer watched the other simultaneous representations of the concept "religious" he saw the situation differently. The ensuing discussion of the bases for contrasting behaviors such as "religious" and "superstitious" was useful in pointing up the value-laden implications of such often used descriptive terms.

The following list of the concepts we have used in the game will, we hope, indicate the types of possibilities created for such analyses: civilized, illiterate, peasant, middle-class, children, female, male, non-human, elite, elderly, lower-class.

One eleventh-grader commented, "I guess in our society we stereotype. Like 'children' you know, we start sucking our thumbs and doing those kinds of things. But being 'non-human,' there's too many things you can do. You just don't look at those things everyday."

The constellation of non-verbal behaviors surrounding "illiteracy" has proved very revelatory to both the observed and the observers. This concept is difficult to represent, of course, because assumptions implicit in the term "illiterate" go far beyond the non-use of written codes to represent language. "Stupid," "retarded," and "children" have frequently been suggested by the observers as possible categories to describe such actions (by the observed) as counting on one's fingers, indicating puzzlement while turning the pages of a book, or marking on the ground with a stick. On the other hand, when representing "civilized," many of the observed read and write, eat politely, and almost always drink tea with the little finger gracefully curved. In discussions following the game, students are frequently surprised to learn that they tend to associate "illiteracy" with "stupidity," or "civilization" with "party-manners," or that in representing "elderly" only behaviors indicating physical debility were considered, or in describing "religious" that only Christian symbols were generated although the observed themselves might not identify themselves as Christians.

Since we hope to find ways to indicate that abstract concepts based on non-contextual observation of human behaviors can only result in stereotyping, "Bird, Beast, or Fish?" seems to provide an experiential method of getting such a discussion started.

Further discussions tend to revolve around group interactions within the game. After everyone has been both observer and observed, the stresses and strains of both social roles are quite clear to everyone. In a discussion of how fieldworkers chose informants, one eleventh-grader commented, "You take when a new person comes into a group, the first person he'll start to listen to is the person usually heading the group. Usually he'll go to the guy who's giving out the most information . . . who's elaborating." Another said, "One of the things that made me feel much better as

an insider was when you're doing something in a group, let's say five people out of fifteen doing it. You feel strange if you're the only one doing it and everybody's looking at you and you feel dumb. It's kind of like in society, when you do something out of the ordinary, then you feel strange. You kind of have to fit in with the group and do what everybody else does." Another commented on being an "insider." "I felt frustrated because they couldn't understand what we were trying to tell them."

One student remarked about being an observer, "Yeah, I felt kind of apprehensive 'cause you're . . . It's like trying to piece together a puzzle with different clues to find out what you're trying to get at. It's kind of confusing at first 'cause some of the clues can vary so greatly and you know . . . You have to break out of a general basis to get the clues."

Since we feel that the study of expressive behavior is valuable, and that both folklore research and communication theory deal with the same basic data from which inferences about human beings and social organization are drawn, we conclude that such study would appear to be best accomplished by providing the students with numerous experiences of shared expressive behavior as data for examination within the classroom. It does not seem to us that "reading about" communication (both verbal and non-verbal) among people is nearly as educational as communicating with people in the environment (the classroom) in which we all spend a great part of our time and energy. The communication between student and student, and between teacher and student, that takes place within the game and during the subsequent discussion is, in fact, the only significant and inherent area of meaningfulness to all participants that can be experienced rather than inferred. Thus, we believe that the less the student must rely on inferences made from the professor's lectures and from silent reading, the more potential "learning" is available in the classroom.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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