

SIMULATION GUIDELINES

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ROLEPLAY SIMULATIONS

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is a product of an Erasmus+ co-funded training course, where we explored roleplay and theatre methods in the context of simulations. The initial part of the training program focused on acting and drama methods, and how to use them in working with young people. We then went on to try out ready made simulations, including some that had been made on previous Erasmus+ projects. In the final stages of the training we developed our own simulations incorporating all those techniques we had learned. The guide documents what we gained from this process, so that others may learn from our experiences.

Following here are then some tips and tricks on how to create good simulations and avoid pitfalls and common mistakes. Towards the end you will find some descriptions of the simulations we ourselves created, with links to some videos illustrating some of the points made in the guide.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A ROLEPLAY SIMULATION?

For many people, the word “simulation” brings to mind training programs used by pilots, doctors and nurses, to prepare for the real thing. But roleplay simulations are different, because they involve actively stepping into someone else's shoes and gaining understanding through that experience. Roleplay simulations are likewise similar to LARP's (Live Action Role Plays), but in general lean more toward present day, real-world scenarios and anticipate more specific problem solving and learning outcomes.

The most well known example of a roleplay simulation is perhaps the "Model United Nations". Over a period of several days, participants in a Model UN course remain in their chosen/assigned role, even outside of sessions. In this way they gain first hand experience of decision-making processes, as well as gain an understanding of the role of UN representatives and the challenges they face. In more recent times, EU specific “models” have also arisen, and there now exists a great variation held annually or on a smaller scale around the world.

LEARNING GOALS & OUTCOMES



KEEPING YOUR EYE ON THE BALL

A simulation can be one of the most engaging and immersive methods to use in youth work. It can get people to open up and come to deep realizations about themselves and others in the strongest possible ways. But at the same time simulations are very demanding, and a lot of thought needs to be put into their design and execution.

When developing a simulation, there is a danger that you can end up spending too much time on creating a clever story or perfecting ingenious twists and turns that you want to impress your participants with. These are important parts to be sure, but when using simulations in non-formal learning, where you want to highlight important social issues, they come in second after establishing clear learning goals.

The learning goal of a simulation can be anything you choose. But when you've finally chosen it, it is important that you stick with it. If your idea is to use the simulation to highlight for example inequality, you have to follow through on that point until the end, not suddenly shift focus along the way.

In reality, when designing a simulation you will always experience a back and forth between focusing on story and purpose. Therefore you should regularly ask yourself during the process:

- What is it that I want my participants to learn from this activity?
- Is it really what I am working towards?
- Is there a simpler and more effective way to reach that learning outcome, than what I am currently doing?



"I didn't understand clearly the social backgrounds of the students, and therefore could not see the examples of inequality very well. It seemed to me like the simulation was more about learning to negotiate, than to highlight inequality."

Participant comment on the simulation High Conflict School

STRUCTURE AND FRAMEWORK



HOW WILL YOUR SIMULATION PLAY OUT

Before you begin working too detailed on the content of your simulation, determine what kind of structure you want to work from. Is it going to be an elimination structure, where the participants are eliminated over a series of rounds? Will it consist of a series of events, where the participants are prompted to take certain actions? Will you be repeating a setting multiple times to either get new information or a new outcome? It is important to figure this out early on and consider the pros and cons, before thinking about building a great story.

Besides structure it is also important to develop the framework of the simulation. What characters are needed? what are their functions? And how do they interact with each other?

No matter what you choose, there will be pros and cons. Choosing an elimination-type structure would for example have the following:

Pros:

- Good for promoting social issues
- Easy to manage

Cons:

- Hard to keep the eliminated characters entertained.
- Can be tricky to get the learning outcome across

Understand your structure, flow and characters and it will be much easier to fit in a story that makes sense. Same goes for topics. If you have a good structure, flow and characteristics, you can almost fit any topic to it.



“It is problematic when you get eliminated early on in the simulation, as you can't participate anymore, and it therefore gets boring. The idea is great, but something else needs to happen for the eliminated characters”

Comment after the simulation Flight 677 LA-Bangkok

STORY AND CHARACTERS

HOW REALISTIC SHOULD THE STORY BE

While the structure exists in order to give a simulation flow, the story is important for keeping the participants engaged. The topic has to be relevant, engrossing, and give participants an incentive to getting into their character. A story can be told in many ways, but one thing we learned is that imitating reality too much can actually be detrimental to the learning process. This is because people may have biases and stereotypes that can disrupt and stand in the way of a productive interaction and lead to clashes of identity.

Creating a more metaphorical story and characters, while dealing with the same "mechanisms" as in real life, can then work better. You could for example go with a sci-fi or fantasy theme. But even if you choose a more metaphoric story and character approach, a simulation still needs to have a certain inherent logic. Or at the very least resonate with participants' expectations about certain things. Try therefore to eliminate as much doubt in the story as possible, in order to create a flow and ensure that "the magic circle" stays intact.



"The idea that the jury is influenced by news outlets in real time during a murder trial, is not something we would expect in real life, as a jury is isolated from the news. This made it hard for me to completely follow the flow of the simulation"

Comment after the simulation The Murder Of Alice Blunt

CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPROACH

If the learning outcome is about self exploration, understanding, or being exposed to different perspectives - or if you have to play a role that is not yourself - setting the scene in a place that does not replicate what participants know from real life is preferred.

But if the learning outcome is not about self exploration, but more about understanding an existing system or process, such as takes place with the Model UN type simulation, a realistically detailed story and characters is the way to go.

Whichever direction you choose, remember that a simulation will never include all elements of a given real life situation, and therefore always in a sense be an abstract exercise

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

'The Magic Circle' is a term used in relation to games, to describe the collective state that is created where the rules of the real world become suspended and one becomes absorbed in the play setting. It can be applied to simulations as well, since it is important for the flow of things that participants can suspend their disbelief when engaging in the activity.

ROLES

In relation to the story it is also important to think about what roles you want the participants to take on. It has to relate to the learning outcomes the participants are working with. During our training course, we experienced two ways of creating roles: **Individual Roles and Group Roles**

INDIVIDUAL ROLES

Individual roles mean that every participant has a unique role that is specified for them. If you want the participants to take on individual roles, it is important that they fit in some relation to the other characters. This is hard, as you will have to do a very elaborate plot to get all participants to be involved in the simulation. The strength of individual roles are, that everyone acts according to personal preference, and therefore might be able to better step into someone else's shoes, and understand things from a different perspective.

Remember, you can always adapt certain roles or characters to fit the group you are currently working with, as long as it doesn't detract from the simulation exercise.



GROUP ROLES

In a group role, participants act according to cues in different groups. Group roles have different dynamics than if you have individual roles, as the participants now will have to negotiate to come to an understanding of who they are.

This creates many possibilities for the creators of the simulation, as you can aim for different dynamics according to what learning outcomes you want the participants to take away. In terms of creating a structure for the simulation, it also takes less work, and give you less groups to worry about.



“It felt very real being part of a news station and it was interesting getting inputs from the others and negotiating how we should portrait ourselves”

Comment after the simulation The Murder Of Alice Blunt

FURTHER DETAILS



WORKING WITH PROPS

Props and support devices can have a small or big impact on a simulation. A simulation doesn't necessarily need props, but the idea of a simulation is to get into a different world or atmosphere. Therefore, props can help in setting the scene and make it easier to get into the story. Through the training course we got familiar with different ways of using props, as well as some of the tips and tricks that can be useful, when you think about the simulation at hand.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO HELP SET THE SCENE

While excessive use of technology can have a distracting effect from the acting flow, it can certainly also help create an atmosphere that participants can become absorbed by. As a part of one simulation in our training course, the facilitator group used the sound of water, as the participants were waking up on a deserted island. This really helped the participants get into the scene, and the roles they were playing.



DON'T OVERCOMPLICATE THINGS !

Unless you are thinking about making a hugely complex simulation, don't overcomplicate the amount and uniqueness of the props and assistant devices you choose to use. Think about the things you have around you, and see if any of them can be used as a setting for your scene. In one of our simulations a table was used for PA meetings, simulating the classroom they were having it in, houses were symbolized by tables and a simple ring by a phone symbolized the ring of a bell. This whole setting was easily set up, and could easily be replaced by other things. But at the same time it created a great atmosphere, where the participants could live themselves into the scene.

OUR OWN SIMULATIONS

THE MURDER OF ALICE BLUNT

In The Murder of Alice Blunt, news stations representing different biases broadcast details of a murder case to a jury. In the end the jury has to make a collective decision about whether the main suspect in the murder is guilty or not. The simulation is inspired from a lot of the public opinion fallout that have been around crime cases in recent years and how the media can affect our judgement on suspects. Overall it is also an exercise in media literacy and how to spot the biases and interests behind media outlets.

See also connected video [here](#)



BOEING 677, LA-BANGKOK

Boeing 677 LA-Bangkok is a simulation where participants are eliminated over a series of events, after their plane has crashed on a deserted island. Each participant is given a specific character and have to negotiate among each other who is the most expendable. The main aim of the simulation is to discover how the social status and identities define the behavior of people - especially in times of crisis, where decisions based on values like empathy, humanity and team spirit become much harder to make.

See also connected video [here](#)



HIGH CONFLICT SCHOOL

High Conflict School highlights the various socio-economic interests that lay behind decisions made on high school board meetings, teacher meetings etc. During the activity, participants take the role of various social actors and groups, and attempt to simulate various negotiation processes related to high school life. Gradually it is revealed how status and influence can play into decisions that are made, and how certain voices can be silenced without us even being aware of it. It forces the participant to reflect on their role in society and how structural inequalities can be identified and dealt with.

See also connected video [here](#)



OUR OWN SIMULATIONS

GENDER SWITCH

This simulation is tightly connected to general theater performances. The idea is to make men understand some of the issues women are dealing with in everyday life, and vice versa. This is done through different scenarios where gender roles are switched in various ways.

For each scenario the setting and general roles are given, but the different groups then have to act the last part of the scene. This can ultimately be used to better understanding and lead to a discussion of gender roles, stereotypes and much more.

See also connected video [here](#)



CHOOSE ME

This simulation deals with how religious beliefs need to be negotiated to be able to co-exist in more tightly framed situations. Each participant is given a cue card with a character/certain way to behave and from here the participants have to find a partner that they want to travel to a new planet with. After the couples reach the new planet, they have to set up rulesets, by negotiating among them. This simulation deals with the many encounters there are between religious beliefs and values and how a society can deal with this to make it possible for all to live a good life.

See also connected video [here](#)



SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Bernard L. Bray & Larry W. Chappell - *Civic Theater for Civic Education*
- Cecily O' Neill & Adam Lambert - *Drama Structures*
- Donald C. Thatcher - *Promoting Learning Through Games And Simulations*
- Rod Dacombe And Elizabeth Morrow - *Developing Immersive Simulations*
- United States Institute of Peace (USIP) - *Guide To Using Simulations*
- YouthPeer - *Theatre-Based Techniques for Youth Peer Education: A Training Manual*

THANKS TO EVERYONE INVOLVED!

