

Rethinking Schools *Online*

The Irish Famine Trial - Instructions

1. I reviewed the indictment (included on each "role" sheet) with the class, and counted students off into six groups — five defendant groups and one jury. Each indictment "role" details the charges against the group but also indicates the outlines of a possible defense.
2. To the defendant groups, I distributed packets of all the roles. Students were free to read the role only for their group or, if they wanted more evidence on each group, they could read the entire packet. I explained that these might be useful as they considered which other groups had more guilt than theirs. Students' responsibility was to fashion a defense to the indictment for their group. They could plead guilty, but in their defense, they had to accuse at least one other group.
3. To the jury, I distributed packets of all the defendant roles. Jurors were responsible for reading each of the roles and developing at least three probing questions to raise of each group. I also distributed blank placards and markers for students to write and display the name of their group.
4. I circulated throughout the class, talking with different groups and helping the defendant groups with their defense. I encouraged each defendant group to prepare its defense/presentation in a way that involved as many students as possible. (In role plays, I offer more points per group if the group is able to involve every member in a substantial way in their presentations — apologies to Alfie Kohn, author of *Punished by Rewards* and the leading opponent of classroom bribery schemes.) Students needn't write out their defense presentations word for word, but sometimes this helps make sure that these are well-argued.
5. After students finished preparing their defense presentations, we formed a large circle, with students from each group sitting together, placards displayed.
6. I introduced the jury and indicated that I would play both judge and prosecutor. If a second adult is available, it's best to have a separate judge to keep order — and if this individual is unknown to students, so much the better, as it lends an air of seriousness to the proceedings. But this is not absolutely vital, and more often than not, I don't have another adult involved in the trial proceedings. I reviewed the process: the prosecutor would lay out the charges against one group; that group would defend itself and, if they liked, accuse others; the jury would raise questions of the group that just defended itself; and any group specifically charged or attacked by the defendant group would be able to raise questions or make counter-accusations.
7. As the prosecutor, I tried to be an equal-opportunity accuser — arguing the charges with even-handed vigor against each group. Sometimes the jury will raise sharp, difficult questions of each defendant group. But sometimes a jury is too soft, in my judgment, and so I supplement their questions by raising difficult ones of my own. However, the best exchanges are always student-to-student, so I encourage other students in the class to also raise questions of the defendant group.
8. After each group has been prosecuted and defended itself, I ask the jury to retire to the hallway and deliberate about who or what they think was "guilty" for the Irish famine. Meanwhile, I ask other students to step away from their roles and to write on this question, and I suggest that they assign percentages of blame — adding up to 100 percent — to each defendant group. They are, of course, free to argue that any group is not-guilty. (I used to require students to use percentages of guilt in their write-ups, but in a different trial role play, one of my students criticized this requirement as it inhibited her from discussing how factors were interrelated.)
9. The jurors return, announce their verdict(s), and we discuss based on the jurors' findings and their own written judgment about the "guilt" for the famine.