

Educators' Guide

The Social Rules Project and the accompanying book *Who Rules the Earth?* are designed for both classroom settings and for citizens who want a better understanding of the social dimensions of sustainability. This essay offers suggestions for teachers specifically.

The free educational materials provided on this website are designed to help make the concept of institutions, or "social rules," accessible to a broad cross-section of students, from undergraduates to Ph.D. students in fields such as environmental studies, public policy, political science, sociology, anthropology, history, and economics. Teachers of advanced placement high school courses in social science and environmental science may find these materials to be of value as well. Although the animation, video game, and institutional landscapes work best in combination with the book (which provides a more in-depth exploration of these topics), these can also serve as stand-alone materials to complement your own approach to teaching about institutions.

Institutional analysis is one of the pillars of social science research. A search on Google Scholar for "institutional" and "environmental" reveals over 2 million publications on the topic. The goal of The Social Rules Project is to make this material more intuitive – to help students "see" institutions and to appreciate their impact on social and environmental outcomes.

Teaching objectives

After using these materials, students should be able to:

- Provide numerous examples of social rules - public and private, local, national, and international.
- Explain why social rules matter for sustainability.
- Describe some of the dynamics of institutional change.
- Conduct institutional analysis – diagnosing the collection of rules shaping a given social setting, by knowing the kinds of questions to ask.

A note on definitions

So what exactly are institutions? And why do I use the terminology of "social rules" to describe them?

Different disciplines use the concept of institutions in quite different ways. For economists, institutions are social rules, pure and simple. (See, for example, the work of institutional economist Douglass North, who explicitly distinguishes these from organizations.) For political scientists, the term "institutions" is used to refer to rules as well as organizations. (This is reflected in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*.) For those drawing on sociological and anthropological traditions, institutions refer to enduring social structures writ large, from religion to social class to specific rules and organizations. To make matters even more confusing, for the public, the term "institutions" is understood to mean "organizations."

I focus on social rules *per se* not because of any bias toward economic approaches to the topic. (I'm a policy-oriented political scientist who could be categorized as an historical institutionalist in the tradition of Theda Skocpol and Kathleen Thelen.) Rather, I find this more minimalist definition to be the clearest and most productive for teaching purposes. Those teachers who prefer a broader approach to the topic may wish to provide their students with the relevant caveats.

The videogame

This site includes a role-player game (RPG) in which the player must uncover the forces causing destruction of a tropical forest. In my experience in the United States, perhaps a third of my undergraduates are regular gamers, another third enjoy games but rarely play them, and the remaining third consider them to be a superficial waste of time. While I am not a serious gamer by any stretch of the imagination – my notion of cutting-edge games involved Atari joysticks from the 1970s – I find that, as a teacher, games offer some significant pedagogical advantages similar to other types of role-playing simulations. In this game, through interaction and open-ended exploration, the player learns about how communities craft rules for the governance of shared resources. This is a content-rich game that attempts to balance learning with entertainment value.

One of the most common public misperceptions regarding environmental problems is that natural resources suffer from a “tragedy of the commons” (to use Garrett Hardin's term) if they are not governed by either private property rights or government ownership. This notion was disproved at least 20 years ago with the publication of Elinor Ostrom's book *Governing the Commons*, but many teachers of environmental studies do not seem to realize it – despite the fact that Ostrom won a Nobel Prize for her work. A rich literature has arisen to describe how, under certain conditions, local communities can and do craft rules for sustainable resource management.

This game demonstrates challenges such as the heterogeneity of resource users; the role of engaging multiple levels of political authority (local, national); the challenge of governance amid weak institutions; the importance of allowing those who are bound by rules to participate in making the rules; and the diffusion of ideas (through a mini-game incorporating Everett Rogers' insights on homophily). The total playing time is approximately one hour.

The animated story

This 10-minute video could be shown in a lecture setting, or viewed individually by students, as an initial motivation and introduction to how social rules shape social and environmental outcomes. The video can be downloaded for free (it is registered with a Creative Commons license) so that teachers need not rely on an Internet connection in the classroom.

After viewing the video, discussion questions might include:

- What are some examples of how social rules shape the main character's community?

- Among other rules, the main character notes the importance of property rights. How else might property rights affect social and environmental outcomes in the world?
- The character is fearful of how rules restrict her, but ultimately concludes that social rules are necessary for human freedom. Do you agree? What are some other real-world examples of how social rules restrict or promote liberty? What are the implications for the size and role of government in contemporary societies?
- By the end of her journey, the main character concludes that change requires collective action and political engagement. Do you feel that you have opportunities to participate meaningfully in the decision-making processes that affect you? Does "politics" have a positive or negative connotation for you, and why?
- Take a walk through a local neighborhood or on your campus, and carefully consider how numerous social rules shape the scene around you. Write a short narrative based on this experience, similar to the one told in the animated story.

Institutional landscapes

In the “See your world” section, viewers will find photos of day-in-the-life scenes from around the world. Scrolling over these photos, pop-up balloons indicate the social rules shaping the scene and lead the viewer to one-page summaries of relevant research. By browsing a number of these landscapes, your students will gain a more detailed understanding of social roles.

Unlike the animation and video game – which were produced through hundreds of hours of work by students in paid positions and in independent studies, often with close mentorship from faculty and other professionals – the institutional landscapes were produced by teams of 2-4 undergraduates as the final assignment for a normal semester class. You may wish to give your students an assignment in which they create their own landscapes, having student teams turn in their final assignment as PowerPoint slides.

My students have found this to be a valuable collaborative exercise and a unique alternative to a final research paper. It forces students to grapple with the meaning of institutions, while encouraging participatory group learning and reinforcing the importance of peer-reviewed research and clear and accessible writing. Please feel free to contact me (paul_steinberg@hmc.edu) for additional details on how I run this exercise in my own classes.