SIMULATION OR REALITY? A GROUP PROJECT IN WRITING

Alister Cumming

While the worth of role-plays and problem-solving activities has long been recognized in the literature on language teaching (Hodgson, 1972; Maley & Duff, 1978; Ur, 1981), very little documentation (aside from Jones, 1982) exists to describe the potential uses of group simulations in language instruction. A fixed repertoire of rather simple simulations structured around situations remote from the experience of the participants (Lost on the Moon, Shipwrecked on a Desert Island, Fallout Shelter) (Taylor, 1982) appear to be stock items in the ESL teacher's grab bag of instructional techniques. Typically, these activities emphasize oral interaction amongst learners who negotiate towards a group concensus. Their pedagogical value is somewhat vaguely justified on the grounds that simulations "can reduce the artificiality of the classroom, provide a reason for talking, and allow the learner to talk meaningfully to other learners" (Sturtridge, 1981, pp. 126). Beyond this, we have seen few descriptions of educational endeavours which relate role-play simulations to the teaching of specific language functions (Candlin, Burton, Leather & Woods, 1981), "authentic" communicative interactions (Breen, 1982), the contextual constraints which make "writing process" techniques meaningful (Britton, 1970, pp. 141-149), or (as in this paper) relevant situational data in the learners' environment.

The simulation described here was conducted with a small group of learners who participated in a course for students of English as a second language registered in regular degree programmes at Carleton University during the summer of 1983. The activities were devised to suit the diverse interests of six students with readily identifiable academic goals as well as to meet the course objective to offer instruction in forms of writing typical of an academic setting. In general terms, the simulation was a project which required students to prepare a joint report documenting the university's contributions to the local community. Specifically, the technique of group simulation achieved a variety of instructional objectives simultaneously: Students were required to compile appropriate data, deliver oral reports, consider purpose and effect while composing a research report, participate in group conferencing, revise drafts, document sources, and engage in peer editing (see Figure 1).

The simulation was carried out over two weeks and centered around classes which met on alternate weekdays for periods of two hours. On the first day, the participants each received copies of a fictitious letter addressed to them from the president of the university who requested that the recipients of the letter form a committee to prepare a joint

CLASS ACTIVITIES	LEARNING BEHAVIOUR
Week One	

1. -introduction of task
  -formation of student
    committee to plan for
    execution of project
	-interpretation of class
	-development of strategies
	  for data collection

2. -initial progress reports
    on data collection
  -discussion of problems
    common to committee
    members
	-sharing of information
	  about processes for
	  collecting data
	-decision-making on the
	  types of data appropriate
	  for the project

3. -second progress reports
  -discussion of uniform format
	-decisions on the format
	  and content of individual
	  reports

Week Two	

4. -submission of rough
    drafts of individual reports
  -peer reading of drafts
  -concensus on suggestions
    after revisions
	-revision techniques and
	  strategies
	-refinement and appreciation
	  of content in relation
	  to form and purpose

5. -submission of revised drafts
  -peer reading of drafts
  -consensus on further
    suggestions for revisions
	-revision techniques and
	  strategies
	-refinement and appreciation
	  of content in relation
	  to form and purpose

6. -submission of final copies
    of individual reports
  -proofreading of peers' reports
  -compilation into joint reports
	-proofreading techniques
	  and strategies

Figure 1. Overview of the simulation

report on the university's contributions to the local community (see Appendix A). The president's letter outlined a tentative working schedule for the committee to follow and designated the class teacher as an advisor for consultation during the committee meetings. An enclosed fictitious memorandum from the Minister of Education who threatened closure of the university unless she received a report which could persuade her against such action (Appendix B) imparted a heightened significance to the project. The advisor/teacher suggested that the participants organize a committee by electing a chairperson and a

recording secretary who would direct the group to consider their inter-
pretations of the scope of the task, recommend procedures for collect-
ing appropriate data, and compose a memorandum to the president of
the university indicating how the committee intended to undertake the
task. The participants decided to prepare individual reports represent-
ing the views of their respective departments and to later compile these
into a joint report.

At the next meeting the committee discussed mutual accomplish-
ments and difficulties in obtaining source documents and data. Each
committee member contributed an oral progress report. These reports
were useful to other individuals who had not discovered such potential
sources as university archives, annual reports, or information offices. In
addition to sharing strategies for the collection of printed data, partici-
pants decided to interview the chairmen or advisors of their respective
departments in order to elicit details on certain common points such as
the number of staff employed, research projects recently undertaken,
and consultancy services offered.

At the third session greater emphasis was placed on the accumulation
of data appropriate to the purposes of the project. A number of points
presented by individuals in their second progress report were deemed
unnecessary or irrelevant by other members of the committee. For
instance, financial statements produced by one student were dismissed
by another since the president of the university had indicated he would
handle this matter. Discussions focussed on the necessity for each
report to contain roughly equivalent types and quantities of informa-
tion in order for the joint report to cohere effectively. The committee
reached a consensus on a uniform format for the presentation of
material in each report so drafts could be written for the following
meeting. The committee chairman listed categories of items on the
blackboard. The appropriateness of each was debated until it was
agreed that the categories of departmental background, employment,
community services, consulting services, research, and publications
would make a suitable basis for organizing individual reports. By this
point, each person had collected sufficient data to meet the satisfaction
of peers as well as the constraints of the task, each had experienced
opportunities to articulate and organize material for an interested
audience, and each had developed this material to accommodate any
alterations in content or emphasis suggested by fellow participants.

The second week of the simulation concentrated on the activities of
writing, revising, and editing. In the fourth meeting each member of the
committee read the initial drafts of reports written by other committee
members. Recommendations for development, re-organization or clari-

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fication were made by the participants. Since many of the drafts were in relatively rough form, their authors took this opportunity to voice their intentions concerning further development of their work, taking care to note the techniques used by peers whose efforts had produced better results. In the fifth session, peer-reading continued and revisions of second drafts were suggested. As the overall shape of the report became more evident, students were prompted to focus further on a uniform pattern or organization in individual papers. The importance of co-operative effort in determining the successful completion of the project became both a justification and a stimulus for comments by students recommending improvements in the papers of their peers.

At the final meeting, members of the committee worked in pairs to proofread the final copies of the reports. When a pair was unable to reach agreement on a possible correction or alteration, the committee's teacher/advisor was consulted to make a final decision. A sub-committee was later formed to compose a covering letter to the president of the university announcing the project's completion. The representative of the Department of Mathematics was called upon to arrange the individual papers in numerical sequence. The joint report was typed verbatim from the students' papers by office staff in the following week and copies were distributed to all interested parties. (For a sample of one report, see Appendix C.) Minor errors which appeared in the final text formed a basis for remedial instruction in subsequent classes.

From a methodological perspective the simulation focussed student attention on a single project consisting of various tasks which appear to have encouraged individual development in writing. The stimulus for the project was sufficiently believable, realistic, and engaging to moti-vate students to collect appropriate material, to write convincingly, and to improve their writing. As a result of the tasks individuals had the opportunity to find out more about their fields of academic specializa-tion and the relationship of these fields to the university and local community. They also took pride in their personal and collaborative accomplishments or discoveries. The framework for group activities provided a classroom atmosphere where problem-solving and estab-lishment of a consensus evolved spontaneously, permitting learners to build upon their peers' contributions as well as to experiment with, sound out, and confer on their own efforts.[1] Above all, the simulation directed learners toward assuming roles as compilers of information, composers, editors, critics, and proofreaders -- roles they were able to perceive as integral to the preparation of any "real" written assignment they might encounter.

FOOTNOTES

1. See, for instance, Crowhurst 1981, Graves 1983, or Judy and Judy 1981 on writing workshops; Witbeck 1976 or Zamel 1982 on peer revision and writing "process" techniques for ESL students; Courteney 1982 for a rationale of drama-oriented procedures to teaching.

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APPENDIX A

Stimulus for the Writing Project
Fictitious letter from the President of Carleton University

Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada K1S 5B6

August 2, 1983

Dear _____ :

I am writing to ask if you could act as a representative on the committee now being formed to prepare a joint report requested by the Ontario Ministry of Education on Carleton University's contributions to "the education, welfare and betterment of the Ottawa community." Please find enclosed a copy of a memorandum recently sent to me by the Minister of Education, which I believe should impress upon you the urgency and significance of this task.

I have arranged for you to meet with the five other persons invited to form this committee on August 3rd, at 2:00 p.m. in Paterson Hall, Room 236. I suggest that you prepare a tentative working plan on this date, outlining how the committee will proceed on researching and documenting this information. If each member could contribute a progress report on August 5th, a draft report on August 8th, then completed individual reports on August 10th, I am sure that you will be able to compile and edit the individual reports on the latter date in order to meet the deadline of August 12th for a joint report.

The committee will probably wish to concentrate on gathering information from library and departmental sources. Limitations of time will prohibit the compilation of a thoroughly detailed report; however, adequate resources exist to allow for the preparation of a general statement, and each member of the committee should be able to work from the perspective of his or her department's role at the university.

I extend my apologies for not being able to work directly with this committee, as the Ministry of Education has also requested that my office prepare a report on the state of the university's finances.

Mr. Alister Cumming of the Centre for Applied Language Studies has been designated to advise the committee during its proceedings as well as to accept the final report in my absence.

Thanking you in advance,

Sincerely,

P.W. Smithson
President,
Carleton University

c.c. Ayoub Ayoub, Engineering
Irene Corbin, Social Work
Rosa Maria Bruno, Spanish
Ana Isabel Guada, Sociology
Adel Fahmy Mikkail, Mathematics
Keiko Sueuchi, Political Science

APPENDIX B

Stimulus for the Writing Project
Fictitious memorandum from the Ministry of Education

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 25, 1983

TO: Mr. P.W. Smithson, President
Carleton University

FROM: Ms. Hildegard Right
Minister of Education
Province of Ontario

RE: OPERATION OF CARLETON UNIVERSITY

Following conversations on July 22 with your office and the staff of
the Ministry of Education, plans have been implemented which will
result in the cessation of further operations at Carleton University by
September 1st, 1983 unless evidence of the university's role in contri-
buting to the education, welfare and betterment of the Ottawa com-
munity can be documented before August 12th of this year.

I suggest that you request the formation of a committee (possibly
consisting of representatives from the areas of Sociology, Social
Work, Engineering, Mathematics, Political Science and Foreign Lan-
guage Teaching) to issue a joint report detailing the services which
these areas of academic study contribute toward the general
population.

APPENDIX C

Sample from the Completed Project

INTRODUCTION

This report is prepared according to the request of Mr. Ayoub, Chairman of the committee established by P.W. Smithson, President of Carleton University, under the purpose for examining the contribution of Carleton University to the community of Ottawa. My enrollment in this committee is to analyze, in particular, the role of the Department of Political Science in the capital community. This paper is mainly based on the records at the Archives of Macdoram Library (Carleton University), interviews from a graduate secretary and graduates in the department.

This Department of Political Science works on two major functions as a public institution: promoting the research in the field of Political Science, and educating students in courses.

The department is constituted of three levels: under graduate, M.A., and Ph.D. courses. In the year of 1982-83, 147 students were in the undergraduate program as full-time students, and 29 students as part-time. In graduate school combining M.A. and Ph.D. courses, there were 68 students who registered as full-time.

The academic program of the department covers the courses in five fields: Canadian Politics, Comparative Politics, Political Theory, International Relations and Public Administration. These programs include theoretical, empirical, philosophical and quantitative approaches. Also there are interdisciplinary courses for area studies.

EMPLOYMENT

In the department there are 41 professors. Also there are usually some foreign professors sent under international exchange programs. For the administration of the department, there are 11 secretaries.

For supporting the study of graduates as well as preparing for their career, the department gives lectureship, Teaching Assistant and Research Assistant systems. Some Ph.D. candidates started teaching courses on undergraduate level. For example, Alex Netherton, who had finished the qualification of Ph.D. program, taught the course of Intergovernmental Relations on 300 level last semester.