# Revelation Games! Developing a Toolkit to Promote Free Speech in the University Classroom

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## Project summary

On morally charged or politically controversial topics students are often afraid to speak freely in the classroom—afraid not so much of the professor, but of other students. One solution is to have students play games under conditions of identity protection and study their own game play data. Such data revelations provoke frank in-class discussions enabling students to find common ground across political divides.

My multi-year project will develop and publicize a toolkit consisting of a game play pedagogy, sample games, and game play data; a theoretical framework, social science literature, and sample prompts; and tips for classroom management.

The games in question relate to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence, Timur Kuran's Preference Falsification Concept, Joseph Overton's Overton Window, Cass Sunstein's Law of Group Polarization, Floyd Allport's J-Curve Hypothesis of Conforming Behavior, Alan Berkowitz and Wesley Perkins's Social Norms Approach, and Susanne Lohmann's Information Cascades.

## Use of January-June 2022 VOICE grant

I used the VOICE grant ($5,000) for programming. Down the line I will program the actual games, but these past six months I dealt with a number of programming and pedagogical challenges on the Gaming Platform, having to do with the dynamic nature of the games.

Because all of the above-mentioned games are, in some form or another, herding games, they unfold interactively over the course of several class sessions. In the first class

session, students express an opinion. In the second class session, they see the distribution of student opinion from the first class session, and in response they may modify their opinions in the second class sessions. This process may repeat to generate a cascade, but at a minimum it must run for two class sessions. Moreover the game play is interactively linked across the two class sessions. This poses both programming and pedagogical challenges. To fix ideas, let me spell out an example.

**Cass Sunstein's Law of Group Polarization**

Extremists who are sorted into echo chambers will become more extreme as a result of hearing the opinions of people with like-minded extremist opinions.

Here's how I am implementing Cass Sunstein's Law of Group Polarization as a dynamic game. Pick a morally or politically controversial question, let's say, "should trans student athletes be allowed to compete with women in the NCAA?"

In the first class session, have students select their positions on this topic in an 18-point spectrum ranging from no! to yes!:

no! ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ yes!

Have them explain their response free-form:

The responses on the 18-point spectrum are then recorded as R9, R8, R7, R6, R5, R4, R3, R2, R1, L1, L2, L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9. R stands for right-wing, L, for left-wing.

The programming sorts the students into three groups: "conservative" (R9, R8, R7, R6, R5, R4), "centrist" (R3, R2, R1, L1, L2, L3), and "progressive" (L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9).

In the second class session, the programming sorts the students into like-minded echo chambers: conservatives see the free-form responses of conservatives; centrists, the free-

form responses of centrists; and progressives, the free-form responses of progressives. Have the students read the responses and instruct them, once again, to enter their positions on the no!-yes! spectrum and write up a free-form response.

The Law of Group Polarization predicts the following. Between the first and second class sessions the mean or modal conservative position will have moved to the right and the mean progressive position to the left; the centrist position should stay put.

Once the game is over, all students get to see all positions and all free-form responses for both class sessions. They check if the Law of Group Polarization is validated in their class, and they discuss the game play results in detail. Also, students now feel free to openly discuss the original controversial question. The discussion of the game play resulst has, in some sense, given everybody the permission to speak freely.

**Future plans**

These past six months, because I've been preoccupied with solving the programming and pedagogical problems having to with the dynamic unfolding over time of the above-mentioned games, I myself have not yet run any dynamic games; that will come next year. In Winter 2023 I will be piloting the dynamic games with a couple dozen students, and in Spring 2023 I will be running them with well over 200 students.

My Gaming Platform and Library of Games is available not only to me but also to my students, and upon the completion of the multi-year project it will further be available to UCLA faculty more generally. My long-term goal is to make the Gaming Platform and Library of Games available online so that faculty worldwide can make use of these tools.

**Student employment of Gaming Platform**

While the above-mentioned dynamic games are still under construction, the Gaming Platform and Library of Games are already operative for less demanding (non-dynamic) games. I myself am using my toolkit in an ongoing way for my undergraduate classes (Fiat Liux, General Education, and Political Science). The number of students impacted per year runs about 300.

Students are further employing the Gaming Platform and Library of Games for their own research. Lauren Enge, a third-year Political Science major with a minor in Professional Writing, who is currently writing an honors thesis for the UCLA Political Science Honors Program. Her thesis explores student opinion at UCLA—an athletic powerhouse—on transgender student-athletes. She is utilizing the gaming platform to test Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's spiral-of-silence theory.

In Spring 2022 six students in my Diversity, Disagreement, and Democracy Honors Sections (PS 89 and PS 189) ran jokes or apologies experiments on the gaming platform. One group included Diana Valdes, a third-year Political Science major; Steven Hoofar, a third-year Political Science major and Anthropology minor; and Soorya Balasubramanian, an International Development Studies major. The other group consisted of SiXuan Li, Kyle Schmidt, and Meera Joseph, all of whom are third-year Political Science majors; SiXuan is additionally minoring in Global Studies and Film, Television and Digital Media.