

Using Simulations in academic courses

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Why use simulations?

It is often difficult for students to translate the knowledge they learn in academia into productive responses in actual work-related situations, and to be fully aware of what exactly triggers their own emotional reactions and complicates professional responses. A very effective way to practice this in class is to simulate real professional situations and dilemmas either by using actors, or through role-play between the students themselves. Generally, not all students participate actively in the simulations, but those that 'just observe' also learn a great deal from the experience, which usually includes heated debates in class after the actual simulations.

When is it useful?

Practicing simulations in class requires a high degree of trust, so is most effective after the students have been working together for a while, and the ground rules for active participation and peer feedback have been established - a 'safe space' has been created in the class. Thus, the best time is towards the end of the course, as a powerful trigger for self and group reflection, in which the aims of the course and the terminology used are refined and emphasized as meaningful in real live situations.

How to use to use simulations

There are four ways to use simulations in a course :

1. Taking the students to a simulation center

Simulation centers generally have staff who moderate the sessions, which are limited to a maximum of 10-15 students at a time. The participants in the simulations meet the actors in a televised studio, while the rest of the group watch the interaction on a screen. Each simulation is generally, 5-7 minutes long, usually there are two simulations per lesson, each followed by a 30-40 minute discussion.

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Participants receive personal feedback from the actors, followed by participation in a group discussion with the class.

The advantages of using a simulation center are:

- The setting and the absence of a live audience make for more realism.
- The assistance of a professional moderator in building the sessions and conducting the post-simulation discussion.
- Professional experienced actors practiced at challenging students and giving constructive feedback.
- The ability to review the recorded simulation with the group and use this recording for teaching other groups.

The disadvantages of using a simulation center are:

- Cost: Most simulation centers are quite expensive, generally charging per hour and per simulation.
- The logistics of getting all the students to the simulation center.
- The limitations of group size.

2. Inviting actors to the classroom

It is possible to create appropriate simulations for the class and invite professional actors to participate, after suitable preparation. The format of the lesson is the same as in the simulation center, except that the lecturer is in charge of the group discussion.

The advantages of using professional actors are:

- This is cheaper and less complicated logistically than taking the students to a simulation center.
- Most professional actors have experience challenging students and giving constructive feedback.
- It is a unique and powerful experience for the students.
- This format has the flexibility of changing and re-working the scenarios for the simulations with the actors themselves.

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The disadvantages of using professional actors are:

- It still requires an extra budget for the course.
- A lot depends on the specific actors involved, whose role is crucial in the success of the lesson.
- The presence of an audience in the classroom makes the simulation less realistic.
- It is not possible to record & review the simulation professionally.

3. Using pre-prepared filmed simulations

It is possible to use pre-prepared filmed simulations, either from previous sessions in a simulation center or films deliberately pre-prepared for this purpose as teaching aids. The format is different: it does not include a live simulation in class, but rather a discussion following observation of the film.

The advantages of using filmed simulations:

- All students are of equal standing (rather than some participants and some observers).
- Situations from the field can be brought into the classroom, to compare theoretical ideas with challenges.
- The discussion is less personal, because none of the students directly participated themselves.

The disadvantages of using filmed simulations:

- Many students will remain passive, and those that are involved in the discussion did not have direct engagement with the situations.
- Following on from the previous point, since the students are not actively participating in the simulations, self-reflection and self-awareness is likely to be limited.
- This form of learning is still based on hearing\seeing rather than doing.

4. Through role-play between the students in class

If your students already have practical experience in their profession, they can provide their own examples of challenges and dilemmas from the field. Re-enacting

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them in the safe space of the classroom, with peer feedback, can be a powerful experience.

The advantages of using role-play between the students in class:

- All students can participate with the option of working in small groups.
- Avoids introducing a stranger into the class 'safe-space'.
- Complete control of lecturer as sole moderator.

The disadvantages of using role-play between the students in class:

- There is no external input challenging the students.
- Dependent on student examples from the field.
- Requires creativity and initiative of both students and moderator.
- Less realistic, and therefore less challenging.

What do simulations make us aware of?

Participating in simulations and the group discussions following them is a powerful means to self-reflect regarding perceptions, attitudes, values and practice. It is advised to pre-prepare the issues you want to work on with your students, what is the purpose of each simulation you have chosen? What issues, concepts or practical tools from the course would you like your students to take with them? If this is clear to you, as a moderator, you can steer the discussion to emphasize these. You can pre-prepare terms and concepts from the course for your students to focus on during the discussion.

The simulations themselves trigger in the participants emotional reactions, which are not normally discussed in class. For example, how do we react when our professional authority is questioned? When our clients behave in unexpected ways? When the person opposite me has such a different perspective on the issue that my common sense is not logical to them? In professional situations, how does the presence of unspoken identities affect the interaction?

Students who participate in simulations often identify the experience as having been the most significant of their degree training.

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