



THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT—ORGANIZING STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES

By Alana D. Murray

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LESSON

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Introduction

The Montgomery Bus Boycott is a model for social movement organization and strategy because it had all the ingredients for success, including:

- drawing from preexisting social organizations and establishing a support base through the development of networks;
- having a catalytic leadership, who had the power to stimulate and encourage followers, and the ability to determine when and how to respond to events and circumstances;
- tapping outside resources in the immediate locale and developing and cultivating interest among those who may be or appear to be uninterested;
- employing a strategy rooted in confronting oppression, providing hope, challenging existing structures, and achieving relief from injustice; and
- defining a clear, ultimate goal of eliminating segregation.

(This list is drawn from a course presentation by Julian Bond.)

Most textbooks and children's books about the boycott emphasize the second ingredient—the catalytic leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks—leaving out not only the other critical elements, but, most importantly, the role of the thousands of Montgomery residents who boycotted public transportation for over a year.

In this activity, students will act as organizers and learn about many of the challenges faced by a group who sustained a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, for 381 days. The activity typically takes five to seven class periods. While it is designed for middle school students, high school teachers can successfully modify this lesson for the upper grades by making the decision-making process less structured.

Following this lesson is a related activity by Maggie Donovan for the early elementary grades.

Objectives

- Students will identify the factors that contributed to the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in promoting social change by engaging in collaborative problem-solving, decision-making, and consensus-building activities.
- Students will employ listening and note-taking strategies when reading about the Civil Rights Movement.
- Students will examine the role of ordinary people in challenging segregation and advancing democracy and will present findings clearly through a written report.



Handouts on
the internet.

- Students will analyze historical documents to gain an understanding of how resistance strategies, such as collective action, civil disobedience, and campaign organizing, can impact unequal policies.

Preparation

Readings for Teachers

- At a minimum, teachers should read “The Politics of Children’s Literature” by Herbert Kohl, in the Reflections on Teaching section of this book.
- If possible, teachers should also read *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997) and/or *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (University of Tennessee Press, 1987).
- The section on the bus boycott in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (Bantam Books, 1990) tells a powerful story through first-person testimonies. This book can bring to life the experiences it describes for both middle and high school students.

Materials and Preparation

- Make copies of all six handouts for each student.
 - Handout 1: Choosing an Incident to Rally the People and the Media
 - Handout 2: You Are in the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)
 - Handout 3: MIA Committees
 - Handout 4: Problem-Solving Worksheet
 - Handout 5: Boycott Challenges
 - Handout 6: Evaluation
- Select students to read Handout 1 aloud to the class. Have them practice reading it dramatically. In order to represent the voice of the narrator and the different characters, there should be two to three students per reading.
- Make a chart for students to use to compare two of the catalyst candidates for the boycott.
- Create wall signs or table tents that list the committee names: Transportation, Negotiation, Media, Mass Meetings, and Education
- Other necessary materials include newsprint or construction paper, post-it notes, and index cards.

Procedure: Day One

1. Ask students these two questions: Who is responsible for desegregating the buses in Montgomery, Alabama? How did the change in policy come about? List their responses in a place where everyone can see them. (Unless your students have been exposed to more than the traditional narrative, they will likely tell you that one day Rosa Parks refused to move, she was arrested, and then the buses were desegregated.)
2. Share with students the following background information:

The plans to desegregate the buses began before Rosa Parks took a stand, and her action was just one of many required to desegregate them. Achieving the goal actually

“[The bus boycott] was revolutionary... profoundly so.”
—C. L. R. James

“In short, Montgomery has contributed to the mental health and growth of the white man’s mind, and thus to the entire nation.”
—Bayard Rustin

“The question was not what King did for the people of Montgomery, it’s what the people of Montgomery did for Reverend Martin Luther King.”
—E. D. Nixon

“People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn’t true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”
—Rosa Parks

Dear Sir:

These are the things that the Council asked for...

A city law that would make it possible for Negroes to sit from back toward front, and whites from front toward back until all the seats are taken.

That Negroes not be asked or forced to pay fare at front and [step back out of the bus] and go to the rear of the bus to enter.

...Mayor Gayle, three-fourths of the riders of these public conveyances are Negroes. If Negroes did not patronize them, they could not possibly operate.

More and more people are already arranging with neighbors and friends to keep from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers.

There has been talk from 25 or more local organizations of planning a citywide boycott of busses.... Please consider this plea, and if possible, act favorably upon it, for even now plans are being made to ride less, or not at all, on our busses.

Respectfully yours,
The Women's Political Council
Jo Ann Robinson, President

took the collective sacrifice of thousands of people who boycotted the buses for 381 days. For over a year, many African Americans found other means of travel for work, school and shopping.

Since kindergarten, students have most likely learned a "Hollywood" version of this story. Now, in this lesson, they are going to learn about aspects of this watershed event that are rarely taught in schools, even at the college level.

The reason they are going to study this event is that it is one of the best examples in our country's history of how people organized to tackle a seemingly impossible challenge. The first important piece of the story is the readiness of the people. Because they were organizing against bus segregation *before* Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, the city was ready and able to mobilize around her action. The Women's Political Council (WPC) formed in 1949 to respond to many injustices against African Americans, including their treatment on

the buses in Montgomery. As Jo Ann Robinson explained in *Voices of Freedom*, "By 1955 it [WPC] had members in every elementary, junior high, and senior high school, and in federal, state, and local jobs. Wherever there were more than ten blacks employed, we had a member there. We were prepared to the point that we knew that in a matter of hours, we could corral the whole city." In May of 1954 Robinson wrote a letter to Mayor Gayle of Montgomery, Alabama, letting him know that if conditions on the buses did not change, citizens would stage a boycott.

Another part of the story most of us never learn is that the organizing was not easy, and, in fact, organizers faced many tough decisions on a daily basis. In order both to learn a full history of the bus boycott, and to develop their own skills as agents for change, students will be presented with many of the kinds of challenges the organizers faced.

The letter to Mayor Gayle did not get a satisfactory response, so a boycott was the next step. The first decision organizers faced was choosing the right time to call the boycott. Three opportunities arose in 1955 when, at different times, three women each refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person and were subsequently arrested. Each time, the organizers debated whether the time and conditions for a boycott were right.

3. While distributing Handout 1, tell students that this handout presents two of the three scenarios and that after they hear or read them, they will choose which scenario should be the "catalyst" or "spark" for a boycott.
4. Have the students who were selected to do the dramatic reading begin to read Handout 1 aloud as others listen and/or read along.
5. On a chart like the one on the next page, ask students to identify the reasons for and against choosing each of the two women (Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin) as the catalyst for the boycott.
6. Explain that, as students probably know from history, Parks was selected as the catalyst candidate for the boycott. Key leaders were concerned that Claudette Colvin

	Colvin	Parks
Advantages (WHY?)		
Disadvantages (WHY NOT?)		

would inflame popular and media prejudices based on class, age, gender roles, and skin color. Colvin came from a working-class family, she had a dark complexion, she was young, and she was soon to be an unwed mother. However, as Jo Ann Robinson explains, after Claudette Colvin was convicted of the charges against her, there was “a spontaneous protest, and for a few days large numbers refused to use the buses.” Teachers might also point out to students that in addition to issues of class and skin color, Rosa Parks had experience and training in civic roles through her work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and her attendance at a class at the Highlander Folk School, a progressive center for political and social organizing and education.

- Students can gain further insights from “The Enactment” and “Claudette Colvin Goes to Work,” two poems by Rita Dove that follow this lesson. “The Enactment” is based on the experience of Mary Louise Smith, who was arrested on October 21, 1955.

Procedure: Days Two and Three

- Explain to students that they are now going to travel back in time to the day after Rosa Parks was arrested and the leadership decided to make hers the rallying case. That evening, Jo Ann Robinson and others from the Women’s Political Council (WPC) prepared a flyer calling for direct action in the form of a bus boycott. Jo Ann Robinson (President of the WPC and a university professor) and another professor spent the entire night mimeographing 35,000 copies of the flyer, which were distributed around town the next day. She and the other organizers had no idea whether their call to action would work. As she explained: “[M]any of us had not gone to bed that night. We had been up waiting for the first buses to pass by to see if any riders were on them. It was a cold morning, cloudy, there was a threat of rain, and we were afraid that if it rained the people would get on the bus. But as the buses began to roll, and there were one or two on some of them, none on some of them, then we began to realize that the people were cooperating and that they were going to stay off the bus that first day.”

The boycott had a successful beginning, but the organizers predicted that it might take months to win their battle for equality on the buses. How could they sustain the boycott for all that time? They decided to form the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).

- Distribute Handout 2. Tell students that their work will begin at this point; they will now take on the roles of the lead organizers of the Montgomery Improvement Association. When you finish reading the handout, ask students to write responses to the questions on a separate piece of paper.
- After students have had enough time to write brief responses, explain that as MIA members they are going to be part of a watershed event involving thousands of people. Their goal is to stage an economic boycott that succeeds not only in desegre

“Even if Montgomery Negroes were willing to rally behind an unwed, pregnant teenager—which they were not—her circumstances would make her an extremely vulnerable standard bearer.”

—Taylor Branch,
Parting the Waters

“If the white press got ahold of that information, they would have [had] a field day. They’d call her a bad girl, and her case wouldn’t have a chance.”

—Rosa Parks

“Mrs. Parks was a married woman. She was morally clean, and she had a fairly good academic training...”

—E. D. Nixon

Q: Was Rosa Parks the first African American to refuse to give up her or his seat for a white person on public transportation?

A: No. For example, in 1884, Ida B. Wells was traveling by train from school and was forcibly thrown out of the first-class car by the train's conductor due to her refusal to ride in the "Jim Crow" car. Ms. Wells was determined not to move her seat; she had purchased a first-class ticket and felt it her right to remain in the appropriate first-class car. White passengers applauded as she was dragged from her seat. Infuriated by the occurrence, Ms. Wells sued the railroad and won her case. However, it was later overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court.

Frederick Douglass often challenged segregation on the trains by purposefully sitting in the section reserved for whites, and in Montgomery, Alabama, there was a boycott of the streetcars to protest segregation from 1900 to 1902.

See how many more examples in history you can find.

gating the buses, but also in building a campaign in which all members are leaders as well as participants in a movement for social change.

4. Distribute Handout 3. Each student will be a member of an MIA committee. Students can select from the following five committees: Transportation, Negotiation, Media, Mass Meetings, and Education. (Please note that these are not based on the actual MIA committee structure, but do reflect the real tasks and challenges faced by the MIA.) In this activity, it is critical for teachers to allow students to select the committee they want to work on.

5. Have students meet in their committees. If the committees are very uneven in membership, ask a few students to move to their second choice. Then ask students to identify people to play the following roles in each committee:

Spokesperson: During the presentation part of the activity, this student will be responsible for clearly explaining the ideas of the group to classmates.

Question Asker: During the activity, one student will be responsible for asking the teacher any procedural questions members may have about the work of their committee.

Decision Maker: This person is responsible for helping the group make decisions about possible options for the organizers.

Secretary: This person is responsible for keeping notes of all the decisions the committee makes on a daily basis. (It may be a good idea to require that all groups turn in their notes at the end of each class period.)

Procedure: Day Four

1. Give students Handout 4. Explain that in their committees students will be responsible for completing this problem-solving sheet. Then have students meet with their committees. Give each committee copies of Handout 5.
2. Students may struggle as they begin to step into their roles. As you respond to their questions, try to assist only with procedural concerns. Encourage students to brainstorm ideas with their groups.

You may have to help students in the Mass Meetings Committee with the concept of a *mass meeting*. Explain that during the Civil Rights Movement, organizers held mass meetings in order to provide collective support for individuals involved in Movement activities. At mass meetings a variety of activities occurred: singing, preparing for the next day's activities, listening to speeches by Movement leaders, or praying for strength to face another day.

3. At the conclusion of their committee work, students should write their proposed solutions to the challenges they faced on newsprint or construction paper.
4. Have committees post proposed solutions to their challenge(s). After students have posted their solutions, provide every student with post-it notes. Discuss the concept of feedback and model how to give appropriate feedback. Then ask the students to move around the room, reading each committee's proposed solutions and writing feedback on post-it notes.
5. After completing the feedback process, students return to their original committees and read the feedback from their peers. Each committee selects a final proposal to submit

to the larger group. Ensure time for each group to present their final proposal.

6. As students prepare to leave class, have them respond to the following questions on an index card:

- What is the role of organizers? Give three examples of their responsibilities.
- What is the biggest challenge when organizing a boycott?
- Typically we hear just about the roles of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. in the bus desegregation. Who else contributed to the success of the boycott?

Procedure: Day Five

1. Distribute Handout 6. Using the primary source document, “Rustin to King: Memo on the Bus Boycott: December 26, 1956,” students will evaluate the successes and failures of the bus boycott. As they read the document, students should highlight six reasons why Rustin thought the bus boycott was successful.
2. Students should then write their own evaluation of the success(es) of the bus boycott. As they do this, they should refer to the questions on the handout.

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Walter Knabe,
counsel for the
defendants: “Did
you have a leader
when you started
this bus boycott?”

Claudette Colvin:
“Did we have a
leader? Our leader
is just we ourself.”
