Empathy-Insight Simulations

Lecture 6

March 2, 2008  OTED 750, Lec 7, Empathy-Insight Simulations

Objectives

- Explain the purpose of empathy-Insight simulations.
- Identify the design considerations of an empathy-Insight simulation.

Empathy

- One's ability to recognize, perceive and feel directly the emotion of another.
- The ability to "put oneself into another's shoes", or to in some way experience the outlook or emotions of another being within oneself, a sort of emotional resonance.
Empathy involves **understanding the emotions** of other people.

Emotions are taken to be centrally characterized by **bodily feelings**, then grasping the bodily feelings of another will be central to empathy.

The basic capacity to recognize emotions is probably **innate** and may be achieved unconsciously... Yet it can be trained, and achieved with various degrees of intensity or accuracy.

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**Empathy and Insight**

- **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.

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**Empathy-Insight Simulations**

- 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.
Major Characteristics

- The key characteristic of empathy/insight simulations is that participants are placed in an unpleasant, confusing or humiliating situations and they are powerless to change the circumstances.

- The key difference for empathy-insight sims 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. Given enough time, they can escape from or mitigate the situation by changing their behavior.
  - Not so in a empathy-insight sim. Whatever they do, whatever action taken, they still are caught in the “web.”

The Effect

- The effect of this design feature is that, typically, empathy/insight sims 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.
- The greater the intensity of the frustration or shock, the greater opportunity for reflection and rethinking.
However, extreme frustration is likely to be accompanied by other negative emotions - anger, a loss of self-esteem and resentment.

- There is potential for setting into motion strong negative feelings that may not be dissipated easily or may be channeled later into inappropriate behaviors.

- Both the design and implementation of empathy/insight simulations should be undertaken with care. More importantly, such simulations should not be used with children.

The Empathy-Insight Simulation is only the First Step

- Emotions generated in the simulations must be explored and channeled in positive directions.

- The participants’ reactions in the simulation serve only as the impetus for growth and development.

Major Design Issues -- Basic Requirements

- Empathy/insight simulations place participants in frustrating or confusing situations that their efforts are powerless to change.

- The intention is for 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.
Basic Requirements (Cont.)

- Participants should not be misled about the nature of the situation nor tricked in any way into executing behaviors that are later criticized.
- Like other simulations, the empathy /insight simulation is not a game and care should be taken that participants do not view them as games.

Nature of the basic situation

- First and foremost, the situation must prevent the participant from escaping.
  - The participants must not be able to “come out” of a session in any way unless they actually opt out by leaving the room or refuse overtly or covertly to participate in the activity.

- Participants are not usually 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 is that participants usually lack the essential understandings and knowledge function in a particular role.
The second important characteristic is that the developing situation should be cumulative. Participants’ frustration is intensified by the knowledge that the activities could be completed if they only had more time, more information, more . . . something.

Third, the simulation must present in a condensed and intensified form, many of the major elements of the complex system which is usually extended over months or years.

Exercises should not be designed that set groups against each other.

Try to design the sim so that all participants experience the frustrations.

Nature of Participant Reactions

Participant reactions occur at two stages in the administration of an empathy simulation.

- The first is during the exercise itself
- 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:

- the degree of frustration
- the complexity of the emotional reaction
- the target of participant emotions.

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.
- Participants should not be expected to articulate the depth of their feelings immediately after the experience.
  - Some participants in some sims may need weeks to reflect on their experiences.
- 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.

This brief “coffee break” allows participants to release their pent-up frustration, some of which may be felt toward the administrators.

Four activities suggested for discussion meetings:

- Use of questionnaire after experience
- Immediate comments invited by administrator
- Orderly examination of participants reactions
- Implications of experience - should relate to goals

Remember . . .

- Empathy/insight simulations are risk-taking exercises in that they place participants in situations that generate negative reactions.
- 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 “YES”.

An empathy simulation should be related to key decisions in the participants’ lives.

It should generate the feelings, reactions and anxieties that are experienced by by those in the targeted situation/environment. Thus, a ‘walk in my shoes’ exercise is needed.

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.
Look at page 10-11 of Reading 6 for the checklist for Evaluating Empathy/Insight Simulations.

1. Analyze the nature of the task, situation:
   - What is the specific context of the interaction? Are there any negative emotions?
   - What actions were/are likely to generate frustration in the agent?
   - What seems likely to cause the characters to act as they do?
   - Does the simulation predict the elements of a complex scenario?
   - Can the scenario be manipulated to be cumulative?

2. Focus on the post-simulation analysis:
   - Do the writers include the key aspects of personality? How were agents?
   - Are the theoretical analyses—specific media in real-world terms?
   - How are the characters depicted in the stories of simulation?
   - Do the agents’ actions predict future behavior in real-world terms?
   - Can the simulated agents be modeled for other reasons?

Next Week... No Class... Spring Break