

Simulations and Communication Skills in Secondary Schools

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Context

This extract is the first part of the first article I wrote about simulations and games. The article was published in 1973 in *Educational Research* (Volume 15, Number 2)—the journal of the National Foundation for Educational Research in the United Kingdom. It makes a good starting point because it describes the scene as I saw it 25 years ago.

My thoughts on methodology have changed somewhat since then, and today I would not have written “Most simulations involve role-play.” I would write something like “All simulations (in the field of interactive learning) involve functional or professional roles, not playacting roles.” And I would regard this as a brief description, not a complete definition.

The observer can be as significant as the observed. I have to confess that I was a journalist by profession, working in the newsroom of the BBC’s World Service where I spent most of my career. Thus, the tone and style of my writing has been influenced by the professional habits of a lifetime. I tend to ask not only “What is happening?” but also “Is it news?” In the newsroom, we had a “two agency” rule—not to write a story based on one news agency only. So my mental habits make me cautious about research involving only one event.

The second part of my article involved an investigation into a handful of graded simulations—graded in order of difficulty. This allowed the participants to become gradually familiar with the methodology. The findings showed that the simulations achieved the aim of giving practice in communication skills.

Simulations differ from games and informal dramas and their benefits have not been fully realized because of misunderstandings and a subject-bound approach.

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Although the use of simulations in higher education, business, and the public services has been developing rapidly, very little simulation has been done in the secondary schools.

The main difficulty is the scarcity of material, and most simulation designers have produced sophisticated material, sometimes linked with computers, and demanding adult intelligence and experience. But sophistication is not essential. Some children's games which involve role playing are an unstructured form of simulation—Doctors and Nurses, or Cowboys and Indians. At the present time, it is certainly true that most simulations used in British secondary schools are not published material, but have been home-made by teachers with the main purpose of providing an insight into their particular subjects. Thus, the geography teacher produces a geography simulation to provide activities that will help illustrate basic concepts and principles.

While this is admirable in its way, it is blinkered thinking about the value of simulations. It is like mounting a production of 'Macbeth' for the purpose of giving an insight into Scottish history. Both plays and simulations have virtues that transcend the 'teaching a subject' purpose.

What Are Simulations?

A much-quoted definition by Guetzkow (1963) says 'Simulation is an operational representation of the central features of reality,' and Taylor and Carter (1971) say 'In a general sense the term (simulation) delineates a range of dynamic representations that employ substitute elements to replace real world components'.

These definitions form a useful starting point, but they do not help to distinguish between simulations and informal drama, or between simulations and games. In fact, some writers on the subject think there is no distinction. As Banks, Groom, and Oppenheim (1970) remark, 'It is unfortunate that gaming, simulation, and games theory are terms usually employed indiscriminately as synonyms'.

Games usually involve a large element of chance, whereas simulations do not. Games involve scoring, but most simulations have no scoring. Games are competitive, but many simulations are not. Most simulations involve role-playing, but most games do not. There are, of course, marginal cases difficult to categorize, but in general the distinction between a game and a simulation is fairly obvious.

For example, the Local Authority Game developed by Armstrong (1970) is not a game but a simulation. It involves a considerable amount of realistic and diverse role-playing. There are teams representing residents, landowners, and the local authority, plus three teams representing development companies. It is an urban development simulation used in higher education and local government training. The chance element is minimal; the outcome depends on the interaction of decisions, the assessment of plans and the course of negotiations.

By contrast, *Monopoly*, although dealing with the subject of urban development, is a game, not a simulation. The role-playing is minimal or non-existent. The players do not have profiles saying that they are the Managing Directors of a particular company of developers. Most players probably think of themselves as players, particularly as the decision making is done mainly by the dice and the chance cards.

There are closer links between simulations and informal dramas than between simulations and games. As with simulations, informal dramas involve role-playing and the decision making of the participants is a vital element. However, there are important differences.

Informal dramas are usually less structured than simulations. Simple directions are often sufficient—‘You are the father, and you are the daughter who has come home late’, or ‘You are the coloured immigrant looking for lodgings, and you are a white landlord’. In simulations the scenario and profiles are usually far more detailed. The profiles in simulations are concerned with functions, whereas the profiles in informal dramas are concerned with people and their emotions. Often the emotions are specified in informal dramas, and the characters are told that they are happy, or depressed, or dominating, or timid, or bad-tempered. Acting of emotions and feelings is often required. With simulations, the feelings and emotions are not specified, but arise naturally. The participants remain themselves, but with different functions.

There is also a difference in aims. Informal dramas are often introduced to help pupils ‘act out their emotions’, or ‘find out what it feels like to be an immigrant, coal-miner, parent, policeman, magistrate, etc.’ Simulations, on the other hand, although they involve emotions and feelings, are more concerned with acquiring knowledge about concepts, functions, organizational problems, or with giving practice in decision making and communication skills.

The point being argued here is not that simulations are ‘better’ than games or informal dramas, but that they are different.

Previous Research in Secondary Schools

As relatively few simulations have been used at the secondary school level there is an inevitable dearth of research in this area. However, small studies have been carried out, usually on the basis of isolated simulations rather than as part of the curriculum.

A useful example is given by Peacey (1971), using Aldrich's youth club simulation (1967) which is designed to help youth leaders in training. Peacey changed the setting from a pleasant county town to a London borough, and used it with about 90 fourth-year children in the middle and lower ability ranges. His aim was obviously not to teach the pupils how to organize a youth club. He says: 'The English secondary school has not traditionally been noted for its ability to train its pupils to group decision-making and problem-solving. Simulations prove one possible way to achieve such training'.

Peacey found that many pupils appeared unable to think for themselves or express themselves. There was a tendency in the early stages to leave the decision-making to those who were prepared to express their opinions forcibly enough. It was only later that confidence grew and one group leader was summarily dethroned when the group decided that his snap judgments were not helping at all. The teachers involved were aware, as an abstract fact, that some children of this age and ability find it appallingly difficult to argue on the basis of written material, but a full realization of what this meant was clearly seen when the pupils were faced with taking decisions on their own.

These difficulties noted by Peacey do not appear to be unusual. But they should not be regarded as reasons for not using simulations. Rather are they an argument in favour of simulations or any other technique to give the secondary school pupil the opportunities of practicing decision making and communication on a responsible level.

Problems of Evaluation

If the aim of simulations was to teach certain facts, then there would be no problem of evaluation. Matched groups could be given the task of learning such knowledge by simulation and by alternative techniques, and the results could be compared. In the United States such experiments have been carried out, and as Garvey (1971) points out 'There is no evidence known to support any hypothesis that simulation is more effective than any other teaching technique in enabling a student to acquire knowledge'.

But most simulations have more generalized aims which are not susceptible to objective testing. How could one measure a gain in decision-making

ability? Simulation is an educational technique and is as difficult or as impossible to evaluate objectively as it is to measure the value of the lecture, or discussion, or individual group assignment as educational techniques. Consequently, the research evidence is based on the subjective assessments of the students, or teachers, or observers. There is nothing discreditable about subjective evaluations; they are used all the time in our evaluation of books, plays, people, ethics, music and behaviour.

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