

To simulate is to imitate or model a set of circumstances, real or hypothetical, to experience a process, explore feelings, or to understand concepts. In the classroom context, simulations often take the form of a game in which the circumstances are prescribed in advance and in which the students are involved as active participants. Students work their way through a process to achieve an outcome that represents an important lesson that can be applied to real life. Although often referred to as a "game," a simulation is seldom linear in nature in that there are many possible outcomes, depending on the decisions and dynamics of the participants.

From the perspective of the teacher, the most important considerations in using the simulation strategy in the classroom are that it should have a specific focus, context, and purpose. In other words, the simulation should be a means to achieve required outcomes, whether they be knowledge, values, or skills outcomes (or all three). The parameters of the game should be developed so that participants are not left in any doubt as to what the purpose of the game is or what the "lessons" are that they should learn from it.

The nature of a simulation game may require participants to play a specific character role (real or imaginary) or act as a member of a certain group in which they find themselves. Typical simulations may involve competition for power, wealth, and prestige, and may require negotiations, switching allegiances, and a variety of moral dilemmas. The length and complexity of simulation games can vary from a simple one-class activity to a highly complex series of activities that may take a week or more. Simulation games may be ready-made for use in a classroom or may be developed as a class activity.

Developing a simulation

- Clearly identify the purpose of the game and the outcomes it will achieve.
- Develop the main idea or format of the activity and the process by which it will achieve the outcomes.
- If possible, the creation and playing of the game should involve the entire class.
- Parameters of the game should be clearly established and understood.
- Establish rules that allow individual choice or flexibility in some circumstances but not in others.
- Long, complex games should be organized into manageable "chunks" appropriate for the length of a typical class period.
- Develop the necessary role cards and/or other materials that may be required.
- Ensure that all participants fully understand the rules of the game, their individual involvement, and the desired outcomes.

Playing the game

- Students should be reminded that this is a game and that their fortunes are hypothetical.
- The teacher's role should be strictly limited to that of an objective observer and facilitator as may be required to keep the game moving appropriately.

Debriefing

- In order to make the simulation game a meaningful learning experience, it is critical for students to have ample opportunity to discuss the activity, describe their feelings, identify decisions that were made and how they influenced subsequent events, what they learned from their participation, and the extent to which it achieved the desired outcomes.