Why Collaborative Simulations Provide a Powerful Learning Experience for Students and How to Develop One

"I learned that no matter how prepared you think you are, you are wrong! There will always be something that you didn't think of, or that goes wrong. The easy part is coming up with a media kit and messages. The hard part is dealing with all the unexpected things surrounding the crisis situation. Overall, this unit was a learning experience that no book or lecture could ever teach." (Student report, 2009)

Benefits of taking part in a collaborative simulation

The following list was compiled from three years of teaching a crisis communications unit involving a collaborative simulation with an advanced-level public relations class and several journalism classes, including news writing, media reporting, and advanced media writing. Most of these benefits would also be true for other simulation topics as well.

Students learn …

- the importance of research to verify information provided by others and not just accepting what they are told.
- to assess conflicting information and different versions of what may have happened.
- to deal with missing information and information that is not yet available or not yet confirmed yet potentially important.
- to prioritize what they need to do or find out.
- to determine what needs to be done and what their resources are for getting things done.
- to handle unexpected situations by "thinking on their feet" and responding quickly.
- to be careful about making assumptions.
- the importance of preparation and being well organized
- to divide duties among team members and then trusting others on the team to do their part.
- how to deal with group dynamics, different work styles, and various styles of leadership.
- to handle the stress and other emotional aspects of dealing with ambiguity and not being sure what to do or what the outcome will be.

12 Steps in Developing a Collaborative Simulation

1. Establish Goals

- What do you want students to learn or experience?
- Think of situations your students might face in the future.

2. Find Classes to Involve

- Any situation that requires interaction with others is a possibility.
- Participating teachers do not need to have identical educational goals for students.

3. Make Grading Decisions

- Instructors need to decide if any aspect of the collaborative simulation will be graded.
- One instructor may include a graded component, while a partnering instructor does not.

4. Schedule the Simulation

- Participating teachers must agree when the collaborative simulation will take place and coordinate their syllabi accordingly.
- One class may need more preparation and/or debriefing time than another, but the timeframe for actual interactions between students must be established.

5. Determine Level of Complexity

- In developing the scenario, decide what level of complexity is desired.

6. Develop the Scenario

- A good scenario is based on something that could actually happen but not duplicate an event that has already taken place.

7. Recruit Role Players (Optional)

- Participation of outside role players enhances the realism for students.
- Faculty and staff from other college departments are excellent resources.
- If role players will be used, line them up *before* the final details of a scenario have been determined to take advantage of their personal backgrounds and experience.

8. Incorporate Something Unexpected

- Anything students do not anticipate makes a simulation more exciting as well as more realistic.

9. Create Needed Materials

- Materials students will need should be prepared before the simulation begins.
- Due to the uncertainty of what will happen during any simulation, however, teachers may need to develop additional materials as the simulation progresses.

10. Starting the Simulation

- Participating students don't necessarily begin their simulation experience at the same time.
- As the simulation unfolds, don't be surprised that what seems obvious to you as a teacher, may not be obvious to your students.

11. During the Simulation

- When classes come together in whatever activity forms the centerpiece of a collaborative simulation, no one should be able to predict what will happen, including the teachers.
- The most difficult aspect for teachers is usually just observing and not offering guidance or even giving clues through body language!

12. Debriefing

- As soon as possible after the simulation, students need a chance to discuss what took place.
- This is the teachers' opportunity to finally share their thoughts and observations.