

The Chef and His Accountant: A Collaborative Venture Into Progressive Thinking

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I just don't care about what happened to those people so long ago. This is a hard subject for me." This student comment came after a class in which we studied one of the most innovative times in American history—the Progressive Era—and that comment remained with me throughout the day. That afternoon, I happened to listen to a National Public Radio *Freakonomics* broadcast by Greg Rosalsky (9/4/2014) about a new website in New York City: *EatWith.com*. Those two ingredients, the comment and the broadcast, resulted in a classroom activity that successfully engaged students, encouraged them to work collaboratively, and caused them to think critically and imaginatively about a major issue of our day: free markets versus regulation.

EatWith.com is a website that, like *Uber*, is designed to bring together two parties—one who can provide a service (fine meals) and one who wants to consume that service (a diner). It pairs up chefs and cooks with individuals who would like a unique fine dining experience. The dining experience takes place not in a restaurant, but of significance for regulators, in private homes. There are currently no laws on the books to prohibit this exchange from taking place, but the restaurant regulator of New York City hates the website and says so in no uncertain terms. I thought this real-life example could be used to bring relevance to the Progressives of the nineteenth century.

To help the class understand *EatWith.com*, I prepared a single PowerPoint slide that describes the website. The slide pointed out that *EatWith.com* does not charge chefs or diners, but instead makes money from advertising, as many websites do. After the class read the slide, students were divided into teams of three and given a character. I created ten characters who could be affected by the new website, including a neighbor, a host, the tax accountant for the city, etc. I created ten because I have a big class and I wanted them to work in groups of three. The following are examples of the three characters.

The Characters

The Chef. You are a fine chef, a graduate of the Texarkana College Culinary Program, followed by a year at the American Culinary Institute. You have been working for three years at The Wave, a fine restaurant that only serves seafood. You make a fantastic Beef

Bourguignon, but The Wave does not include it or your other special dishes on the menu. Your job pays very well. You have been contacted by a new website called *EatWith.com*. They would like you to connect with diners directly through the website. How do you feel? What will you do?

Chef's Accountant. Chef is in a good mood when you talk to him over the phone. He makes a lot of money at The Wave and, in addition, he has been cooking at his home through *EatWith.com*. As you take your 10th Tums of the day for your ulcer, you ask him about the income from *EatWith.com*. He is silent and then says, "I gotta go," and hangs up. You will do Chef's income taxes this coming April. You will be signing your name to his forms, saying that you will go with him to any IRS audit. Your husband says that if you take on one more difficult client, the stress will kill you. How do you feel about the conversation you just had with Chef? What will you do when you meet for your annual appointment concerning his tax returns?

The Neighbors. You two have the apartment right next to Chef's, and he has been a great neighbor, helping you out by babysitting occasionally for your newborn twins. You are both EMTs. Your jobs are stressful, and your hours are variable. This evening, you had a knock on your door by a well-dressed party of six who were looking for Chef's apartment. They didn't know him, but had made contact with him through *EatWith.com*. They were obviously already well on their way to being drunk. You direct them next door to Chef's apartment. How do you feel? What courses of action are open to you?

No matter what character I created, the questions at the end of the description were essentially the same: (1) How did the character *feel*? and (2) What *action/s* would that character consider taking? I created characters who would see the new company as beneficial and characters who would have serious concerns about the effects of the new business. The goal is to have students see how difficult it is to establish a balance between free markets and regulation.

The teams of three were divided along collaborative lines of reader/leader, recorder, and reporter. I walked around the classroom so I could answer any questions students might have, but in general, they dived right in, obviously enjoying the exercise. After about ten minutes, each group sent its Reporter to the front to read the character's description and the team's answer. A slide was projected that listed the characters in a chronological order that is best for the "story" created by the class as they present (i.e., The Chef is the first character to tell his view).

I was amazed at how thoughtful the answers were, and I was pleased when one group explained a possible action for their character, The Wine Shop Owner. The team referenced an earlier lecture I had given about the Robber Barons. They decided one possible solution to their dilemma as The Wine Shop owner, who was caught in the middle between The Chef and The Restaurant Owner, was to try to create a small monopoly so that *both* The Chef and The Restaurant Owner were *forced* to buy from The Wine Shop.

After all teams had finished, I showed the class the real website, and they were intrigued to find out *EatWith.com* really did exist. They also offered some examples of internet sharing websites they had heard of or used.

Evaluation

Overall, it was a successful collaborative experience, but I wanted to be certain they could respond to material discussed as individual students. For their essay question about the Progressives, I asked my usual questions about the historical movement of Progressivism, Teddy Roosevelt, etc. However, I added a single question at the end, asking them to, "Explain an issue today that involves the tension or clash between reform and regulators and free market forces." As I read and graded all of their completed answers, I made a quick list of the examples they had given. Not a single example was the same! The fact that they chose so many different examples confirmed to me that individually and as a class they had absorbed the lesson and met the learning objective of understanding the inherent tension between free markets and regulation. Student essay examples about possible free market versus regulation conflicts included the requirement that movie theaters post the number of calories found in their popcorn.

Variations

This exercise could be used not only in history classes, but also in political science, accounting, economics, business, social science, and ethics classes. Additionally, it could be used in critical thinking units. The questions the teams must address could be altered to focus on aspects particular to a discipline. For example, in an ethics class, the Accountant's choices could be dealt with in-depth by asking, "Is it *ethical* for the Accountant to turn a blind eye?" "Is dropping the client an option?" "Should that client be reported anonymously to the IRS if they fail to report income?" A political science class could focus on the owner of *EatWith.com* by asking, "How could he go about getting regulations that would accommodate his business?" "How could he use *the political process* to accomplish this?" The range of questions that could be asked is wide.

The issue involving free markets and control of them defined the Progressive Era, but students understand it most clearly when that concept is connected to the current digital age.

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