

## Turning the Tables

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I was in the sixth form, and a fellow student and I were asked by our English Teacher to assist in an experiment he was conducting with a Lower Year class. We arrived at the library ten minutes before the class and the teacher showed us a table full of seven identical piles of items, such as bits of string, wood, toilet rolls, cartons and glue. He then gave us a sheet of paper on which the word "Boat" was written, a simple diagram drawn, and a list of the equipment in each pile, sufficient to make the boat as described. We checked each pile contained the list of items, and then returned the sheet to the teacher. He then pushed all of the piles together, and we placed the whole lot into a large bag, which he shook up and then took to the classroom.

The class arrived, and we divided them out into seven groups of four, each at a separate table in the room. We then randomly drew a handful of items out of the bag, and without saying anything, placed a pile on each table. This meant some groups got a mix of items, others all the bits of string, and some others no string, but lots of wood, and so forth. We handed a sheet of paper out to each group, and the teacher said, "You have one hour to make the boat." My friend and I were then asked to stand back and observe, or assist if asked.

This is what I saw;

Different groups, as you would expect, went at the problem in different manners. Some neatly arranged their piles, some sat and went through the diagram, others just started making the thing. It took some minutes before it sunk in that they did not have the right materials to make the boat. At first, questions were asked, "Does this boat do?", "Can we use our shoelaces?" and the like. When this was met by silence, the groups started rudimentary trading, simply swapping bits with each other. But at some point, communications began to break down, as one group went to another to find they'd already traded a certain item with another table. Confusion set in. Arguments started, primarily within the separate groups, but in one or two cases, between them. Some groups then started hoarding key items (the loo roll was the central part of the boat, and they ended up holding the majority of the seven loo rolls available) and refusing to trade them for "fair" swops. Other groups then became competitive with each other and began trading to put others at a worse disadvantage than themselves. This went on from bad to worse, until as time began to run out, one member from one group picked something up from another table without asking the group at that table. This went unnoticed, so it happened again. At some point, the thefts were noticed, and anarchy broke out. Groups began stealing from each other and running around destroying the semi-made boats on other tables. As the hour elapsed, the scene in the class was entire pandemonium. Everyone had a pile of smashed items on their desks, some groups had nothing and were almost in tears, some groups were throwing stuff all over the floor to stop others getting at it.

I will remember the look on the teachers face and the words he shouted until I die. "You lot," he yelled, "have just destroyed the world!" Many of the kids burst into tears, and we had parents complain about the lesson to the PTA and the Governors, but I saw the written work that came out of the children in following lessons, and it showed they understood exactly what had happened, and what the teacher had

demonstrated. As one child put it, "I saw a lot on the news, where people were fighting, just like us. I was very upset then, but I saw that wars are doing it all the time."

Now, from an external point of view, and in retrospect, the exercise could have taken five minutes. The children could have put everything together onto one table, taken out the right number of items that they each needed, and constructed the boat. No waste, no competition, and everybody gets a boat. It is my belief that the reason this did not, and has never happened, is because everyone had been arranged into different tables to begin with. Although "not fair" in the experiment, this is exactly what happens in real life - we have obvious "tables" in our geographical boundaries, whether it be divided by oceans, rivers or mountains, and we have less-obvious ones such as our sex ("everyone on the man table, stick your hands up now"), gender, social background, political beliefs, and all the other associations we cling to. And thus, we all start off in a falsely delineated groups, which tend to become competitive. Is this because of early survival issues such as competition of tribes competing for limited resources? I don't know, only I do know that our resources aren't limited - everybody can have a boat.

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