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Developing Collaborative Simulations to Benefit Multiple Classes

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Abstract: This article describes the process used to develop a collaborative simulation for college students taking advanced-level courses in public relations (PR) and journalism. PR students organized a news conference to convey information to “the media” about an evolving crisis, and journalism students reported on a situation where the final outcome was unknown. This interaction of students from multiple classes resulted in both expected and unexpected learning opportunities. The involvement of nonstudent role players added to the effectiveness. Collaborative simulation may be of particular interest to teachers in small programs because of the ability to utilize one simulation for multiple classes.

Introduction

The idea of classroom simulation is one that has been utilized and studied for more than 400 years (Hertel & Millis, 2002). Hertel and Millis argue that significant learning results from students gathering information, making key decisions, and determining conclusions during a simulation, and they state that simulations are “particularly adept at helping students acquire usable knowledge...that can transfer and be applied to other situations” (p. 12).



Simulations are ideal for connecting factual knowledge, principles, and skills to their application within a profession. They help students understand the environment and processes of a profession in a way that other teaching methods cannot. They provide students with an opportunity for decision making, and for evaluating the consequences of their decisions that no textbook or laboratory can (p. 13).

While teamwork and problem solving are typical aspects of all simulations, a collaborative simulation adds the active involvement of more than one class taking part, which builds realism as well (Olson, 2010). A collaborative simulation also requires a predetermined coordination of syllabi and schedules among the teachers whose classes are taking part. Nonstudent role players may be used to further enhance the reality of a simulation for students and add even more uncertainty in terms of what may happen.

Another difference in our collaborative simulation involving PR and journalism students was not giving them specific roles or guidelines that would influence and shape their interactions with one another. Instead, students in our classes applied their existing knowledge and skills as either a professional journalist or a PR practitioner while dealing with a simulated situation.

Little research has been done on collaborative efforts between journalism and PR classes. One exception is Veil's (2010) analysis of an in-class exercise that she uses to teach crisis communication. In Veil's scenario, teams of PR students holding a press conference on a crisis are surprised by reporters who show up and "begin firing questions" (p. 60). Veil's scenario differs from the one described in this paper in a variety of ways, however. Our collaborative simulation gave students an opportunity to work together much as journalism and public relations people do in the workplace, and we were as surprised as our students were by the PR team's view of the journalists primarily as adversaries. Another article on collaborative efforts between journalism and PR classes focuses on the reactions and learning by the public relations students (Olson, 2012). The current study focuses on why instructors at other schools might consider a collaborative simulation and how they could go about creating a collaborative simulation of their own.

Preston and Cottam (1997) found that simulations in education can give students "extremely vivid" (p. 224), hands-on experiences that lead to a better understanding of complex problems while also creating empathy for those who must make difficult decisions in real life. We also found the emotional involvement of our students to be very high during our collaborative simulation, which was due at least in part to their interactions with others not in their class. Because they could not predict how the other class of students would act or react, the unscripted nature of the project made the experience memorable as well.

Another benefit for students taking part in a collaborative simulation is the opportunity to develop their creativity. *Newsweek* highlighted research indicating creativity in the United States is decreasing, which authors Bronson and Merryman (2010) speculate may be caused in part by "the lack of creativity development in our schools" (para. 8). Scholar Mark Runco, a founder of the *Creativity Research Journal* and Torrance professor of creative studies and gifted education at the University of Georgia at Athens, defines creativity as "any thinking or problem solving that involves the construction of new meaning" (2003, p. 316), which can often be seen when students are taking part in a realistic simulation. Runco also argues that "everyone has creative potential" (p. 321) and that educators can work to target that potential. (As any professional communicator knows, creativity is a vital skill to have and can come in handy when the unexpected occurs.)

A collaborative simulation in the classroom can be very similar to an organizational simulation in the workplace, with many of the same benefits. "Simulations that recreate work conditions can be an effective way to train. They allow participants to apply learning to their jobs without taking big risks" (Slack, 2003, p. 79). Slack also describes workplace simulations as producing "powerful experiences, providing insight and skills for participants to use as a basis for changing their behavior" (p. 79) and helping people "apply and combine skills—particularly analytical, interpersonal, and group-leadership skills" (p. 80).

Background

A collaborative simulation works well when students in different courses can apply what they have been learning to a particular type of situation they might one day encounter in the workplace. In our case, students benefited from an opportunity to "practice" their respective PR and journalism roles. PR students functioned as a PR agency with a new client that was facing an emerging crisis situation. The client was a fictional university and the crisis involved its

athletic department. Background information about the university, the department, and the situation was provided by the teacher, who was also the president of the class PR agency. Role players had also been recruited for the simulated press conference the PR students would need to arrange.

The journalism students were sent media advisories about the upcoming press conference, which they would attend as “news reporters.”

The PR students had opportunities to hone their problem-solving skills while dealing with the ambiguity of many unknown factors and the consequences of their decisions. They also faced the dilemma of communicating with the media about an evolving situation. Journalism students had opportunities to ask questions and interview people associated with a developing situation while trying to piece together a report and make sense of unanticipated occurrences. In the “real world” of journalism, there is no script to follow. When unexpected answers and events occur, journalists must be ready to handle the situation, ask follow-up questions and adapt to get all the information needed for a good story. Students faced this reality during the simulated news conference.

12 Steps in Developing a Collaborative Simulation

The following steps provide an outline for teachers who are interested in developing a collaborative simulation for their students.

1. *Establish goals.*

What do you want students to learn or experience? Will they need to apply knowledge they already have to solve some kind of problem? Will they be placed in a situation that requires them to work with information they have been given in a creative, new way? It is not necessary for all participating teachers to have the same educational goals for their students, but it is important that the goals each teacher wants to achieve can be accomplished through the collaboration. In our case, a goal for both classes was the realization that PR practitioners and journalists serve different communication roles, but those roles do not require an adversarial relationship. However, other goals for the journalism students differed from the goals for PR students.

2. *Determine classes to be involved.*

One teacher may decide what type of situation would be most beneficial for his or her students to experience in the simulation and what interaction is desired. Or the classes taking part could be determined by two or more teachers deciding they want to work together and then developing a situation that would logically involve their respective classes.

3. *Decide if and how students will be graded.*

Each participating instructor must decide in advance if the collaborative simulation will include any graded component(s) for his or her class. In our example, journalism students wrote news reports based on the “press conference” and then posted their stories, photos and/or video to individual blogs. Their reports were graded on accuracy, clarity, thoroughness, visual appeal, and the use of links and photos or video. While they were not graded on mistakes they made while actually covering the press conference, students who excelled during that event itself were rewarded with extra points.

PR students wrote formal reports for the “client” and for their agency “president.” These reports were not graded on

what they actually did or did not do during the simulation but on each student's analysis and understanding of what had taken place, what had been successful, and what could have made the situation better. These reports were graded on the students' understanding of what had taken place and not on what students had or had not done during the simulation.

4. ***Schedule the simulation.***

Before the start of the semester, teachers need to agree when the simulation will take place, including the number of days or weeks it will run, and coordinate their syllabi accordingly. Some classes may need more prep and/or debriefing time than others, but the timeframe for actual interactions between students in the different classes must be planned ahead of time. Scheduling is definitely easier if participating classes take place during the same time period, which also prevents the problem of a student taking both courses at the same time and, therefore, having knowledge about what the other group is doing that would not be possible in real life. If scheduling classes at the same time is not possible, teachers need to be creative in finding a time when all students can participate in the main component of the simulation or find an alternative option, such as making participation by one class an extra-credit activity.

5. ***Determine the level of complexity.***

In developing the scenario for a collaborative simulation, teachers will need to decide beforehand what level of complexity is desired. For example, advanced journalism classes should be able to cover a complicated situation, but the scenario for an introductory journalism class should be simpler.

6. ***Develop the scenario.***

In general, a situation that requires interaction with others and involves immediacy is a good option for a collaborative simulation. The scenario should be something that can actually happen, but not duplicate an actual event that has already taken place since students could research the real case and act according to what happened rather than working through the scenario as a developing situation. Additionally, one never knows when a student has a connection to a real-life event, which could cause unintended complications or embarrassment for that individual as well as hamper the student's participation in the simulation. However, with those cautions in mind, news stories can be good sources for scenario ideas.

The time it takes to create a scenario with supporting materials could be a deterrent for some instructors who would otherwise be interested in the benefits of doing a collaborative simulation. If the activity will take place every semester or every year, however, it may be possible to repeat scenarios after students who have already worked with them have graduated. Repeating a basic scenario also gives teachers a chance to make changes based on any confusion or problems that surfaced the first time. In our case, supporting materials included background material on a fictional school, including its history; the general fictional scenario (which varied by year and included everything from a theft leading to a potential donor not wanting to give a sizable amount to a library to an athletic scandal) and fictional "biographies" of certain role players.

7. ***Recruit role players.***

Using outside role players is optional but highly desirable; however, if role players will be incorporated into the simulation, they should be lined up *before* the final details of a scenario have been determined so as to take advantage of their background and experiences. At a college, faculty and staff from other departments are excellent

sources for appropriate role players, and their participation can greatly enhance the realism of the simulation for students. For example, for a scenario involving an athletic scandal, getting role players from the college's athletic department proved beneficial to the experience. In that same scenario, an acting professor's interruption of the press conference to ask questions related to the treatment her fictional athlete son threw the event into chaos. PR students tried to usher her out of the room, and the student journalists wondered which event they should cover, the press conference or the hysterical "mom" being led out of the room and yelling in the hall. For roles that do not require specialized knowledge, actors or even students from other classes can also be used. In our case, the simulated news conference required subject experts who could respond to questions from reporters. Although these role players were not scripted, they were given key points to match information that had been provided to the PR students. They also had great flexibility in terms of improvising all other details as needed. This was a major aspect of making the simulated press conference more realistic because no one, not even the instructors, knew what questions the journalism students would ask or how the role players would respond.

8. *Incorporate something unexpected.*

Occurrences that students have not anticipated can make the simulation more exciting as well as more realistic. We utilized this concept by asking an uninvited role player to show up at the simulated news conference as the upset mother of a fictional college student in our scenario. When this role player spoke out during the press conference, students in both classes were taken by surprise and clearly unsure what to do. As we watched from the back of the room, our students were clearly engaged in the evolving situation as though it were real as they looked for clues to understand what was going on. They had to think on their feet and call on their common sense as well as their creativity to deal with a problem that was not going away on its own.

Later, several PR students said their hands were sweaty and their hearts were pounding because they didn't know what they should do, and they knew their teacher wouldn't step in to solve the problem. Several journalism students said they were surprised to find themselves tongue-tied and not knowing what to do beyond watching what was taking place.

9. *Create any needed materials.*

Usually there will be at least some materials that students will need to be given during the simulation, especially when the situation is first introduced to them. In our example, PR students were given a brief description of their client and basic facts about the client's crisis situation at the point they were being "hired" to work with the media. As they began planning a press conference to share information with reporters, additional information was provided when they requested it, such as the history of the athletic department at the college, a profile of the coach involved in the crisis situation, and the names of potential spokespeople (the pre-arranged role players) who could attend the press conference if asked. Journalism students got a different view of the crisis as the transcript of a "call" to their newsrooms from an irate parent who believed her son was being treated unfairly. As in real life, the PR team did not know about the call and the journalists did not yet have the information from the client.

Depending on the situation, additional materials may be created during the simulation in response to legitimate questions or requests that teachers had not anticipated from students. Teachers may also want to set up e-mail or social-media accounts for interactions between students in their classes. In our scenario, the PR agency had an e-mail account that journalism students could use to contact them, just as a real PR agency would.

10. *Prepare students for the simulation.*

Information about the simulation may be shared on the first day of a class, or introduced when the collaborative teaching unit will take place. The timing of when students learn about their participation in this experiential activity does not need to be the same in all participating classes, as was true in our collaboration. PR students were told on the first day of class that they would take part in a simulation during the semester, whereas the journalism students learned of their participation around the time the simulation was to begin. The simulation activity began first in the PR class when students learned about a new “client” for their PR agency: a university with an emerging crisis involving its athletic department. They were told that they would be in complete control as they planned a press conference the client had requested to share information with the media. The prepared background information was given to them, and their teacher took a seat to simply watch and listen.

The opportunity for students to be in control during the simulation is crucial to gaining the most benefit from this activity. The purpose of the simulation is giving them an opportunity to make all the decisions and then deal with the consequences of those decisions. They must also figure out how to work effectively and efficiently as a team, how to be creative as well as logical in addressing the issues they face, and how to manage their time and resolve any problems that arise. Teachers must be prepared and committed to a “hands off” approach. Let your students make mistakes; they will learn from them! It can be very difficult for a teacher to stay silent while students struggle to make decisions, especially when those decisions are clearly not the best ones. The teacher must resist the temptation to intervene. Teachers will also have time to share their views during the debriefing discussions afterward.

Journalism students were told by their instructor about an opportunity to participate in a “press conference” arranged by a PR class. They were also told they would receive extra credit by attending the press conference as reporters and writing an online story that would be “published” on their own blog sites. The instructor and students had been discussing differences and similarities between online and print journalism in this advanced journalism course, and the simulation activity gave students a chance to show what they had learned in a non-traditional format. All but two students seized the opportunity to earn the extra credit, and those two only declined because of scheduling conflicts. Journalism students were shown how to set up an individual news blog on Word Press, a free blogging site, and told to send a link to their sites to the instructor. The links were also forwarded to the PR instructor so that her PR students could read the reports as well. The PR team e-mailed a media advisory to each journalism student with the date, time and place of the simulated press conference. As already noted, the journalism students also received a “call” about the crisis situation prior to attending that press conference.

11. *During the simulated event.*

As the simulation unfolds, don't be surprised that what seems obvious to you as a teacher may not be obvious to your students. And when the classes come together in whatever activity forms the centerpiece of the collaborative simulation, no one should be able to predict what will happen, including the teachers. In our simulation, PR students arrived early to set up the room they had reserved for the “press conference” and to meet their client's spokespeople (role players). As “reporters” (journalism students) arrived, each person was given a copy of the media kit the PR team had prepared.

Journalism students brought notebooks and cameras to the press conference and used both throughout the presentations; but when it came time to ask questions, they were silent. Eventually one student took the lead and began questioning the spokespeople. Others slowly followed, but some of the most basic questions remained unasked. This was frustrating for their teacher to watch without comment. When an irate mother of a college student

interrupted the news conference to voice her views, journalism and PR students were taken by surprise and clearly unsure what to do. Eventually the PR students ended the press conference and escorted the “mother” to the door, but several journalists followed into the hallway and continued to interview her. Throughout the simulated event, not interfering or offering suggestions to our students was extremely difficult for us, but we also knew it was extremely important not to “telegraph” any advice at this point, even by our body language.

As noted by Sasley (2010), simulations let “students direct their own efforts and control their own actions and decisions. When a professor does not tell students how developments and processes end, they are forced to find out for themselves” (p. 62). Writing about the use of simulations to teach international relations, Sasley advocates for the benefits of the personal experience a student has while taking part in a simulation, where success can become a matter of pride and personal triumph, and failure can teach valuable lessons about the situation at hand as well as about how to handle failure itself.

12. *Debriefing discussion.*

Debriefing discussions need to be held after the simulation (Hertel & Millis, 2002; Petrank, Corey & Black, 1992; Slack, 2003; Smith & Boyer, 1996). Students need a chance to discuss what took place with their instructor, and this important debriefing opportunity needs to take place as soon as possible after the simulation is over so the experience is “fresh” in the students minds. “During the debriefing discussions, the student harnesses the vast information and makes sense out of these experiences by sharing his ideas and listening to other’s impressions” (Petranek, Corey, & Black, 1992, p. 174).

Journalism students were eager to talk about the simulation, and many said they were surprised that they “froze” and could not think of any questions to ask. A few students who had worked extensively in student media said they did not find themselves fully engaged in the simulation because they had covered real press conferences and knew this was not real. Others said they thought the activity would be easy, but it was not. One student said he thoroughly enjoyed it because he did not know what was going to happen next.

PR students were also anxious to discuss their experience when their class met again a few days after the simulated news conference. Discussion centered on how real the experience had seemed. They said they had been confident about their preparations for the news conference, about how they had worked with the role players, and about the information in the media kits they had prepared for attending “reporters.” But they admitted to being totally unsure of what to do about the unexpected disruption caused by the “mother,” and they wanted to know what they could have done differently.

A common complaint during the journalism students’ debriefing concerned the PR students steering them away from talking to the sources (role players) after the press conference. This led to a discussion with the journalism students about how to handle a situation like this and about the differing roles of journalists and PR practitioners. In the PR class debriefing, the teacher shared her surprise that the PR team had tried to keep the reporters from talking with the spokespeople after they had ended the press conference in an attempt to get the disruptive mother to leave. The PR students weren’t sure why they had tried to “protect” their spokespeople from the reporters, but an important discovery had been made: The PR team needed to understand its role as helping journalists get accurate information from reliable sources rather than trying to prevent them from talking to its client’s representatives. The lack of clarity about the complementary roles of PR practitioners and journalists became very apparent as a result of our bringing our students together for this collaborative simulation.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to share the process we used to develop a collaborative simulation for journalism and PR classes, which we believe can be adapted by faculty in other disciplines. Based on our experience, this type of collaborative, experiential activity provides opportunities for students to think critically, apply knowledge they have been learning, and develop their creativity to solve problems. They also get a taste of the surprises they may face in the workplace, which can be quite different from their experiences in the academic world.

Some of the benefits for students participating in a collaborative simulation reflect the principles of improvisation suggested by Berk & Trieber (2009), such as attentive listening, spontaneity, and nonverbal communication. Improvisation is certainly a component of students reacting in real time to what is happening during a collaborative simulation, and Berk & Trieber argue that improvisation “taps into students’ multiple and emotional intelligences, particularly verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal” (p. 32). They also assert it “fosters collaborative learning and promotes deep learning” (p. 33).

The feedback from students in both our journalism and PR classes showed that most students would do at least some things differently if given the chance to participate in the same simulation scenario again, and many students admitted to learning a lot from the things that had gone wrong. This outcome points to the importance of giving students a chance to fail in the supportive setting of a classroom, where mistakes won’t cost them their jobs or reputations. In the workplace, PR practitioners and journalists routinely work with each other; yet our PR and journalism students failed to fully understand the importance of their complementary roles and interactions.

Another lesson that can be gleaned from our collaboration is one for the teachers: Don’t be afraid to remind your advanced-level classes about the basics. The journalism students knew how to write a news story, but it was clear that they could have benefited from a discussion of *why and how* journalists do what they do. The number of smart students who did not ask any

questions and even seemed overwhelmed during the news conference was surprising. It was clear that it would be beneficial for students at any level to review a journalist’s responsibility to get accurate information to the public as well as practical tips on how to handle interviews. Students should also be reminded that if they do forget to ask a question, they can contact the source after the press conference. After all, that’s what real journalists do.

For students who want to know the “right” way to do something, participating in our simulation was a challenging, and sometimes frustrating, experience. There was no obvious “right” way to act or react; and while trying to manage the press conference, PR students found they had to think on their feet, make quick decisions about what to do, and immediately deal with the outcomes of their decisions.

The realism produced by this activity is definitely a major reason to consider doing a collaborative simulation. For example, an individual journalism instructor cannot create an in-class exercise that will compare to a “real-life” scenario in which students don’t know the role players, can’t predict what will happen next, and are watching it unfold in front of them. In some cases, the twists and turns of a dramatic collaborative scenario may require journalism students to be even more alert and skilled than when covering an actual event, such as a student government meeting or homecoming parade. The reality factor was also key for the PR students in terms of keeping their interest and challenging them to develop their teamwork, communication, and leadership skills. Any difficulties or differences of opinion among team members must be handled while dealing with unknown forces and factors at the same time.

They must think quickly yet still consider the ramifications of each action they take. A survey of PR students a year or more after they had participated in a collaborative simulation reinforced the importance of having people taking part who were not in their class. The outside role players along with the need to work with journalism students from another class were very important in making the simulation seem very real to them (Olson, 2010).

An interesting lesson was also learned from the journalism students' use of blogs: Always use a fake name for the places involved in the simulation. Students with a scheduling conflict for the extra-credit opportunity of covering the simulated press conference were given an alternate scenario to write about on their blogs. The outlandish scenario involved fake names for people, but the real name of a college. When Google Alerts notified a college official about a story naming his college, he thought it might be real and was concerned, even with its outlandish details and fake names. The lesson? Always use fake names for your college or university in a simulation.

Among the possible deterrents for developing a collaborative simulation is the time it takes to plan, create, and execute it. There is also the factor of coordinating schedules and the need to stick to the schedule once it has been agreed upon. Students who are absent during all or part of the simulation activity will also lose out on the benefits of participating, although they can still learn something from the debriefing discussions of their classmates.

Research on collaborative simulations might examine how they can be used to teach students across disciplines as well as using them with classes in a single department. Additional research involving journalism and PR students might also integrate social media, giving journalism students a chance to report in "real time" on Twitter and social networks and giving PR students a chance to monitor the reporting so as to react and respond to it within the confines of a simulated event. For teachers who are ready to let go in terms of controlling their classrooms and the actions of their students, we believe the learning that occurs during a collaborative simulation is a benefit of this activity that outweighs any discomfort or trepidation over the loss of a controlled learning environment.

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