

Reimagining Engagement: Adapting In-Person Simulations for Synchronous Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how to successfully adapt traditional classroom simulations for virtual spaces. Acknowledging the importance of the co-construction of knowledge and the impact of student-centered, active learning in classrooms, this article explores instructional design approaches, logistical issues, and pedagogical considerations for reimagining successful in-person simulations for synchronous learning environments. The authors share lessons learned and best practices identified throughout the process of adapting an intercultural communication simulation for a virtual space. By reimagining five areas of adaptation, including materials, technology, groups, communication, and the facilitator, faculty can examine critical junctures at the intersection of content knowledge, technology, training pedagogy, and instructional design to conduct successful virtual simulations.

KEYWORDS

Active Learning, Instructional Design, Simulations, Synchronous Online Learning, Virtual Spaces

1. INTRODUCTION

Mimi is a student taking a graduate level intercultural communication course that meets on Tuesday nights at 7:30pm Eastern Standard Time. The students in her program log on from 16 time zones, some from a different location each week, joining the synchronous class from homes and workplaces in cities across the United States, military installations abroad, communities in the middle of the African continent, and from ships at sea. While she is completing the course readings and watching the asynchronous videos, her faculty is preparing to facilitate a simulation in their virtual class, pulling up notes, creating breakout rooms, finalizing instructions, and opening files she will need to share information with students. Mimi looks forward to attending class, knowing her fearless faculty will create a student-centered, interactive, and immersive learning experience.

There is a need to rethink what is possible in online classes and in the virtual spaces students and faculty inhabit. The COVID-19 pandemic “has caused the largest disruption of education in history” and the number of faculty and students engaging with each other in virtual spaces is extraordinary (United Nations, 2020, p. 5). In the unprecedented events of spring 2020, many institutions of higher education in the United States and across the globe, shifted to solely remote teaching and online learning. A transition to the virtual space of this scale and scope has never happened before and the outcome about whether this historical transition to virtual learning will create more skepticism of online pedagogies or will bolster the confidence of faculty remains to be seen.

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In the United States, 6,359,121 students took at least one online class in 2017, approximately 30% of all university students (Allen et al., 2018). Even before the pandemic an upward trend in online enrollment was evident, paralleling another trend in the lives of students and faculty - increased mobility. Undergraduate students can pursue internships, military-affiliated students can complete their mission, and graduate students can conduct field research, all while completing their coursework and earning a degree. Faculty can share lessons learned from ongoing consulting projects, engage in professional development opportunities and training, and network at conferences while still engaging with students in the online classroom from wherever their work situates them at that moment in time. As academic nomads, faculty and students are participating in class discussions, learning from and collaborating with individuals from various time zones, and exposing themselves to the perspectives and worldviews of those whose lived realities vary (Gargano & Throop, 2017).

Higher education can expect both technological innovation and mobility to increase and “generally contribute to disseminate global citizenship and interculturalism and to promote self-awareness and personal growth” and mobility will “contribute to the acquisition of skills relevant to work in international settings” (Dias et al., 2021, p. 91). The mobility of ideas and people across borders and boundaries creates cultural flows that cannot be contained. As noted in the literature, “mobilities and their relations to learning within education are still understudied and undertheorized” (Leaander et al., 2010, p. 329). A decade later, the same sentiment applies. While for years education considered the “classroom-as-container” model, a conceptualization that requires physical walls, faculty now need to consider “how the (newly) imagined geographies of place, trajectory, and network critique, interact with, and push open the boundaries of the enclosed classroom” and reconceptualize a classroom without walls (Leander et al., 2010, p. 330).

Yet, some faculty still hesitate to teach online. So often the resistance of faculty to teach in a virtual space comes from the unfathomable task of envisioning how to take what they do on campus and create a similarly successful class online. Historically faculty expressed reservations about the shift to virtual classrooms and the integrations of digital technologies. According to a report by the Babson Survey Research Group, in 2002 only 27% of faculty accepted “the value and legitimacy of online education” (Allen et al., 2016, p. 26). There were minor fluctuations in faculty acceptance from 2002 to 2016, with faculty acceptance increasing only one percent to 28% overall in the last 15 years (Allen et al., 2016). In a 2019 Gallup Poll administered before the pandemic, 46% of faculty were already teaching online, up from 30% in 2013, with four in ten faculty “fully support(ing) the increased use of educational technologies” (Jaschik & Ledermen, 2019, p. 8). Before the start of the pandemic, more than two-thirds or 69% of faculty who transitioned to teaching in virtual spaces shared “that they incorporated more active learning techniques” into the new course (Jaschik & Ledermen, 2019, p. 14). With even more faculty teaching online as a result of the pandemic, the need to understand how to transition simulations to virtual spaces is ever present.

While some faculty resistance to online education still exists, with each new technological innovation and pedagogical development that expands the geography of virtual education, more and more faculty are not only adopting digital tools in the classroom, but are also creating intentional and immersive simulations. A thriving virtual agenda is creating immense space for faculty to innovate.

Faculty and students realize that intercultural interaction in virtual spaces is not a privilege, but now a necessity for most. Understanding cultural differences and dynamics will lead to increased intercultural competency and an expanded sense of self-efficacy across cultural contexts. Simulations “activate not only the explicit rules but also the hidden cultural rules of the participants. This can lead to memorable learning as well as to frustration,” especially when deployed across cultures or with multicultural groups (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 824). As institutions harness the growing mobility in the lives of students and recognize the expanding terrain of possibilities by incorporating innovative learning technologies and modalities, it is imperative to reimagine what it means to learn online in a student-centered, immersive, and interactive virtual classroom.

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