

## **Role-play Simulation as Alternative to Work Experience Placement**

[Roni Linser](#), Fablusi P/L, Australia; [Tahmina Rashid](#), University of Canberra, Australia

### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a pilot role-play simulation game at the University of Canberra in Australia. The simulation "Pakistan: Democracy, Development and Human Rights" is intended to give students a choice between work experience placement and playing a role in a simulation. The simulation took place over a whole semester in 2010 and was intended to give students an option to do their work experience in a virtual environment rather than at a work place. Most role playing simulation games that serve educational needs are usually part of a course that is either taught fully online or as a hybrid – part online part face-to- face. At the University of Canberra we have, we believe as a world first, replaced a full work experience course with an online role play simulation. The paper discusses the problem faced by students in finding work experience placement, outlines the design of the simulation, how the design fulfills the objectives of the course, the issues that we encountered during the pilot and the result of the pilot from the student's perspective and the course coordinator.

### **Introduction: The Course and the Simulation as Work Experience**

In previous years this course aimed at 4<sup>th</sup> year students at the University of Canberra required students to find placements in work environments.... Real work experience is crucial in developing student's ability to apply skills and knowledge acquired in various courses during their university studies in order to prepare them for the professional life after University. In particular, the course was designed as a cumulative apex to integrating their knowledge and skills in researching, evaluating and developing policies and writing reports with regard to such research and policies.

In recent years, the coordinators of the course faced two challenges to which they needed to respond creatively. As a result of the economic downturn and consequently increased difficulty in finding suitable placements for students on the one hand, and increase in student numbers on the other, coordinators needed to find solutions. Having researched a number of options and some shopping around online, and phone conversations, we decided to go for Fablusi for a number of reasons, simulation packages offered for Business Studies (Capsim) were far too expensive, not suitable for Social Science and Humanities students as the learning outcomes were different. Examples on Fablusi's website and the offered simulations gave more insight into what I was looking for and how could we achieve that. One additional factor was its user-friendly features, enabling (not very tech savvy) to catch up with new available educational technologies.

The success of role-play simulation games in political science subjects (Linser & Naidu, 1999; Naidu, Ip & Linser 2000; Linser, R. 2004; Shaw & Mendeloff, 2007; Hintjens, 2005, 2008) seemed to provide a model that might be utilized to help coordinators meet these challenges. The coordinators decided to run a pilot online role-play simulation that would become an option for students who could not find suitable work placements as required by the course and yet meet the

required standards. Simulation is not 'real work experience' but is sufficiently suitable, if designed appropriately, to enable students to meet with most of the course requirements.

The choice to use the Fablusi role-playing system as briefly stated above was the flexibility to develop the entire structure, contents and assessments. Pricing of educational technologies would continue to remain an issue especially in social sciences and humanities, where governments are not willing to invest while higher educational institutions cannot afford to allocate more than the generated share of revenues. Unlike some other options, the cost of license for Fablusi was not prohibitive, and the flexibility of developing a simulation as opposed to access the existing and structured was found very attractive.

### **Course Objective and Simulation Design**

The objectives of the course were to enable students to gain workplace experience in an environment that dealt with policy development and where they would be able to use skills gained through various courses for work related activities; be able to work in a group; work with diverse group of people, manage difficult people and situations. Students were required to have to write a Policy Recommendation on one aspect of the country situation they were studying and present the report at the end of their work.

To meet these objectives we decided to combine the simulation designs of Professor Caroline Shaw from Wichita State University in the US and Professor David Mendeloff from Carlton University in Canada, titled "Afghanistan Consultation Group: Peace Building Conference" (Shaw and Mendeloff , 2007), with that of Dr. Helen Hintjens in the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague (Hintjens, 2005, 2008) "Venezuela: Justice and Rights in Development" and "Land Rights and Post-Genocide Justice in Rwanda". Shaw and Mendeloff's design was specifically aimed at developing student's ability to do research, think through and develop policy. The objective that was to be reached by individual players in the course of the simulation was a policy recommendation in particular area of expertise. Hintjens design on the other hand was more focused on understanding, thinking through and suggesting policy under difficult situation with conflicting pressures and interests and in coordination with others. The objective of each player in this simulation was to negotiate possible solutions to issues in a final conference. In combining the design of these simulations the necessary objectives of the course in Canberra could be met. It was therefore decided to provide an optional course alternative, a simulation, for those who cannot get a work placement during their candidature at the University.

The online simulation was designed to take place over a whole semester period (3 months), unlike both simulations mentioned above, which were part of a hybrid course that included face-to-face lectures and tutorials and only lasted between 4-6 weeks. The rationale for this was that like their peers who found suitable real work placements, the time spend and work load would be approximately the same for all students.

Like the Shaw and Mendeloff simulation the objective to be reached by players was to provide policy recommendations for the country they were studying. On the other hand, like the Hintjens simulations, the players had to research and develop policy recommendations under conflicting

interests and pressure and in coordination with each other. This combination, thus met the objectives of the Canberra course.

The simulation was designed into 4 main stages elaborated below:

Introduction, choosing roles, allocating them, submitting the role profiles and responding to the first scenario;

Submitting a role evaluation, responding to the second scenario writing and submitting a draft of their final policy for peer review and reviewing 2 other such policies;

Organizing and preparing for an all actors face-to-face conference, as their roles, by negotiating and posting conference agenda items

Face-to-face debrief, submitting game summary evaluative reflection and submission of the final policy paper.

Playing different roles in Pakistan, students first had to research and write profiles that included an agenda for the roles they were playing and to submit them for all the other players to read. Once they submitted their role profiles, the scenario, which revolved around the recent floods in Pakistan and their impact on democracy and human rights in Pakistan, was revealed. The issues of democracy and human rights are particularly salient in the confrontation between Islamic radicals and the government on the one hand and Federal-District-NGO relations on the other. Thus the roles included members of government, members of Islamic radical groups fighting the government, District governors, both local and international NGO groups involved in human rights and aid during the floods, and the media. These roles then reacted to the scenario, each from their perspective, by communicating with each other within the Fablusi software system that includes, individual chats (simulating face-2-face meetings), sim-mail (simulated e-mail), dedicated formal forums (that simulated formal organizational meetings, e.g. Cabinet and other government meetings, the media that published news and others.)

After 2 weeks of play, students were asked to provide an evaluation of how they were going as the role and as the student playing the role. The objective was to provide the coordinators with a sense of how the students felt about what they were doing and for the students to pause and reflect on their activities. These were submitted to the coordinators for evaluation.

After submitting their role evaluations, the second stage of the design was revealed as a second scenario that deepened the issues of the first and was partly based on the action that had taken place thus far in the simulation, and which began preparing the students for their final objective to write a policy paper from the perspective of the role they were playing. We reasoned that the students needed of time (the first two weeks) before they fully felt comfortable in their roles and with the technology before embarking on a complex assignment like researching and writing a policy paper from the perspective of an actor in Pakistan.

As part of their response to this second scenario the students needed to prepare a draft of their final policy paper which was to be blind reviewed, each by two other roles in the simulation. This draft policy paper aimed to help the students begin formulating policies, and having them

reviewed by peers that would suggest, critique and point to missing dimensions from their role's perspective. This we reasoned would provide students with a more encompassing perspective of their policy paper; deepen their understanding and provide practical suggestions regarding their policy formulation. This took place simultaneous with the action in the simulation with various issues arising from the second scenario and their interactions.

In the next stage the students prepared agenda items, based on their draft policies, for a conference where they presented and negotiated the positions they had developed and possibly reach agreements about the important issues facing Pakistan into the future. This we reasoned enables the students to practice their negotiating and presentation skills, rehearse their understanding of the issues and thus prepare them for the final required policy submission as well as give closure to the simulation.

Finally, the last stage included a debrief, in which students, in a face-to-face meeting guided by the coordinators reflected on their role's actions, agenda, successes and failures as well as on their own decisions and strategies in playing their role; a formal reflective game summary evaluation which each student submitted to the coordinator; and submission of the crowning piece – the policy paper recommendation by the student from the perspective of the role.

### **Issues in Running the Simulation**

Simulation as an alternate to work placement and internship has not been offered at UC previously, therefore students had not fully grasped the mechanics. Initial student enrollments were around ten, which later dropped to four. Although we were not envisioning large numbers, still the situation was unexpected. There were a number of reasons for late dropouts, work placement in 2010 was an elective therefore the students had an option to complete their degree without completing it, and two of them picked another elective. Those who missed the introductory session managed in a computer lab as well as via skype with the moderator were the one who opted out later. Two dropouts mentioned that the workload that they imagined was different; they envisioned Internet chat not regular online participation. Some students inquired few weeks later and it was not possible to allow them joining the group after 4 weeks unless they were able to catch up rather quickly. There is another interesting aspect that an actual workplace where they may be required to work 9 AM to 5 PM as internee was clearly understood by those students who preferred to work with an organization, however those enrolling in simulation thought that it means flexibility in joining at whatever stage the simulation was as well as the participation aspect of it. Simulation in their initial imagination was without boundaries, fully flexible and not requiring “too much writing”. Although students working with organization are also required to submit written pieces based on their work and reflections of work experience.

I would also like to share my personal observation, as opposed to my initial thoughts that young generation has access to internet and are very tech savvy, was refuted - not all young people enrolled were regular users of social media (myspace; facebook; twitter). They are users of mobile phones and texting, yet using technology for educational purposes, where participation is within the confines of a course, requiring written submissions and responding to the situation as it arises (scenarios) poses complexity.

In the beginning, there were some technical glitches and accessibility issues, which sometimes are due to the simple issues on the whole system being slow in downloading a webpage or not been familiar with its interface. At times, the issues were able to be resolved quickly; while at other issues were not technical issues. As the simulation progressed and few students dropped out the rest of the group had no idea why a particular role is failing to respond to an invitation of an online chat at a specified time. Considering the small number of participants, few roles were kept on board for later withdrawal that corresponded with the simulation well. As the real life drama caused by floods and militancy was unfolding in Pakistan, students were closely monitoring the situation and using that information in a range of different ways, by improvising as well as innovating different aspects of their role.

Another minor issue that came up few times during the course of the simulation was keeping the communication between two roles separate. Students were advised in the initial two sessions (run in a lab via skype) to use sim mail for all communication related to simulation except when access to simulation is denied for a technical reason. Students were clearly instructed that simulation is replication of a real life situation therefore any private agenda or plans needs to be communicated through sim-mail in all circumstances, there were few incidents where students asked for advise on their private agenda using personal email. Despite a clear warning regarding possible implications resulting from mingling simulation with real life, students perhaps did not understood the potential repercussions.

As the students were required to write their role profile that involved researching the role they had picked, and then evaluate another role profile, they understood the role better but also had an understanding that simulation would require developing their skills in a different manner as independent learners, taking control of their learning. During a “Development Studies conference” at Melbourne in Sep. 2010 and later at a similar event in NZ in Dec. 2010, I had the opportunity to listen, discuss and ask questions about simulations as well as role-playing as tools to understand issues and debate policies, one of the scholars from Wellington University suggested that by having a place and roles from real life, one may potentially limit the possibilities of learning beyond the defined boundaries. In a role-playing situation, where students work through an imagined land, situation and roles, they can extend the range of skills gained. The discussion that followed was along the lines, that by choosing Pakistan and flood situation as well as the actual roles, we have not given students enough space to improvise. The role-playing that allows the students to develop an initial scenario; think of crucial teams and roles, has the potential to think outside the existing structure. Another scholars from a different university commented that, as a student she participated in a simulation offered by her university in collaboration with an international NGO. In hindsight, she believes that it was a futile effort, as unless you “go there” and “live there” you cannot understand the context, especially if it is from a different socio-economic and political context. That has led to some initial discussions with a (private sector) University in Pakistan, seeking collaboration with a similar program. The possibility of having a group of students from Pakistan or any other country, participating in the existing simulation may broaden the learning potential (but that remains a separate issue at this stage).

Student and Course Coordinator Perspectives on the Simulation

Student reflections gave an insight into their learning, this aspect of self-learning and discovering knowledge by taking control allowed them to expand their skills in a way that is not available in structured learning experiences in the class. Their informal discussions during the debriefing and conference meetings suggests that their learning experience was twofold, research aspect which was similar to other units they were enrolled and innovating being in-charge of a real situation, negotiating a role, keeping an eye on the unfolding of events in real life and virtual scenarios, making adjustments to policies and accommodating and shifting their own agendas.

Some of the student reflections below highlight the broad range of learning outcomes and skills they would have gained through work placement. Keeping in view some of the apprehensions of fellow scholars regarding the effectiveness of role playing in enhancing student's understanding about issues faced by communities in the under-developed world, I was very concerned for student's expectations as well as their ability to understand a situation unfamiliar to them. The involvement of students as well as the level of engagement during and after the simulation has surprised me. They have continued to be involved with the issues and are following the change of events in Pakistan - occasionally sending links to some articles they have read, asking about my research work in Pakistan and making themselves available to play a role in future simulation even after graduation.

Student learning is not confined within the timeframe of simulation or their study year at the university, but has expanded outside the requirements or credit points of a unit. They were actively involved in an awareness campaign and charity event organized on campus in collaboration with an international NGO and local community group.

Learning experience as illustrated by students gives an insight into their understanding and experience.

Admittedly, I commenced this unit with some skepticism on the simulations ability to replicate real life. I questioned my role and wondered what I could possibly learn from a position that I could never play in reality. However, as the game progressed, it became easier to disengage my personal views, and employ views that better suited to my role's objectives. At times I, caught myself making plans that would benefit what I perceived to be the role's view of the 'greater good'. The more I learned about the role, helped me to become empathetic to his objectives. Near completion of the simulation, I have an entirely positive view of the scenarios capability to increase understanding of real life dynamics in situations that we, in the Western world, often feel so removed from.

The interactions we had within the virtual world, along with the 'in character' tasks we were required to complete were the building blocks that aided my understanding of real dynamics. The complex relationships that occur across positions of high power were evident. This scenario gave me an insight into the country specific difficulties, extremist groups, immense security concerns, a history of nepotism and corruption made all players highly suspicious of each other - as I imagine the real political life there would be.

I think that the simulation was a really interesting and innovative way of learning how to deal with global social issues.

The issues listed on the login page of the simulation were very closed to the real issues that are occurring in Pakistan. When natural catastrophes occur, we as global citizens can chose to care or not to care about the victims, and most of the time even if we care about such events it is only for a short period of time.

In fact, the simulation gave us the opportunity to be in the field without really being there.

One particular aspect of 'real life' dynamics that surprised me was the tendency to shut off compassion to the objectives of other members, if they did not directly fit into our character own objectives. In retrospect, I can imagine that this would be a typical dynamic in the real world. Those in positions of such great power would need to compartmentalize and prioritize the objectives in order to make those objectives a reality. The simulation also helped me to understand better that at a work place one has to stick to the timeline and try to merge quality with quantity. Also that in a workplace environment colleagues need one another for undertaking some tasks as for instance the policy reviews that required me to review each others review.

#### Understanding the other perspective

simulation forced the players to see the world from the view of another person, which I believe is a vital quality for any effective employee.

It was interesting to see through the eyes of a .... being able to see through another perspective is very useful to develop skills such as anticipation and defense strategies.

Although the simulation was about floods disaster, I was able to understand that there are other underlying serious issues making the plight of Pakistan even worse. I understood the socio-political and economic dynamics related to governance, corruption and security that continue to hinder the development of the country.

Some of the comments made by students highlight the difference in real-life and virtual work placement, where one can bring workplace stress with them as opposed to a virtual world, where role-playing is seen as a separate role. It highlights an interesting aspect of human understanding of work place where personal and professional freely mix, while in virtual work, the disconnect between the roles is recognized. Having said that, student involvement with issues even after the conclusion of simulation and their engagement with the network established highlights the broad range of learning and unconscious acknowledgement that virtual world indeed spills over in the real-life.

The major difference in dynamic was the ability that we as players had to switch off. When the computer was off, so was the character. This ‘down time’ is something that the real life does not have.

The simulation was different from the real world’s dynamics to the extent that there was not daily face-to-face contact and that the articles produced were not going to be produced for the public in general but, only for those who made part of the simulation. Also, that the policies produced where not going to be put in to action or produce any changes to Pakistan’s political situation.

These comments suggest that in their understanding, in real life all policy documents are widely circulated and used while the all the hard work in virtual life fails to make it to the real world. Though it would be premature to suggest anything at this stage, however such comments have been taken into consideration that may eventuate into some real life value.

As pointed out by scholars managing “role playing” with an imagined scenario, there are certain limitations which we were neither conscious of nor took into account that real life situation and existing templates to write roles, agendas, and policy paper may limit the possibilities of innovating.

The simulation was useful for understanding the real dynamics of Pakistan in relation to the issues that were listed on the login page to the simulation to the extent that it gave me the highlights and then lead me to go on to investigating further and finding out the complexities of the issues outlined. When the issues listed were read it helped me to keep focus and not to derail on to issues that were not relevant in other words, it was used as a guideline or point of reference for producing articles and undertaking the tasks that were assigned to me.

For instance, the issues that were put forward at the beginning of scenario II that gave a summary of how Pakistan was going to address the issues that were unfolding as a result of the floods gave me a hint about what to research for and where to research for it like start by reading articles that were produced by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

At the same time, I would hesitate to suggest these are limitations jeopardizing innovation. While working for an organization, community group or public sector, one has to work within a framework; there are timelines; teams; competing agendas & personalities and the outcomes are also set and measured. Similarly in virtual world these students learnt to deal with competing roles, agendas and worked within a timeframe producing policy documents and conference paper. Dismissing this learning experience as limiting would be an unfair comment considering their active involvement and engagement with their research over 14 weeks.

As coordinator, I was meeting with individual students face to face and they would ask various questions, though ideally we were all to interact in virtual world. Despite the fact that coordinator is a facilitator and not a teacher in traditional sense, still students felt the need to share in informal faces to face settings. Interestingly they did not disclose their virtual identity to



each other even during the two face-to-face meetings – South Asian Division AusAid and UNIFEM Australia. The nature of relationship had not changed despite the sole virtual existence of these roles, the presence of some “ghost roles” left intact deliberately was great help as these were considered “not played well”.

## Discussion

To put the issue in perspective we need to remember that this was a pilot and we did not have a clear view how it would turn out. Surprisingly it turned out much better than we expected despite the difficulties.

The learning curve for coordinators...

I feel that the duration of simulation has been an issue since students are required/expected to participate daily, similarly student comments about the workload and number of assessment pieces would need to be revisited before the next round of simulation is offered.

## Conclusion

We intend to run this simulation again next semester.

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