Empathy/insight simulations

Empathy and insight, like complex language and communication skills, are uniquely human traits. The circumstances of modern life, however, including the fast pace and competing demands, are not conducive to the development of sensitivity and empathy.

Webster’s Dictionary defines empathy as ‘the capacity for participation in another’s feelings’. The difficulties involved in acquiring empathy are illustrated in the 1991 Hollywood film, The Doctor, starring William Hurt. The film is based on the real-life story of a doctor who changed his attitudes toward patients after suffering a life-threatening illness and experiencing the reactions of the health-care system as a patient.

Simulations considered to be empathy/insight simulations place participants in situations in which they experience the same emotions as those experienced by a particular individual or reference group. An example is Me The Slow Learner in which teachers and prospective teachers experience the same continuous failures and frustrations as learning-disabled students.

OVERVIEW

In the early years of development, empathy and insight were viewed as typical expectations for many simulations. Thus, the issue of simulation characteristics that specifically contribute to the development of empathy is a relatively new one in simulation design.

Early developments

In July 1977, seven broad communication purposes for ‘gaming/simulations’ were identified at a conference on Global Interactions and Gaming/Simulations held in Nijmagen, the Netherlands. The first purpose was: ‘(A) Motivation/sensitivity — to help participants develop empathy by experiencing the roles of those with value orientations and constraints different from their own’ (Hasell, 1980, p 287).

The implicit assumption in many early exercises was that empathy could be fostered by placing a participant in a different role in an appropriate context. Some exercises also incorporated gaming elements into the structure. For example, Ghetto is described as a simulation ‘designed to sensitize its players to the emotional, physical and social world the
disadvantaged inhabit’ (Edwards, 1980, p 343). Individuals assumed the names and ages of different ghetto residents and attempted to improve their lives by investing hours (poker chips) in various activities and collecting as many reward points as possible. Chance events that negated ‘investments’ and reduced reward points were expected to produce frustration in the players similar to the frustrations experienced by the disadvantaged. However, the exercise (both the board and computerized versions) is a game. In the computerized form, Ghetto is a variable-assignment exercise like Oregon Trail in which the outcomes are dominated by random events.

A different approach to the development of empathy/insight was taken by Shirts (1969) in Starpower. Participants in the simulation believe that they are playing a game that involves trading chips of different values. They are told that the three individuals with the highest scores at the end of trading will be the winners.

After one round of trading, participants with the highest scores are placed in a group called the Squares. The middle third of the scorers form a group called the Circles and the lowest third are the Triangles. A second round of trading then takes place. However, events in the exercise depend on the Squares emerging from the second round as the high scorers. Unknown to the players, the game is structured so that the Squares are the high scorers for the second round.

At this point, the director gives the Squares the privilege of making all the rules for the game because ostensibly they have worked so hard. The Circles and Triangles may suggest rules by submitting them in writing to the Squares. Also, the Squares may be quietly told that they can make rules such as all chips should be distributed equally, Circles and Triangles must trade with a Square even if they don’t want to and so on.

The likely outcome is that the Squares make stringent rules that protect their status. Circles and Triangles express their frustration in any of several ways - protesting, organizing against the Squares, refusing to play and so on. The director stops the exercise when the Squares have formulated rules so one-sided that the Circles and Triangles turn against the Squares. In other words, the exercise is stopped when the Squares have abused their power and the Circles and Triangles either give up or defy the Squares.

Until the final minutes, participants believe that they are playing a game. However, the ‘game’ activities are set up in order to establish a threethiered situation in which the ‘rich get richer’. The circumstances are orchestrated to provide a situation in which the Squares are given license to make rules that benefit their group.

Starpower is an ingenious exercise in that conflict between the groups is established. However, the exercise contains a design flaw that generates undesirable effects when implemented. This problem is discussed in the section on design issues.
Major characteristics

The key characteristic of empathy/insight simulations is that participants are placed in an unpleasant, confusing or humiliating situation and they are powerless to change the circumstances. In *Me The Slow Learner*, for example, participants are unable to perform successfully on a series of classroom tasks that are nearly impossible because of several situational circumstances. Although participants exert great effort, they are unable to be successful.

Empathy/insight simulations are similar to single-agenda simulations in that participants are placed in situations that essentially trap them. However, the key difference lies in the nature of the constraints that trap the participants. In the single-agenda simulation, participants are trapped by their own assumptions and behaviors. In other words, given enough time, participants can escape from or mitigate the situation by changing their behavior. In *The Numbers Game*, for example, participants eventually settle down and accomplish the task. In *Talking Rocks*, the Eagle people, after some trial and error, begin to develop picture messages for the other groups.

In contrast, in the empathy/insight simulation, participants are trapped by constraints over which they have no control. Thus, there is no escape. The near-impossible tasks set for the ‘learning-disabled students’ in *Me The Slow Learner*, for example, are not accomplished by exerting greater effort or by changing strategies.

The effect of this design feature is that, typically, empathy/insight simulations are more intense experiences than other simulations. The inability of the participants to influence their circumstances contributes to their increased frustration and, in some cases, rebellion.

In other words, simulations developed to foster empathy are inherently the most emotion-laden of the social-process simulations. The greater the intensity of the frustration or shock, the greater the opportunity for reflection and rethinking. However, extreme frustration is likely to be accompanied by other negative emotions - anger, loss of self-esteem and resentment. The potential for setting in motion strong negative feelings that may not be dissipated easily or may be channeled later into inappropriate behaviors implies that both the design and implementation of empathy/insight simulations should be undertaken with care. More importantly, such simulations should not be used with children.

Another key characteristic of empathy simulations is that they are only the first step in the development of empathy and insight. The emotions generated in the simulations must be explored and then channeled in positive directions. In other words, participant reactions in the simulation serve only as the impetus for growth and development.

MAJOR DESIGN ISSUES

Several issues are important in the development of empathy simulations.
Included are a) basic requirements; b) the nature of the basic situation; c) the nature of participant reactions; d) post-simulation activities; and e) the cost/benefit ratio.

**Basic requirements**

Empathy/insight simulations place participants in frustrating or confusing situations that their efforts are powerless to change. The intention is for the participants to experience the particular frustrations and/or negative emotions felt by a particular individual or group in society as a first step in developing new ways of thinking about certain events and situations.

One example is the exercise devised by a high school teacher of a marriage and family course for high school students. She believed it was important for teenagers to experience the continuing and ever-present responsibility of parenthood. The key was to identify an ongoing situation in which the students could experience the restriction on freedom and the attentiveness that parenthood requires.

An exercise was devised in which the ‘parents’ must care for a ‘baby’ over a two- to three-week period. They were never to leave the ‘baby’ unless a responsible sitter could be found; otherwise, one or the other of the couple was required to stay with the baby or take it with them. The ‘baby’ was a 10-pound sack of flour. The parents could also not be careless with baby, dropping it or otherwise damaging it in transport, because they then lost the child and could not succeed in the exercise. The ‘parents’ in this exercise experience reality of function in that they encounter the essence of parenthood -- that of an ever-present responsibility that cannot be ignored.

The design of empathy/insight simulations should be consistent with two basic requirements. First, participants should not be misled about the nature of the situation nor tricked in any way into executing behaviors that are later criticized. Second, like other simulations, empathy/insight simulations are not games and care should be taken that participants do not view them as games.

**Starpower**, however, violates both requirements. First, participants are told they are participating in a game and that the three highest scores will win. When given an opportunity to make the rules, the Squares do so in a way that ensures that three of their group will be the winners. There is no difference between this behavior and the behavior of bankrupting one’s friends in *Monopoly*. Both actions are entirely legitimate in a game situation.

At the point that the Circles and Triangles rebel or otherwise refuse to cooperate with the stringent rules adopted by the Squares, the game is halted by the director. The post-simulation discussion then focuses on the behavior of the Squares and the reactions of the Circles and Triangles. However, the behavior of the Squares is extrapolated into the real world as though the Squares were not playing a game. They have, in other words, been tricked. In fact, the Director’s Instructions includes the statement that the Squares sometimes have difficulty in admitting that
they abused their power (Shirts, 1969 p 18). They are quite correct -- their behavior was appropriate for the game they believed they were playing.

*Director's Instructions* also describes the concepts that typically emerge from the post-simulation discussion. Two of the concepts are ‘1. Each of us may be more vulnerable to the temptation to abuse power than we realize’ (p 18) and ‘2. To change behavior, it may be necessary to change the system in which that behavior occurs’ (p 19). Other concepts are that individuals who feel powerless are not likely to participate in an endeavor; rules that lack legitimacy are not obeyed; the concept of ‘fairness’ is viewed differently by those in power and others; and those who are promoted tend not to remember people they left behind (pp 20-21).

In other words, participants have been asked to judge the Squares’ game behavior as though it were real-world behavior. Participants are not sophisticated enough to understand the differences between games and simulations and thus do not question the transfer.

A more serious problem, however, is that issues of trust may be raised: Susan (a Triangle) may wonder if Diane (a Square) is entirely trustworthy. Hard feelings generated by the exercise may persist into the educational or work setting.

Therefore, selection of an empathy/insight simulation should be based, in part, on congruence with the two basic requirements. They ensure the integrity of behavior when participants conscientiously carry out their functions.

**Nature of the basic situation**

The tasks and context developed for empathy simulations must meet three important criteria identified by Thatcher (1983). First and foremost, the situation must prevent the participant from escaping. The term ‘escape’, however, does not refer to physical exit. Instead, it refers to the mental and/or emotional withdrawal that occurs when one comes out of a role without actually leaving the activity.

In other words, the participants must ‘not be able to “come out” of session in any way unless they actually opt out by leaving the room alternatively, refuse overtly or covertly to participate in the activity’ (Thatcher, 1983, p 14). Therefore, in order to prevent mental emotional withdrawal, participants are not assigned roles as individuals with whom they are to establish empathy. If roles assigned in which participants role-play mental or physical handicapped’ they can ‘come out’ of the activity fairly easily.

Another reason for not assigning roles as disadvantaged students that participants lack the essential understandings and knowledge function in the role. Although participants may conscientiously attempt to behave as learning-disabled children or inner-city home teenagers, the activity is a play-acting experience for the participants. Such a situation does not facilitate learning and also may lead superficial views and actions. In other words, although participants may expend great effort attempting to
think and react like underprivileged children or minority inner-city teenagers the experience la reality of function for them.

Therefore, empathy/insight simulations place participants, as group, into a context that imposes a particular set of aversive contingencies. The circumstances are such that participants are to change them. Thus, they can only respond to the situation in which they find themselves and their coping mechanisms are taxed by experience. In other words, the contingencies of reinforcement altered so that participant behaviors are ineffective.

Participants in *Me The Slow Learner* are learning-disabled children who are faced with problems to solve. However, they are first fitted with devices that produce some disability such as glasses that produce tunnel vision or color blindness and impediments to hearing physical movement. In addition, insufficient time and the unclear presentation of the tasks combine with the participant’s disability make the problems impossible. Since individuals are not permitted talk to each other during the classroom ‘activities’, they have no choice but to keep trying the tasks or to sit silently waiting for the ordeal end.

The second important characteristic is that the developing situation should be cumulative (Thatcher, 1983). For example, the ‘parents caring for the flour sack ‘baby’ experience continued frustration as early days of their ‘parenthood’ stretches into weeks.

The cumulative experience for participants in *Me The Slow Learner* is that of continuing failure on six problem-solving tasks. Moreover, the sense of frustration is intensified by the participants’ knowledge that the activities could be completed given greater clarity in the tasks or if the participant did not have a disability (Thatcher, 1983, p 15).

Third, the simulation must present ‘in a condensed and intensified form, many of the major elements of the complex system which in actuality is extended over months and often years’ [Thatcher, 1983, p 15]. *Me The Slow Learner* addresses this requirement in three ways. In addition to experiencing specific disadvantages, participants are subjected to derogatory comments by their ‘teachers’ [project staff) and public scoring of their efforts which reinforce the sense of failure. These events represent the reactions of the world at large to disabled people that occur in the form of derogatory comments, innuendos or facial reactions (Thatcher, 1983, p 15).

Furthermore, some of the tasks have been re-designed to appear as they would to learning-disabled children. Letters and words are reversed and parts of words are omitted in the technical passage that the participants are to read. Similarly, the mathematics task uses unfamiliar terms which add to the complexity of the problem (Thatcher, 1983).

In addition to the design characteristics identified by Thatcher (1983), exercises should not be designed that set groups against each other. One shortcoming of *Starpower* is this very feature. As already stated, one problem is that the feelings of the Circles and Triangles may carry over to future interactions. That is, Circles and Triangles may feel betrayed by a
friend who was a Square. If strong negative effects are to be experienced, the simulation should be designed so that all participants experience them.

**Nature of participant reactions**

Participant reactions occur at two stages in the administration of an empathy simulation. The first is during the exercise itself and the second may occur from one day to several weeks after the experience.

Reactions by participants to the aversive circumstances in empathy simulations vary on at least three dimensions. They are a) the degree of frustration; b) the complexity of the emotional reaction; and c) the target of participant emotions.

The extent of the frustration may range from low to high and the level may vary with different participants in the same simulation. Some of the teenage girls caring for the flour sack ‘babies’ accommodated fairly well to the new responsibility, while others experienced high levels of frustration.

In contrast, *Me The Slow Learner* is designed specifically to produce high frustration levels in all participants. Further, the extent of the difficulties faced by the participants interacts with their background to produce a complex matrix of emotions - anger, hostility, lack of motivation and, in some participants, withdrawal.

The teachers and prospective teachers who take part in the simulation are academically-able individuals who may not have experienced serious difficulties in learning. They are accustomed to achieving and the awareness that a clear task presentation or removal of their disability would make achievement possible contributes to their negative emotions. They also are somewhat shocked that they cannot overcome the circumstances to accomplish the otherwise simple tasks. In other words, their accepted beliefs about themselves as competent and able to overcome obstacles through hard work is contradicted by their incompetence in the simulation. The sense of shock generated by this situation is essential, according to Thatcher (1983), because it is the basis of rethinking that leads to empathy

Simulation designers and administrators should also be alert to the direction of the participants’ emotional reactions. That is, participants may become angry with themselves and/or suffer temporary loss of self-esteem or they may vent their frustrations on other participants or the simulation directors. The teenage ‘parents’, for example, sometimes argued about whose turn it was to care for the ‘baby’, and some blamed each other for not succeeding in the exercise.

In contrast, the simulation directors for *Me The Slow Learner* are the source of some of the participants’ difficulties. They nag the ‘learning disabled students’ and publicly attach low marks to their work. During at least two administrations, the directors experienced the feeling of losing control of the class. This feeling was related to the loss of discipline and the continued deterioration of the participants’ behavior (Thatcher, 1983).
It is important to recognize that these reactions are not unusual and administrators should be prepared to address them in post-simulation activities.

**Post-simulation activities**

The simulation experience is only one phase in student learning. Subsequent activities are required to build on the processes set in motion during the simulation.

Empathy/insight simulations are intense experiences. Typically, participants are placed in a situation in which their accepted beliefs about themselves are contradicted. In *Me The Slow Learner*, participants' views of themselves as competent individuals who can overcome obstacles through hard work and extra effort are not true in the simulation. They experience the phenomenon referred to by Piaget (1972) as cognitive conflict or disequilibrium. That is, they are faced with two contradictory views of themselves -- competence that overcomes obstacles and incompetence in the face of difficulties.

Therefore, participants should not be expected to articulate the depth of their feelings immediately after the experience. Inservice teachers who were participants in *Me The Slow Learner*, for example, seemed to require several weeks to process the full impact of the simulation (Thatcher, 1983). Therefore, several activities should be planned to provide opportunities for the participants to explore their reactions, the nature of the context and/or system that precipitated those reactions and the implications.

In simulations that generate a range of intense emotions, a short informal break without the game administrators should be scheduled between the end of the simulation and the first post-simulation discussion (Thatcher and Robinson, 1990). This brief coffee break allows the participants to release their pent-up frustration, some of which may be felt toward the administrators.

Four specific activities are suggested by Thatcher and Robinson (1990, p 266) for a post-simulation discussion. First, participants complete a questionnaire that focuses each participant's memory of the experience. Second, the game administrator invites participants to make immediate comments. This activity permits strong reactions or points to be released by the participants.

Third, the discussion proceeds to a more orderly examination of the participants' reactions. The significance of different kinds of behavior during the simulation, such as giggling and aggression, are also explored. Finally, the discussion broadens to include the implications of the experience.

Partly as the result of the intensity of the reactions in the simulation, participants are likely to continue to reflect and to develop new ideas in the weeks after the simulation. Therefore, an instructor—student conference should be scheduled a week or two after the simulation as
well as a second group discussion a few weeks later.

The intention of the empathy/insight simulation is to influence participants’
decision-making in some way. Therefore, activities should also be
implemented in which similar and/or related situations, and possible
actions and/or decisions of the participants for countering similar negative
situations, may be examined.

Other planned discussions following *Me The Slow Learner*, for example,
may include topics such as the different ways that low achievers are
sometimes treated in the classroom and the differences between
proactive and reactive teachers. Specifically, low achievers are
sometimes seated farther from the teacher and/or in groups, less work is
expected of them and less attention is paid to them. Included are less eye
contact, fewer opportunities to respond to teacher questions, less time to
answer questions and so on (Good, 1980, p 88). These teachers are
referred to by Good as ‘reactive’ because they overreact to students
perceived as low achievers. In contrast, proactive teachers build
classroom structures in which the needs of low achievers can be met
without ignoring the needs of other students.

Subsequent class discussions can then address ways that the teachers
can structure their classrooms to provide for multiple learning needs. In
this way, the growth experiences set in motion by the simulation begin to
be developed.

**Cost/benefit ratio**

Empathy/insight simulations are risk-taking exercises in that they place
participants in situations that generate negative reactions. Therefore, both
the design and implementation should be undertaken from the
perspective of a clear rationale for subjecting participants to an aversive
experience.

In other words, the primary question is, ‘Is the pay-off worth the negative
effect experienced by the participants?’ If the negative effect is relatively
mild and the exercise makes a point that is important in their lives, the
answer is likely to be in the affirmative. An example is the teenage
‘parents’ caring for their flour-sack ‘babies’. Teenage pregnancy is a
growing problem in the United States. To the extent that simulations can
counter the naive belief that having a baby is like having a doll that
breathes, they may be a step in addressing the problem.

Simulations that produce intense and complex emotional reactions, such
as loss of self-esteem and/or anger that may be directed to any of a
number of individuals, should not be used in the classroom or work
setting unless two criteria are met. First, is the anticipated empathy that is
to be developed related to key decisions in participants’ lives that should
be addressed or understood in new ways? In other words, does the
exercise represent a possible pivotal point in the decision-making
activities of the participants?

For example, *Starpower* was developed to demonstrate the abuses of
power. Setting aside for the moment the design flaws within the exercise, what post-simulation decisions are to be undertaken in a different way as a result of participation in the exercise? Are the participants to become more vigilant citizens in monitoring their government officials for the abuse of power? Or are they to understand the psychological dynamics of power so as to recognize its early stages? Or are they to experience the effects of discrimination so that they can call this problem to the attention of government agencies and others? In other words, the post-simulation decision-making that the new insight is expected to influence is not clear.

The second criterion that should be met is to determine if the simulation is the most effective mechanism by which the intended change in thinking may be met. Considering each of the possible purposes for Starpower in turn, can other experiences influence the subsequent behavior of the participants?

Becoming a more vigilant citizen, for example, may be accomplished by discussing ways that government fails to be regulated, analyzing contemporary examples of corruption that have been discovered and writing letters to elected representatives and other follow-up activities. Similarly, examining in detail the careers of public servants who became mesmerized by power is appropriate for the second purpose. Finally, experiencing the effects of discrimination calls for a different kind of interactive exercise.

Me The Slow Learner, in contrast, was developed for a specific purpose and was based on the experiences of a particular group of teachers. That is, the teachers who were most successful with less-able pupils had experienced difficulty at some point in their own schooling (Thatcher and Robinson, 1990, p 264). In overcoming the difficulty they had acquired practical insight into the problems and feelings associated with learning difficulties.

The specifications for the simulation, therefore, were that teachers who do not have obvious learning problems should experience the difficulties of learning—disabled pupils as a first step in learning to work with and manage these children (Thatcher & Robinson, 1990, p 265).

Thus, the criterion that an empathy simulation should be related to key decisions in the participants’ lives is met. The second criterion is also met. The objective is to generate the feelings, reactions and anxieties that are experienced by less-able children in the school environment. Thus, a ‘walk in my shoes’ exercise is needed. However, the benefits of the simulation are realized only in the growth experiences developed in the post-simulation activities.

In summary, empathy/insight simulations are powerful exercises that, properly designed and implemented, can fulfill a unique purpose in the educational setting.

EVALUATING EMPATHY/INSIGHT SIMULATIONS

Step 1: Analyze the nature of the basic situation.
• Are participants placed in a situation from which they cannot escape?
• Is the situation credible for the intended participants?
• Does the situation avoid tricking the participants in any way?
• Does the exercise avoid assigning roles for which participants lack relevant experience?

Step 2: Determine the intensity of the experience.
• What are the specific components of the simulation that generate negative reactions?
• Is the simulation likely to generate mild frustration or intensely negative emotions?
• Is the experience likely to generate temporary loss of self-esteem?
• Does the simulation present the elements of a complex system in a condensed and intensified form?
• Are the effects of the experience likely to be cumulative?

Step 3: Review the post-simulation activities.
• Do the activities include two group processing sessions a few weeks apart?
• Is at least one instructor—student conference scheduled?
• What homework assignments and class activities are developed to build on the simulation experience?
• Do the scheduled activities contribute to a sense of empathy?

Step 4: Determine the cost/benefit ratio.
• Is the empathy that is expected related to decisions in participants’ lives?
• Can the expected empathy be fostered in other ways?

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