

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH SIMULATIONS

History / Social Studies Education

One of the most effective ways to make history and social studies “come alive” in the classroom is to take that phrase literally. Simulations require students to draw on their knowledge and experience, think critically and analytically, make choices and deal with the consequences of those choices. Students become warlords in feudal Japan, factory workers in the Soviet Union, traders in West Africa or migrant workers in California. Although the students are “in role” throughout a simulation, they typically think, act, and react according to their natural dispositions. Both positive and negative elements of human nature figure into the experiences, leading to some unpredictable (but always interesting) dynamics and interactions.

Most of my teaching experiences have been with fifth and sixth graders, but I believe that simulations are appropriate (with modifications) for all ages. After reading through this overview of my approach to simulations, please take a look at my lesson plans for specific simulations.

— Ramón Esquivel
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GUIDELINES FOR CREATING AN EFFECTIVE SIMULATION

- Begin with Essential Questions. The lesson is designed to lead students towards what deeper understandings? EXAMPLES: *Why do people migrate? Where do human beings choose to establish settlements? What determines population density?*
- Establish clear guidelines for the simulation that encourage authenticity. EXAMPLES: *In stratified societies, how would people from different classes interact and/or advise one another? How do leaders motivate those who serve them?*
- Be flexible to let students explore unexpected ideas and social dynamics. EXAMPLES: *Why do students so often want to declare war on each other? Why might some students “give up” on the simulation and try to sabotage its objectives? If students feel left out, what transpired in the simulation that may have caused this?*

- Always budget enough time for a thorough debriefing session. Encourage the use of the “I” perspective: *I think ... , I believe ... , I noticed ... , etc.* The best questions always ask students to share their visceral responses to the behavior of others. Questions such as these are especially provocative when the simulation involves issues of class and power.
- Understand that simulations always over-simplify matters. Asking students to critique the simulation can lead to a great discussion.
 EXAMPLES: *Are the conditions of the simulation realistic? Can you draw parallels with another period of history or today’s world? What could we change in this simulation to make it more relevant?*

NUMBER OF STUDENTS

I have done simulations with as many as thirty-six students and as few as eight students. With larger groups (more than sixteen), it is best to have one or two other teachers or responsible adults to help with logistics and general trouble shooting. I recommend debriefing in smaller groups (less than eight); consider asking the large group a guiding question (or questions), and then letting them discuss in smaller groups of four to six.

MATERIALS

Simple manipulative objects enhance simulations because they provide tactile representations of resources, currency, products, and even ideas. Kindergarteners, fifth graders, eighth graders and high school seniors can imagine and suspend disbelief enough to regard a paper clip as a precious gem, for example. Befriend a math teacher because they tend to keep impressive stocks of manipulatives.

Some common manipulatives ...

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| — pattern blocks | — dice |
| — index cards (<i>multi-colored + cut into squares</i>) | — popsicle sticks |
| — poker chips | — playing cards |
| — paper clips (<i>multi-colored</i>) | — beans and seeds |
| — Cuisinaire rods | — LEGOS |