

CULTURAL PREDICAMENTS:
DESIGNING ROLE-PLAY SIMULATIONS INVOLVING
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This paper describes, analyses and compares the learning objectives and design of four role-play simulations involving intercultural communication contexts. The aim is to elicit some practical observations in the search for an effective strategy for the creation of online role-plays that meet learning objectives involving intercultural communication settings. Can learning objectives be designed into a role-play simulation framework that enables participants to experience the issues and problems involved in intercultural communication? The paper suggests that certain design choices are particularly useful in creating such role-plays regardless of the subject domain to which they are applied.

Keywords

Simulation Design
Online role-plays

Introduction

In a globalized world the problem of intercultural communication is increasingly stretching the imagination of teachers in confronting the dilemma of how to best provide students with appropriate tools to understand and resolve problems that arise in such communication contexts. It is not just a question of identifying cultural assumptions and their effects on communication strategies. Poignantly it is also about finding new pragmatic approaches that would help students in overcoming the limitations of such assumptions and supporting communication strategies that bridge cultural divisions.

Our approach has been to place students in simulated intercultural environments using online role-plays. By inviting students to play sides in some intercultural divide we hope students would be explicitly confronted by their own cultural assumptions as well as learning to identify the cultural assumptions of the other. In working to resolve problems related to their subject domain in inter-cultural communication contexts, students are able to experiment with different strategies and to evaluate the effectiveness, or otherwise, of approaching intercultural problems from an alternate perspective.

This paper is based on the author's experience of participating in role-play simulation design involving intercultural issues over the last five years. It describes, analyses and reflects on the design and delivery of three role-play simulations (RPS) that involved intercultural communication settings and a fourth RPS that has been designed but not run yet. All four RPSs - *A Different Lunch*, *Black Blizzard*, *A Trip to Australia* and *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution* - are on line role-play simulations that approach very different subject domains and learning objectives. By trawling through the relationship between learning objectives and RPS design the paper yields some hopefully useful observations and conclusions about role-play design involving intercultural communication that have a more general application beyond particular subject domains.

A Different Lunch

A Different Lunch was designed for a teacher-training program and delivered at the University of Melbourne. The learning objectives were:

- To enable students to engage in critical thinking when relating to professional issues/concerns within everyday contexts;
- To enhance teaching and learning of key professional concepts through problem based learning strategies which allow students access to meaningful contexts as if they themselves were direct participants in the ongoing dialogue;
- To facilitate better access and understanding about critical debates in education though real-life scenarios encountered by early educators. (Linser, Waniganayake, & Wilkes, 2004)

As can be gleaned from the above inter-cultural communication was not the main objective of the course. However, given a) social diversity in Australian society for which these students were being trained; b) that the learning objectives demanded engaging critical thinking about issues and concerns raised in everyday contexts; and c) the demand to facilitate understanding through real-life scenarios, our design choice was to embed professional dilemmas in an intercultural context that reflects the social diversity of Australian society.

The start-up scenario, delivered as a video, portrayed an altercation between a member of staff at a fictional child-care centre and a parent whose cultural background can best be described as of Middle Eastern origin. The scenario thus aimed to highlight cross cultural communication issues and policy. It was designed to raise questions dealing with the appropriate behaviour of staff and parents, appropriate policy development regarding food, relationship to other professionals in government and media and other issues.

A design flaw immediately became apparent at the beginning of the exercise. The episode depicting the altercation shown in the video does not specify the cultural background of the parent – it portrayed a generally Middle Eastern character. Consequently, in the role profiles submitted by each role, this parent, his wife and daughter described different cultural origins for the family. The problem was that we failed to specify the cultural background we wanted this family to assume. Designating ‘different cultures’ in an abstract fashion was clearly not sufficient for participants to understand their character and formulate an integrated cultural position. The lesson learned was that in order to highlight ‘intercultural’ issues the design needed to specify the particular cultures in question.

In the design of the simulation students were assigned to work on their roles in teams of 2-4, because we anticipated that it would help them with the workload and more importantly we thought that as teams they would be able to develop their ideas and reflect on the developing scenario more effectively than they would have as individuals.

At the end of the simulation students were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the role-play simulation for learning. “86% of the participants agreed that the simulation had been successful in raising their awareness of cultural diversity issues.” (Linser, Waniganayake, & Wilkes, 2004)

In the student evaluations of their experience of working in teams our design expectation that working in small teams would help in coping with the amount of work involved proved correct as 83% of students thought that it was useful in coping with the workload.

The second assumption, that the simulation would help them develop their ideas, was also born out by the results. The majority, 81% thought that playing the roles as a team was useful in that it enabled them to develop ideas with their partners. From their comments it is clear that they thought this was the major advantage in working as a team. Only 14% preferred playing on their own rather than as a team as opposed to 64% who preferred playing as a team and 23% who had no preference.

Black Blizzard

The Black Blizzard RPS was designed for a course at Hedmark University College in Norway, targeting personnel involved in crisis management. The objective of the course was specifically to provide students with “tools” to better understand cross-cultural and intercultural issues that may give rise to miscommunication and/or misunderstanding. The simulation was thus designed to enable an exploration of typical issues and problems that arise in intercultural collaboration. It was also intended to provide participants with awareness and experience of problems and communication breakdowns using English rather than their mother tongue, i.e. to experience the problems they might encounter given the lack of vocabulary and precision in expressing their thoughts in English (Linser, Ree-Lindstad & Vold, 2007)

A further objective of the simulation was to replace a real-time face-to-face simulation constituting the final exam of the course usually conducted at a Norwegian army simulation centre. Because this simulation replaced the final exam of the course and because the number of participants was only 10, each role was played by a single individual rather than in teams.

Given the above learning objectives and the fact that it was an exam using a tool with which they were not familiar, the design provided two very different scenarios, which were played out separately. The first scenario was meant as a preparation for the second – so that the students would know what to expect in this online simulation and be better prepared for their ‘final exam’.

The first scenario involved an earthquake in Northern Turkey to which a UN agency sends a Norwegian led team to help manage the crisis. Participants played both the roles within the UN team and Turkish roles responsible for managing the crisis. All roles were instructed to use only English as would be expected in such an intercultural crisis management scenario. Some roles on both sides of the communication divide (Norway/Turkey) were provided with instruction to specifically ‘misunderstand’ and raise issues that could potentially lead to cultural miscommunication and conflict.

Thus we expected that participants would have to research cultural differences that may lead to miscommunication. The idea was for the players to realize that culturally normative behaviours of one side do not necessarily correspond to those of the other side and to find strategies to overcome these intercultural problems. And indeed participants researched and provided examples like the use of dogs in the rescue efforts that on the Turkish side was culturally problematic or the payment of bribes that to the Norwegian roles seemed culturally problematic.

The design of this first scenario thus presented participants with a triple challenge – first to use a language which was not their native tongue; secondly to use it in an alien cultural context (Turkey) as a vehicle for intercultural communication; and thirdly to deal and resolve subject matter problems related to collaboration in tackling crisis management.

The result was that participants reported that they found it particularly difficult to tackle these three issues at once. In particular they found it difficult to communicate in English while at

the same time attending to cultural norms and behaviours appropriate to the Turkish context. We therefore reluctantly decided that the second scenario would be conducted in Norwegian in order to focus more on the subject matter and cultural differences that were critical to the exam context of the simulation.

The second scenario of Black Blizzard involved a UN refugee camp on the Sudan/Eritrea border led by a Scandinavian camp leader and doctor who had to work with Eritrean refugee leaders on the one hand and on the other a village head and witch doctor from a nearby Eritrean village. Like the first scenario some roles were instructed to 'create' communication problems for each other – the doctor vs. witch doctor. Moreover, conflicting interests were built into the scenario – village head and camp leader had different priorities about the camp location and the refugee representative in charge of camp security had a double agent role that undermined camp security.

This second scenario may have indeed allowed participants to focus on the conflicting cultural demands that arise in intercultural communication. But the learning objective of highlighting the problem of speaking in a language other than ones own was sacrificed. Consequently the focus shifted to the conflict between the roles and to the particular problems that arise in refugee camp crisis management.

Both scenarios of Black Blizzard required participants not only to research and learn about culturally specific differences between Norwegian and other cultures with which they potentially have to communicate and collaborate, but also to think through and find solutions to potential communication and crisis management problems and deploy these solutions to evaluate their effects.

Participants reported that the role-play was both fun and useful in focusing their attention on intercultural communication issues involved in crisis management. However our design did not adequately meet the learning objective of using English as a foreign language. It seems that we attempted too much in the first scenario. The lesson, implemented in the second scenario seems to have borne this out. Perhaps a simpler scenario in the Turkish context would have helped meet that objective. On the other hand, the fact that the roles were played individually rather than in teams may also be a contributing factor to the difficulties encountered by participants. It may therefore be a better strategy to re-design the roles to be played in teams in order to overcome the difficulties faced by the students in the first scenario and thus to meet all the learning objectives for which the simulation was designed.

A Trip to Australia

A Trip to Australia is an RPS designed for a course in English as a foreign language (EFL) at the Universitat Jaume I, in Spain. The objective of this simulation was to provide Spanish native speakers ample practice in using English reading and writing skills. (Coll-Garcia and Linser, 2006)

To create a design to meet these learning objectives we thought it to be useful to create an authentic context - one that the students could identify with. Our scenario put the students in

a travel agency that was contracted by the University Jaume I Student Union to offer an Australia study/holiday package for students. The package, given as the task for the roles to create, was meant to combine studying English with pleasure (i.e., a hypothetical holiday around Australia in summer time).

The students played the roles of three executives working for three different branches of Australia Travel Agency (ATA), based in three different cities. The chief executive of ATA (played by the lecturer) in Madrid oversaw the development of the student holiday package to Australia that required the executives to create a collaborative report on what the students would get as part of the package. Thus they needed to organize a three-week trip to Australia for themselves, on a limited budget of €9.000, in order to check out potential places and things to do that would be included in this package. They then had to write the report presenting their findings.

A list of English language Web-sites was provided as a resource, where tourist information on Australia could be found for organizing their trip around Australia (e.g., maps, sightseeing monuments, museums, excursions, photo tours, local food, festivals and folklore, night life, weather and temperature, etc.) They were also instructed that English was the only language to be used in their interactions with one another on the web site. However, each of the instructions they received, including the scenario, was available in Spanish translation.

The RPS was divided into two modules – in the first only a synchronous communication tool was provided – a chat system – while in the second they also had access to asynchronous communication tools – SimMail (or email) and a discussion forum. The object of this was to investigate the difference this would make for meeting the learning objectives of practicing English language skills and the use of web-based communication.

The pedagogical objective of the synchronous module was for the students to discuss the above in English by using the chat tool, to articulate and write their ideas and hence practice the language in real time within an authentic context. The emphasis on real time meant that responses had to be fairly immediate thereby reflecting their current knowledge of the language. The pedagogical objective of the second (asynchronous) module was to practice the language as in the first module, but with the added time to research and reflect on their linguistic expressions.

Results of an attitudinal survey administered at the end of the simulation strongly show that students viewed simulations as a good learning environment to improve their reading skills as well as writing skills in the foreign language (i.e., English). They reported, finding it “engaging” and “challenging” and they liked the experience because they felt immersed in the activity. A semi-structured interview also revealed that students perceived the simulation as a very positive tool to improve foreign language skills. They said they had incorporated new vocabulary into their repertoire as they worked through the simulation. Some learners reported to have experienced improved fluency in their writing and reading comprehension skills after having participated in the simulation. (“I realized that my fluency in English increased with the practice”). (Coll-Garcia and Linser, 2006).

Perspectives to Conflict Resolution

This simulation was designed for Israeli and Arab students from 3 different High Schools participating in a program on conflict resolution at the Tami Steinmetz Centre for Peace Research at the University of Tel Aviv. The learning objective of the course was to provide participants with a basic understanding of the different approaches to conflict resolution. The simulation thus intended to clarify the problems inherent in conflict resolution, provide different approaches to conflict resolution and to exercise participants in implementing these approaches.

The guiding questions for the simulation were: To what extent can these tools be used in resolving conflict? And how can a strategic approach be brought together with a conflict resolution approach?

To answer these questions and meet the learning objectives we designed a two-tier simulation corresponding to two scenarios. In the first, participants would play the roles of the different leaders to the sides of the Northern Ireland conflict. We reasoned that given the emotional involvement of the students with the issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict, it would be helpful if they first attempted to deal with conflict resolution issues and strategies in an emotional context that resembles such dynamics yet seems removed from their experience. Using the different approaches and tools learned during the course, participants could then examine their usefulness in reaching results from the point of view of the different sides to the conflict.

In the second scenario, having already experienced how issues may be approached, participants would play the role of leaders of various sides to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict where they would have to confront not only the strategic implication of different approaches to conflict resolution but significantly their own emotional attachments to values and normative standards of behaviour involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. And this after having, perhaps more dispassionately, examined a conflict with similar emotional dynamics

Given that participants are students from two different Israeli High Schools and an Arab one, remote from one another, we thought to leverage the online nature of the simulation so that each role would be played by a team that constituted both Israeli and Arab students. This we reasoned would help the students to become aware of cultural sensitivities and/or significance in their collaborative team discussions and efforts to play that role. It is important to note that apart from Israeli, Arab and International leaders, we included three media roles (Aljazeera, Ha'aretz and CNN) that were meant to represent Arab, Israeli and American/International perspectives on the events of the simulation. This we reasoned would prompt and reinforce the intercultural discussion within the teams playing the various roles.

Observations and Discussion

Though all four simulations above are embedded in intercultural contexts, the direct learning objectives of only one (*Black Blizzard*) were specifically about intercultural communication. In the three other simulations (*A different Lunch*, *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution* and *A*

Trip to Australia) intercultural communication was an essential dimension to the simulation design in order to meet the specific subject related learning objectives. In *A Different Lunch* and *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution* the reality of cultural diversity in which participants were located required the design to situate the scenario and roles in an intercultural context that would highlight the issues raised by the stated learning objectives. In *A Trip to Australia*, the learning objectives indirectly suggested that an intercultural setting would be useful in helping the students to reach the learning objectives – learning a foreign language is a bridge to intercultural communication as it introduces the learner into a cultural world presupposed by the foreign language. Thus the design of the roles in a foreign context brought out intercultural communication differences and issues in expressing oneself in the learned language.

In *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution* not only does the scenario and roles have an intercultural dimension, participants are themselves divisible by the very cultural divides being simulated. The other three role-plays only simulated intercultural settings while the majority of participants shared the same cultural perspective. In the first, intercultural communication is expected to occur both at the simulated levels of scenario and roles as well as the real levels of intercultural communication between participants. In the latter three, the learning objectives, directly or contextually involved a simulated level of intercultural settings, but relative cultural homogeneity of participants was assumed. For all, however, the simulation experience was a means to understand, become aware of, and/or practice, intercultural communication and its associated predicaments.

In order to help participants understand and become aware of the problematic involved, each role in *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution*, is designed to be played by a team of participants. In *A Different Lunch* all roles were played as 2-4 players team collaboration as we expect to do in *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution*. In both *Black Blizzard* and *A Trip to Australia* however individual participants played each of the roles.

From a design perspective, playing roles in teams adds another collaborative tier to the collaboration that already takes place in doing a role-play. This seems to be particularly helpful to participants in intercultural communication contexts as it enables them to discuss the predicaments involved in such settings and bounce ideas off each other in finding strategies to handle these. The overload that participants experienced in the first scenario of *Black Blizzard* can thus be minimized.

The roles in three of the simulations (the fourth being *A Trip to Australia*) involved pitting two different cultural contexts against one another so that miscommunication and cultural differences would be highlighted. *A Trip to Australia* on the other hand, involved all participants to take the perspective of a different culture so that they would face the predicament of articulating their thoughts from that perspective. At the level of design, we suspect that the first strategy, pitting roles from two different cultural backgrounds, is more useful as it explicitly differentiates the two different cultural perspectives rather than relying on the participants to become aware of these on their own as was the case in *A Trip to Australia*. However, we have no data to corroborate this. Participants in *A Different Lunch* explicitly stated that the simulation helped them appreciate the impact of cultural difference in intercultural communication. But whether the strategy of pitting roles from two different

cultures is better than having all the roles played from a different cultural perspective to the one that participants belong, remains an open question that needs further study.

Three of the simulations, for different though not unrelated reasons, were designed with two different tiers. In *Black Blizzard* and *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution*, the first scenario encountered is a preparation for the second scenario that is intended to be the more critical part of the simulation. Participants not only confront two different scenarios, but they also play different roles in tackling each of these scenarios. Thus they researched and played one role in the first scenario and then researched and played another role involved in the second scenario.

In the third simulation, *A Trip to Australia*, the division into two modules was designed to investigate the advantages of synchronous vs. asynchronous communication in the study of EFL. Thus despite the design of two tiers, the second module of *A Trip to Australia* continued and deepened the scenario introduced in the first module. It is thus closer to *A Different Lunch* in which the single scenario introduced at the beginning, deepened and branched out but the students played the same roles throughout the simulation.

As a design choice, a two-tier simulation involving 2 different scenarios certainly seemed to be useful in *Black Blizzard* and seems that it will help participants in approaching emotionally laden issues in *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution*. Whether or not such design has a more general application for developing role-plays involving intercultural communication remains an open question for further research.

All simulations above required participants to research their role within certain cultural contexts on the basis of information designed to meet the learning objectives. The level of detail provided to participants however varied. The variation depended on the learning objectives. Thus, in *Perspectives to Conflict Resolution* we did not provide much detail because we want the students to research 'real world' personalities and the cultural environment in which they are embedded. While in the other simulations we provided greater detail of who the roles were because of their fictional nature. Obviously in *A Different Lunch* we did not provide enough detail as the confusion about the cultural background of the family shows.

The level of detail provided to participants involves designing a delicate balance between information provided to participants and the expectations demanded by the learning objectives of information that participants need to find out on their own. While on the one hand the characteristics of the role are an important design feature in meeting learning objectives, it is also important to have participants imagine and imbue the role with their own research and imagination so that they feel involved in creating the roles. Allowing participants to create their character when intercultural communication differences are at stake is particularly important in so far as the learning objectives requirements involve consideration of the cultural contexts in which the roles are situated. Thus awareness of intercultural communication predicaments becomes explicit. How much detail should be provided however remains an open question. Future research in finding the balance between learning objectives and role design would thus be helpful.

Conclusions

Learning Objectives can indeed be designed into a role-play framework as demonstrated in the four simulations examined above. In the three role-play simulations that were delivered, participants did report that it enabled them to experience and appreciate the issues and problems involved in intercultural communication.

Did it enable students to overcome culturally based assumptions and bias? Did it motivate them to examine their own assumptions? These remain moot points. It seems logical that in confronting the issues of intercultural communication one would need to examine one's own cultural assumptions. However we have no data to support this. Future research would need to confront this issue more explicitly. We hope that, given the unique nature of the participant's cultural divide, running *Perspective to Conflict Resolution*, would provide us with the opportunity to investigate these questions in more detail.

Role-play simulations as a learning strategy to deal with intercultural issues seem clearly useful. The key to the intercultural gateway is detailed design. One that considers learning objectives in their wider cultural contexts. Even when, like in three of our simulations, intercultural communication was not the main learning objective, intercultural communication settings were still deemed necessary. These intercultural communication settings were needed in order to provide a learning environment that would enable participants to experience and reflect upon these settings in order to reach subject specific learning objectives.

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