

A Novel Simulation for the Literature Classroom

Mary Noggle

mnoggle@cccti.edu

English Instructor

Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute

Hudson, North Carolina, USA 28601

Abstract

As an innovative approach to teaching the novel, web-based role-playing simulations in the literature classroom engage students by placing them directly into the conflict of the story, thus increasing motivation. The story, then, comes alive as students interact with one another via their personas. Through play, students gain insight into character portrayal by understanding the inherent motivation of characters to recognize real life psychological and sociological conditions of these otherwise fictional entities. Students benefit by acquiring a deeper understanding of character, theme, language and historical perspective.

Introduction

The truth seems to be, however, that, when he casts his leaves forth upon the wind, the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates or lifemates. Some authors, indeed, do far more than this, and indulge themselves in such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed, only and exclusively, to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large to the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it.

-Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Custom House*

In the fall of 2005, American Literature students from Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute in Hudson, North Carolina, began to experience a novel approach to their studies. While examining the literary works of colonial America, these students take an active part in this turbulent time in history through simulating Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. The role-playing simulation allows students to *commune* with the characters of the novel rather than separate themselves from the conflict.

In summary, *The Scarlet Letter* is the story of Hester Prynne, who finds herself the object of public ignominy at the birth of her daughter Pearl. The paternity of the child is in question since Hester's husband is presumed dead at sea. As the child's father, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale torments himself by holding the secret sin and crime from the townspeople. Hester's long-lost husband arrives in Boston town in the guise of physician Roger Chillingworth. The townspeople are outraged that such a crime, punishable by death, has defiled their "utopia."

This four-week simulation examines the values, mores, and traditions impregnating 17th century Puritan culture through peer interaction within the framework of Hawthorne's narrative. The simulation aims to explore the themes of sin, hypocrisy, repression, self-knowledge and the fall of Puritan society. Players experience the conflicts inherent in questioning why individuals struggle with their actions and feelings, why individuals feel the need to chastise others, and how individuals deal with the conflicting desires of nature and the demands of society.

Theory

Pedagogically, several theories support the use of simulations. Using a constructivist approach, the study of the novel begins with the instructor's kick-start episode, which initially engages students into the scene. Within *The Scarlet Letter*, students take on the roles beginning with the problematic scene in the forest occurring midway through the novel. Much interpretive reading is carried out prior to launching this opening scenario. Students develop an understanding of the Puritan perspective by reading other works from Colonial writers such as William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, and Edward Taylor, among others. From there, students create their own reality based on their assumptions and interpretations of how their particular persona would act and react in the evolving conflicts. This problem-based approach situates students within the initial conflict. Students consider the context of the problem, infer the information surrounding that dilemma, and make plans to resolve the conflict, which invariably will create a series of new problems. Students are free to make mistakes, find strategies that work and challenge the established strategies, beliefs and values in diverse situations (Linser & Ip, 2004). Through the context of the novel, students make decisions for the characters and realize the consequences these decisions have on the world they've helped to create, all in the safe, controlled environment of the simulation. As argued by Roger Schank (2001), Artificial Intelligence researcher, "the mark of an educated person is not the ability to spout little-known facts, but to have had a variety of experiences in simulated worlds that prepare one for decision-making in the real world." These experiences, then, take the focus from a lectured, teacher-centered setting to one in which the students are in control of making the decisions.

In the role-play, students have much of the control over the direction the story takes, thus a strong sense of ownership further serves as a motivator. Through the development of Dynamic Goal-Based Learning (DGBL) environments, actively constructing the tasks, students gain an understanding of relations and the processes that they create (Naidu, Ip, & Linser, 2000). These learners process the information presented through the novel and supplemental writings, analyze the character, predict actions and reactions, and add voice, in character, through dialogue interacting with the other roles while reflecting on the experiences they themselves have implemented. Role-play, then, becomes "a reflective process in which reevaluation of action takes place... [requiring] participants to understand both processes and relations as a byproduct of the necessity of evaluating the effectiveness of their own actions (Naidu, Ip, & Linser, 2000). By developing and expanding roles, students expand their appreciation of characterization within a work of fiction.

In these roles, students struggle to understand different perspectives and make sense of decisions and actions otherwise foreign to them. Role-play simulation designer Roni Linser (2004) points out, “By explicitly taking on the attitude of another, something we do implicitly as a matter of course in communicating with others in many contexts, students discover issues that they would not have otherwise encountered had they been viewing the material on the basis of their own attitudes.” Through the creation of characters based on Hawthorne’s original model, students gain a deeper understanding of not only the characters within the fiction, but also will be able to transfer that knowledge to life situations empathizing with people of varying views and opinions. As quoted in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Joseph Polman, associate professor of educational technology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, says that simulations teach “empathy, perspective-taking, and, by extension, ethics,” ideas often difficult to convey in the classroom” (Leach 2005). By taking on the semblance of these characters, the participants come to terms with perceptions unlike their own, making them conscious of varying viewpoints.

Inherent in the simulation is also the cognitive conflict involved with collaborative learning. While students will naturally tend to veer the story in different directions, role teammates will learn the art of negotiation and compromise for the greater good of the group. “Intensive argumentation of this sort can also enable students to experiment with their self-identities and grasp the constructed nature of role fixity in social life” (Mitchell, 2000). *The Scarlet Letter* centers on the internal conflicts of so-called “sinners” and the external conflicts of varying religious and political views. Internal conflict in the simulation is compounded by the discussions that must take place when a team develops a single role. All roles also need to negotiate with each other to advance to story. The advantage of using this collaborative learning method suggests that students work together as they are able to share a wider range of viewpoints and interpretations.

Goals and Expectations

The Scarlet Letter simulation is part of a course in American literature which emphasizes historical perspective, cultural context, and literary analysis. The primary goal of the activity is for students to be able to interpret, analyze, and respond to the novel with historical and cultural context. It is anticipated that the simulation will engage students’ interest. Surprisingly, students were reluctant to take part in the simulation at first; however, after the initial practice phase, these students demonstrated an eagerness to take part in the play. They take the story to heart, empathizing with the characters, and understand the painful experiences described in the narrative. Oftentimes in studying literature, students give a superficial reading of the novel. Through the simulation, though, students read more critically in order to delve inside the characters, understanding the key elements of motivation and internal conflict in order to effectively portray the roles. This careful reading was found with the supplementary reading material as well as the novel. Students read with interest sermons, journals, and poetry of the time period in order to capture the voice and beliefs of the people. In expanding the characters on their own, students also appreciate the author’s ability to develop characterization. In adopting the personas of these historical figures, students learn tolerance of varied beliefs while understanding the psychology of the times.

Role-playing in a virtual environment rather than a classroom setting allows the actors to formulate their movements rather than improvise. Their words and actions are calculative rather than impulsive reactions. Those students who are often too shy to “act” in front of an audience are more likely to take part in the action. Beginning the simulation, some students are hesitant to act out, but soon find voice and courage with the growth and development of their characters. In the virtual environment, all participants have the opportunity to play, whereas in the traditional classroom setting only a few dominate the activity.

It is questionable, however, whether students have the computer savvy to effectively interact in the online environment. Will they be able to utilize the tools available? Are their interpretive skills strong enough to portray the characters accurately? Will teams be able to cooperate in executing the roles? Will the lack of intonation, facial expressions, and movements misconstrue the intended meanings within dialogue? To what extent will actor and role identity be an issue? How far will students take the role? Will there be incidents of personal conflict and confrontation stemming from the fictional conflicts presented in the narrative? Would it be more effective to analyze the printed text face-to-face or to experience the sequence of events virtually? Without direction from the instructor, will students still reach valid conclusions about the text? There is also fear of straying too far from the original text and causing confusion of Hawthorne’s intended purpose as we apply his concepts in psychological and sociological experiment. These concerns soon diminish as the simulation progresses.

Throughout the simulation, students are monitored for understanding and involvement. If students have acquired an understanding of the characters, their roles will perform according to their nature. A formal evaluation in the form of an open-ended response questionnaire is administered to students.

Method

Although some technical skill and time is required, designing and implementing the web-based, role-play simulation is painless when using the Fablusi™ generator and pre-designed templates. The simulation generator allows the author to specify roles, define tasks, create sim-conferences, and assign rights for sim-spaces (Naidu, Ip, & Linser, 2000). Using the Fablusi authoring guide, the instructor begins constructing the simulation by setting up general information about the content and providing instructions for the group. This section contains learner objectives and introduces students to the notion of teamwork and the various tools available to them, such as NotePad, ChatRoom, and SimMail. Students use NotePad as a work area for individual composition as well as sharing information with teammates. Chats are scheduled among team performers or other characters. A large portion of the communication is channeled through SimMail, in which each character has his or her signature stationary.

The next step in the process involves writing the kick-start episode. *The Scarlet Letter* simulation begins at the pivotal point of the narrative when Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale meet in the forest, confess to their moments of deception, and avow to begin anew together. From there, the story moves to areas of the simulation set up for

interaction among the characters. These interaction spaces (iSpaces) relate to spaces described in the novel. The forest scene, the governor's mansion, and the meeting house, among others, serve as areas to intermingle, further developing the plot. These spaces are designed for private reflection and public interaction. The setting of the simulation is also replicated from the novel. The estimated time period of the novel spans 1642-1649. The first phase of the simulation holds true to this time beginning in 1649. The second phase advances the storyline fifteen years in order to incorporate events leading up to the Boston witch trials of 1665, the persecution of historical character Ann Hibbins, and emphasizes the roles of Pearl and John Hathorne. Setting the second kick-start episode fifteen years later introduces students to other historical developments that will serve as background for later literary works, such as Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* and Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*, also studied in the course.

Not only does the simulation give historical perspective, but it also allows for deeper insight into character development and motivation. During set up, the instructor defines the roles and establishes parameters for each. In teams of two or three, students take part in one of ten roles; all but three roles are established characters in the novel. The role of Elizabeth Wilson, wife of Reverend John Wilson, was added to the simulation to typify Christian women of colonial Boston town. Also added were the historical figures of Nathaniel Hawthorne's ancestors, William and John Hathorne, who represent the heavy hand of Puritan law. Once roles are defined, the instructor assigns tasks. The first task is to research the role and write a role profile. Creating the profile gives students an understanding of the character and what motivates this character in action. Through students' preparing the role profiles, they acquire the concept of remaining in character throughout the simulation, characters they themselves have created.

The role of the instructor is that of the moderator who observes student progress and interjects new dilemmas into the scene. This guidance keeps the focus of the simulation on the ultimate goals and objectives to be achieved. Further support for the simulation is in the conductor and controller. "The simulation controller is a tutor or a lecturer who is able to modify the information presented for the roles, monitor the messages and jump in to support particular roles, if necessary. The simulation conductor, on the other hand, is a hidden role in certain World(s). The conductor can monitor only selected activities in the assigned Worlds" (Naidu, Ip, & Linser, 2000). The students, then, have the control to develop roles as they choose, but still have the support and guidance of the moderator.

Conclusion

A web-based, role-playing simulation is an effective approach to teaching the novel. Beginning with the authentic scenes and characters, the story takes on new life as it evolves beyond the actual text into a new literary work created by students. Through literature simulations, students are asked to read and reflect on the original text, analyze characters and scenes, make predictions concerning the characters' actions, and follow the characters through the ensuing conflicts. Students are exposed to varying frames of reference in their development of character and plot. The aim of the literature simulation for *The Scarlet Letter* is to take the story beyond a structural study of the novel and its literary devices. This simulation is a psychological examination of a period and its

people. Students experience and empathize with the sorrow of guilt and the pain of repression found in Puritan New England. By playing in the fictional world they've created, students learn to problem solve and make decisions in the real world. They experience the conflict and learn how to deal with the challenges in the safe environment of the simulation.

References

- Leach, S.L. (2005). Role-play helps kids learn moral complexity. *The Christian Science Monitor* July 5, 2005. Retrieved July 27, 2005, from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0706/p15s02-legn.html>
- Linser, R. (2004). Suppose you were someone else... The learning environment of a web-based role-play simulation. Retrieved July 27, 2005, from <http://www.simplay.net/papers/suppose.html>
- Linser, R. & Ip, A. (2004). Creating learning opportunities using an RPS authoring tool. Retrieved July 27, 2005, from <http://ausweb.scu.edu.au/aw04/papers/refereed/ip/paper.html>
- Linser, R., Waniganayake, M., & Wilks, S. (2004). Where is the teacher? E-learning technology, authority and authorship in teaching and learning. Presented at EDMEDIA-2004, Lugan, Switzerland, 21-26 June 2004. Retrieved July 27, 2005, from http://www.simplay.net/papers/where_is_the_teacher.html
- Mitchell, G.R. (2000). Simulated public argument as a pedagogical play on worlds. *Argumentation & Advocacy*, 36(3). Retrieved July 25, 2005, from Communication & Mass Media Complete database.
- Naidu, S., Ip, A., & Linser, R. (2000). Dynamic goal-based role-play simulation on the web: a case study. *Educational Technology & Society*, 3(3). Retrieved July 26, 2005, from http://ifets.ieee.org/periodical/vol_3_2000/b05.html
- Schank, R. (2001). The computer isn't medium, it's the message. *Communications of the ACM* 44(3). Retrieved July 31, 2005, from InfoTrac OneFile database.