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Crystal A. Evans

Assistant Professor, College of Business and Economics, Regis University, cevans005@regis.edu

Lorin Mayo

mayolorin@gmail.com

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Zombie Apocalypse: Using the Unreal as a Pedagogical Tool

Crystal A. Evans
Assistant Professor, College of Business and Economics
Regis University
(Cevans005@regis.edu)

Lorin Mayo
(mayolorin@gmail.com)

Abstract

The following paper opens with a first person account illustrating how “the Unreal” was used in a classroom setting as a class management tool by one of the authors. This method had the benefit of resetting a classroom environment that had become hostile by creating a fun atmosphere that encouraged lively debate. Next, a faux journal article is provided to the students as a way to introduce this method. Finally, sample discussion questions are provided for classroom debate followed by a conclusion.

Using the Unreal as a Pedagogical Tool: Classroom Situation

I was teaching critical thinking at a community college and presenting logical fallacies (such as strawman and red herring) as compelling tools in political campaigns. To counterbalance the responses from an older, forceful, and opinionated student, my interest in using Zombies or “the Unreal” as a pedagogical tool began to expand. An aggressive student with considerably more life experience and ingrained views than the typical freshmen and sophomores in the class was dominating the arguments rather than analyzing them. His constant berating of the other students and his tendency to use his historical knowledge as a weapon of intimidation rendered the rest of the students faint-hearted in their desire to participate in the discussion. In spite of having a private discussion with the student outside of the classroom, the issue continued.

Skimming through television channels one night, while my mind mulled over the situation, I came across a program on the History Channel that used logical fallacies to convince the audience that space aliens had visited Earth and could have been responsible for events in history, such as the creation of the pyramids. I immediately began recording the program. The next class period, I brought in the recording and changed the topic from an often tense discussion about identifying fallacies in political campaigns to a discussion of

the fallacies used to argue space aliens had created the pyramids. The dominating student, though engaged, was not as authoritative. The typically reserved students as well as the overbearing student all actively participated and challenged each other and often found humor in the discussion. Since nobody really had firsthand experience with space aliens, the students felt freer to speak up and less likely to put down somebody else’s comments with this topic than they did with real world topics. The new approach helped students learn how logical fallacies can be used as persuasive tools and even included the occasional moments of shared laughter.

Three main advantages of using this method in specific situations surfaced. First, an unreal topic, such as space aliens, can level the playing field and neutralize an otherwise tense discussion. It allows those with fewer life experiences a safe zone to share their thoughts without being susceptible to another student’s unconstrained comments. Second, emotional reactions can be defused by filtering the conversation through a less emotional lens. As a result, I witnessed students empowered to express their opinions without feeling the need to conform to the prevailing opinion(s). When social justice issues are explored, individuals might feel pressured to conform to the crowd. Fear of judgment or personal timidity can override a student’s desire to participate openly. However, in

“Zombie Impact and the Nonprofit Sector” by Coalition for Zombie-Human Relations

The undead is receiving increased attention, not just in popular culture, but also in academic research. Research on zombie outbreaks is emerging from such fields as Public Health,¹ Mathematics,² and National Defense.³ Missing from this list to date is the nonprofit sector. “The documented rise of multiple zombie pathogens should be a wake-up call to the international community that we need additional funding and cooperation among scientists and government officials to tackle the looming threat of apocalyptic disease.”⁴ Government often relies on nonprofits to carry out programs and community activities to address the needs of those affected by the crisis.⁵ Therefore, nonprofits must be part of the deliberations to consider the difficulties that could result from an unexpected increase in the undead population.

Three main contributions are made with this research. First, a topic that nonprofits have to date failed to address—the impact of the undead upon local and national nonprofit trends—can be brought into the conversation. Second, specific ethical issues can be examined as a result of this research. Third, distinct social justice topics relating to nonprofit and societal responses to the undead are illuminated.

Literature Review

The dispute among zombie specialists on the origin of zombies is thriving. As far back as the 2nd century BCE, the Chinese took great care to bury their dead in ritualistic ways that would assure they did not return to menace the living.⁶ Zombie mythology can be traced back to the 1500s as part of the Haitian voodoo religion.⁷ Followers believed that zombies were susceptible to mind control and could be controlled by their master like a slave. While voodoo was the stated cause of the zombification, the zombie-like state was more likely caused by a neurotoxin that kept the slaves in a drugged state and vulnerable to suggestions.⁸ Others argue for a more supernatural origin for zombies, which require death and reanimation.⁹

Classic “Romero zombies” or ghouls, as they were dubbed in the 1968 movie *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George Romero, were the result of overpopulation of the afterlife.¹⁰ These zombies were slow, uncommunicative, and traveled in large groups called hordes. Moreover, these ghouls possess an unquenchable desire to consume human flesh. Romero zombies are deactivated by destroying the brain or severing it from the rest of the body. In 1932 researchers determined¹¹ and others have since corroborated¹² that zombies are not harmed by damage to the chest and other body parts.

Other research suggests that zombies are the result of a viral infection, possibly from an improperly contained biological weapon. These zombies are called “rage zombies” and are aggressive and rabid. They were generated in multiple instances by the Trixie virus in the 1973 Pennsylvania outbreak¹³ and the 2010 Iowa outbreak,¹⁴ the modified rabies virus in the 2007 New York City outbreak,¹⁵ and the modified Ebola virus in the 2002 UK outbreak.¹⁶ The rage-zombies originating from this type of virus are unique in that they are capable of communication and are fast runners.

In 1985 researchers started documenting classic Romero zombies exhibiting behavior similar to the rage zombies.¹⁷ Though the original cause of zombification may vary (voodoo beliefs, improper burial, punishment for immorality), the spread of zombieism from the initial outbreak is consistently attributed to saliva contaminated by a rabies-type virus infecting a new host when bitten by the original carrier.¹⁸

During outbreaks, communities call upon nonprofits to help in containment and provide needed supplies to those who are not zombified.¹⁹ Once an outbreak is controlled through zombie starvation,²⁰ zombie dormancy,²¹ zombie rehabilitation,²² or successful quarantine,²³ the mission of rebuilding society begins. One particular problem during this time is a scarcity of politicians, as their constituents may have served them to the zombie hordes.²⁴ In the case that the legitimate government is destroyed by zombies, the survivors will need to establish an unofficial government based on authority and security.²⁵ Nonprofits, volunteers, and grassroots workers must participate in reestablishing society.

the fictional setting created by this method, students were more willing to argue an opposing side of the discussion creatively and ardently. This method is not intended to avoid challenging topics, but to help reset a classroom dynamic free of preconceived notions.

See the previous page for a faux journal article that can be used to present this method in a classroom context.

Sample Questions for Classroom Discussion

General Discrimination

General prejudice abounds regarding zombies. Some believe the only good zombie is a dead zombie. Survival rules for those terrorized in Zombieland,²⁶ such as the second rule of “Double Tap” (always shoot a zombie at least twice, and one of the shots should be to the head) and the 25th rule of “Shoot First” (small talk is not necessary, just shoot), impedes acceptance and understanding of these tormented beings. But what if there was a way to rehabilitate a zombie?²⁷ Do we have a responsibility to try to rehabilitate as many as possible? Do rehabilitated zombies have some inherent value as a (non)living being that should be respected? What if some medical procedure could be performed on the zombies that would render them harmless? Can they be restored and find a useful place in society?

Employment Discrimination

How will rehabilitated zombies provide for themselves and contribute to society? When they enter the workforce, they will likely face discrimination. Until society understands their rights and protections as citizens, such as equal pay, disability rights, or religious freedom, their chances to sustain themselves are limited. Existing workers will need specific sensitivity training to know how to understand and deal with their new colleagues. The zombies who do not find employment will be unable to provide for their most basic needs. Consequently, the zombies may rely on nonprofits for daily care such as food, shelter, and clothing. Nonprofits may be challenged to respond to the unique tastes and cultural aspects of the new population.

Immigration

As their brains have been compromised, zombies will need assistance to complete the myriad of paperwork required for the special legal protection afforded to outsiders. Understanding the nuances of obtaining legal status will be complicated and confusing for them. Special locations will need to be established to accommodate the sheer numbers of these illegal aliens requesting asylum or refugee status. Volunteers are needed to record their personal narratives and analyze and interpret them to be sure they are truly rehabilitated. On-site medical clinics will be necessary to stave off any healthcare needs, perhaps brought on by their viral origins or injuries from spirit possessions. They will need translators to make sense of their grunting and respond to them in a way that helps them navigate the system. Physical and/or speech therapists will need to evaluate the zombies to determine first if they are the slow-moving, non-communicative zombies, or if they are capable of some type of communication and are fast movers. Attempts can then be made to return them to a more acceptable gait and/or speech pattern.

Food Banks

Zombie diets typically consist of brains. Will food-banks adjust their offerings or is it too onerous to accommodate diet preferences in a mass operation? Would it matter if a dietary request is medically motivated (e.g., brains) versus a self-imposed diet (e.g., only eat male brains)? What if the self-imposed diet is the result of moral (e.g., don't eat brains) or religious beliefs?

Shelters

How will the homeless rehabilitated zombies be treated? Will they be sheltered together in a repurposed, abandoned, urban building,²⁸ or should they be more isolated in refugee camps that allow families to receive communal resources such as food, medical care, and integrative support while living separately as families in tents or container communities?²⁹ How can nonprofits address the needs of the new population while remaining sensitive to the safety fears of the original population? Will long-standing citizens be culturally sensitive to their new neighbors and will the zombies readily accept their new surroundings

and tone down their idiosyncratic nature even sans violence? What might be the best way to soften the culture shock and probable fear felt by locals at this invasion of outsiders? What can be done to resist the inclination of the newcomers to create ethnic enclaves, particularly since they are accustomed to living and traveling together, so that their integration minimizes any cultural, religious, or racial conflicts or outburst?

Evaluation of Using the Unreal as a Pedagogical Tool

While this use of the unreal to defuse an overbearing student reflects my personal experience, I found that using space aliens or another unreal fictional schematic can help students contemplate sensitive social justice issues free of preconceived notions or prejudices. Furthermore, the objectified topic in this instance helped manage a class in the presence of an overbearing student while engaging other students who might be too shy to speak up about “real” situations. An equalized level of experience to an imaginary scenario can eliminate barriers of communication and classroom contribution to open discussions inclusively. Again, this method is not intended to avoid difficult conversations but can be used to set the precedent of an environment free from judgment that encourages outside-the-box thinking and lively (and friendly) debate.

The evidence presented here is anecdotal and the experience of one faculty member. For future research, others may consider using such a method to determine if results are consistent. Additionally, modifying discussion questions to fit other disciplines could be beneficial. HJE

Notes

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³ “A Plan to Stop the Zombie Apocalypse Seriously: Everything You Need to Know about the U.S. Military’s Defense Strategy to Protect Humanity from the Walking Dead,” *Foreign Policy*, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/13/exclusive-the-pentagon-has-a-plan-to-stop-the-zombie-apocalypse-seriously/>.

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⁵ Beth Gazley and Jeffrey L. Brudney, “The Purpose (and Perils) of Government-Nonprofit Partnership,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2007): 389-415; Beth Gazley, “Beyond the Contract: The Scope and Nature of Informal Government-Nonprofit Partnerships,” *Public Administration Review* 68, no. 1 (2008): 141-154; Dennis R. Young, “Complementary, Supplementary, or Adversarial? Nonprofit-Government Relations,” *Nonprofits & Government: Collaboration & Conflict* 37 (2006): 37-79.

⁶ “The History of Zombies,” SPS student news, accessed January 29, 2016, <https://cpsstudentnews.wordpress.com/2013/12/10/the-history-of-zombies/>.

⁷ Hans-W. Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier, “The Ways and Nature of the Zombi,” *Journal of American Folklore* (1991): 466-494.

⁸ *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, directed by Wes Craven (Universal Pictures, 1988).

⁹ *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George A. Romero (Continental Distribution, 1968).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *White Zombie*, directed by Bela Lugosi (Victor and Edward Halperin Productions, 1932).

¹² Max Brooks, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003); *Zombieland*, directed by Ruben Fleischer (Columbia Pictures, 2009).

¹³ *The Crazies*, directed by George A. Romero (Pittsburgh Films, 1973).

¹⁴ *The Crazies*, directed by Breck Eisner (Overturn Films, 2010).

¹⁵ *I Am Legend*, directed by Francis Lawrence (Warner Bros., 2007).

¹⁶ *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle (20th century Fox, 2002).

¹⁷ *Return of the Living Dead*, directed by Dan O'Bannon (MGM, 1985).

¹⁸ Brooks, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*.

¹⁹ *World War Z*, directed by Marc Forster (Paramount Pictures, 2013).

²⁰ *28 Days Later*.

²¹ *Day of the Dead*, directed by George A. Romero (United Film, 1985).

²² *Fido*, directed by Andrew Currie (Lions Gate Films, 2006).

²³ *Land of the Dead*, directed by George A. Romero (Universal Pictures, 2005).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Zombieland*.

²⁷ *Warm Bodies; Fido*.

²⁸ Joseph R. Rudolph, "Ethnic enclaves," *Immigration to the United States*, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://immigrationtounitedstates.org/484-ethnic-enclaves.html>.

²⁹ "How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp," *New York Times Magazine*, accessed January 29, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/magazine/how-to-build-a-perfect-refugee-camp.html?_r=0.