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AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF SIMULATION CENTERS IN THE TRAINING OF PRE-SERVICE AND NOVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS IN ISRAEL. WHAT MAKES THEM WORK WELL?

Nicole Broder
David Yellin Academic College (Israel)

Abstract

Escalating rates of teacher attrition require teacher training programs to consider more contemporary training methods. Adapted from the medical and aviation fields, the concept of simulations is currently making an entry into the world of education. An international pioneer in this venture, Israel already has twenty simulation centers at its universities and teacher training colleges and has more in the planning stages. Through qualitative research methods, this study analyses the factors contributing to their success. It highlights benefits derived by teachers from experiences at simulation centers including, inter alia, heightened self-awareness leading to more successful interactions in the workplace. Numerous benefits, particularly for graduates entering the teaching profession, suggest that simulation center experiences should be necessary inclusions of teacher training programs around the world.

Keywords: *Simulation centers, teacher training programs.*

1. Introduction

Teachers are responsible for shaping the minds of future generations. It is for this reason that the training of future teachers is of fundamental importance. The conception of simulation centers for educators seeks to enhance this training period. The opportunity for pre-service and in-service educators to experiment with interpersonal skills - whether real or in the form of simulated role play - promises improved performance inside and outside the classroom. While practice at real schools, in real classrooms is necessary, mistakes often occur at the cost of the children and the teachers themselves. Simulations are dynamic experiences, occurring in safe, artificial environments, away from the real world. Simulation centers attempt to serve as places that contribute to the vital training of teachers.

In 2023 Israel, there are twenty simulation centers for specifically built for educators, all of which are located on the campuses of universities or teaching colleges. These centers welcome all types of stakeholders in the field of education, including pre-service and in-service teachers, principals, inspectors, pedagogical advisors and college lecturers. Thousands of educators and future educators experience simulations each year as an integral part of their professional development. The needs of the target audience are ascertained ahead of time by the staff at the center so that relevant, genuine scenarios that reflect actual practice, can be tailor made for them by scenario writers. Professional actors and debriefing facilitators are prepared to be immersed into the complex, and often conflict-filled world of education.

Simulations are traditionally used in the training of air force and health care professionals (Rutherford-Hemming, 2012). In fact, Dr. Sarah Zilberstrom together with Dr. Meira Eizenhamer, leading educators of newly qualified teachers at Bar Ilan University in Israel, carried out three years of research and study at the M.S.R. Simulation Center for Health Care professionals - adjacent to Tel Hashomer Hospital in Tel Aviv - before developing their own program for educators at Bar Ilan University between the years 2009-2011. In 2013, after two years of pilot studies, mainly for the benefit of the members of their own teacher internship program, the center obtained approval and funding from the Ministry of Education to provide simulations for educators from all sectors and at all levels of their professional development. HaLev, the National Center for Simulation in Education, is part of the School of Education at Bar Ilan University and was the first center of its kind in the world. Since then, an additional nineteen simulation centers for educators have sprung up all over the country, aiming at educators at all levels.

This study will focus on the organizational aspect of simulation centers. The relatively new simulation center at David Yellin Teachers' College in Jerusalem is the center at which I carried out my

research. This center has been successfully providing simulations in conflict management - in Hebrew, Arabic and English - for educators, since 2016. In particular, I focused on the experiences of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) student teachers and novice teachers.

2. Literature review

At simulation centers, teachers can experiment with a variety of strategies, unpack them in a group forum and then attempt to improve them based on the lessons they have learnt (Kaufman and Ireland, 2016). The emergence of simulation centers, founded in recent years for the purpose of both pre and in service educators, attempts to upgrade the future practice of teachers. The simulation center experience for educators is, in fact, a modern concept in education. Traditionally, simulations are standard, conventional learning tools in the medical and aviation professions (Keskitalo, 2014), and studies from these disciplines point to them becoming recognized as potentially effective learning tools in teacher education too (Kaufman and Ireland, 2016). Simulations have the ability to hold slices of reality under the magnifying glass with a view to reap better understandings and use of inter-personal skills (Cruz and Patterson, 2005) in the workplace.

In fact, the main objective of simulation centers is to enhance and improve social interactions between educators, as well as between educators and students, teachers and parents (Eizenhamer, 2014). At simulation sessions, educators are required to display behavior based on respect and trust in a safe environment, in groups no larger than fifteen participants, although this number varies from center to center. The simulation sessions are led by facilitators who are skilled in creating this environment. In an introductory session, they explain the process of the simulation experience and following the scenario, they lead a debriefing session aided by screenings of recorded clips from the scenarios themselves. During debriefings, participants are encouraged to reflect on both their choice of both verbal and non-verbal methods of communication in order to raise their awareness of the ways in which they are able to manage conflict situations and thereby explore alternative routes to successful results in real-life interactions in the future (Eizenhamer, n.d.).

Participants in simulation scenarios are encouraged to engage in realistic situations, and to attempt, in the best way possible, to manage them and later, to reflect on the results. Based on the conclusions of these reflections, they are expected to find parallels between the scenes enacted in these pre-written scenarios and their own practice, with the intent of rethinking their actions and words in future similar real-life situations (Zigmont et al., 2011b).

As with all types of learning, reflection and repeated practice are key factors in the change process (Girod and Girod, 2006). Therefore, simulations may be seen as tools of professional development adopted to encourage and support change in teaching strategies, decision making, classroom management abilities, and other inter-personal interactions, innate in the daily lives of educators (Kaufman and Ireland, 2016).

Situational simulations are role-plays based on conflict or emergency situations during which the teacher or trainee teacher is required to behave as though in a real-life situation, using strategies in order to resolve them in an optimal manner. Participants usually react to the actors in the scenarios as a result of their individual characters, cultures, backgrounds and life or work experience (Cruz and Patterson, 2005). A sense of urgency is provided by the limited amount of time allotted for the scenario to take place and the particular inter-personal strategies chosen to deal with the situation, making it meaningful and practical (Alessi and Trollip, 2001).

Simulation based training encourages active involvement, collaboration and reflective practice, which are all necessary elements on the road to meaningful learning. By experiencing a vast range of individual emotions and reactions during the simulation experience, participants are driven to reflect on their own real-life situations and possibly change their practice (Paskins and Peile, 2010) or at least, consider other possible courses of action in order to achieve more desirable results.

The facilitator then sets the stage for the scenario, and in doing so, provides an introduction to the program so as to avoid any uncertainty about the length and shape of the debriefing process (Rall et al., 2000). Scenarios range between issues of classroom management, interactions between teachers and students, teachers and parents and others. One of the participants volunteers to participate in the scenario, usually in the role of the teacher. Additionally, a professional actor will play the part of the student, principal or a parent. The remaining participants are encouraged to take notes of interesting observations, thoughts, or feelings they experience during the scenario.

The scenario plays out for between five to seven minutes and is filmed. Clips chosen by the facilitator for group discussion will be screened later on in the debriefing session and essentially a platform for reflective group discussion. Taking an active part in a simulation scenario or being an observer of one is not sufficient for the simulation experience to be complete. Following the scenario, the

participant returns to the circle where his colleagues await him following the observation of the scenario. Led skillfully by a trained facilitator, the debriefing process begins. This process is commonly thought of as the most important factor in the simulation experience (Issenberg, 2005; Zigmont et al., 2011a). Indeed, of what value is observation if not to spur reflection?

Towards the end of the debriefing session, the facilitator sums up the session, providing the participants with tangible points to take away with them. It makes no difference if they are written in point form on the board or provided digitally. Educators are adult learners. Andragogy, or the teaching of adults, understands that adults are self-motivated to learn; their learning is based on life experience; adults learn what they want to learn when they want to learn it, usually because they are interested in improving their performance (Deci, 1985). Adult learners need to feel that they have not wasted their time discussing intangible topics, but instead come away feeling that the experience has succeeded in granting them with useful, practical tools (Jobe et al., 1997).

Often, videos are shown during pedagogy courses at pre-service teachers' colleges or at in-service programs in order to activate productive reflection and professional discussion in a collaborative setting (Alsawaie and Alghazo, 2010). There is much value for a student teacher who provides a video clip of himself teaching during the practicum for class discussion, for he gains valuable critical feedback on his teaching from his lecturer and peers. Observers of video clips are permitted to take an impartial stance and an objective view of authentic classroom scenarios. Repeated viewings of these clips constantly provide new angles, detached reflection, and hopefully, change in practice (Amador, 2018).

At simulation centers, however, the use of video has a twin purpose. Not only does it allow scenario observers access to a scenario taking place in a different room perhaps, but later on in the debriefing session, it provides participant who volunteered to take part in the scenario to actually see themselves in action as well.

3. Empirical illustration

I investigated the experiences of student teachers and intern teachers at the Simulation Center at David Yellin Teaching College. In order to discover which factors contribute to the success of simulation experiences for student teachers as well as novice teachers, I chose to interview three participants who volunteered to act in the simulation scenarios, both before and immediately after the simulation sessions.

4. Discussion

It is interesting that the facilitator, attributes the success of the scenarios to her communication with the group's pedagogical advisor prior to the date of the session (Cherrington and Loveridge, 2014). Not only does this ensure that the scenario is relevant and practical for the participants' needs, but it also creates a relationship between the facilitator and the pedagogical advisor, which becomes a key factor during the debriefing session. When students witness agreement between the two during the debriefing, the messages being relayed to them, bear more weight. Preparatory work involving the coordination of the pedagogical advisor, facilitator and actor is vital. The scenario must be relevant and appear realistic for the participants, the actor must be provided with the scenario ahead of time in order to immerse herself into her role and attempt to predict the participants' reactions, and, as previously stated, the relationship between the pedagogical advisor and the facilitator must be established.

A revelation by a student teacher regarding her childhood speech impediment and the traumatic effect of the cameras on her performance admittedly surprised me. Until now, I had only seen the positive benefits of the use of filming the scenarios (Cherrington and Loveridge, 2014). Although the cameras didn't bother the other two students interviewed, they certainly had a profound effect on this student. The actress too, suggests that in order to improve the simulation experience, the scenarios should take place in a separate room, away from the glare of cameras and fellow participants alike. On the other hand, a novice teacher reported that although, at first, she felt that the scenario was staged, in a matter of minutes, she found herself immersed in her interaction with the actress, and perceived the scenario as real.

In general, unless they are entertainers, people tend to shy away from cameras. It is for this reason that the cameras in simulation centers should be hidden as well as possible. If participants are to behave and respond to stimuli in an authentic manner, they need to suspend the feeling of disbelief. Cameras prevent this from occurring. This said, the value of filming the scenarios for later use in the debriefing period, is overwhelming. Without this tool, facilitators would need to describe the participants' body language and other forms of unspoken communication to them and conversely, participants would have to accept their perceptions. However, due to the filmed clips, participants are provided with hard evidence of this communication which, although perhaps painful, they must acknowledge. It is

fascinating to witness the power of a slight glance at one's cellphone or an unintended yawn on people with whom we are interacting.

Two student teachers admitted to gaining a boost in confidence when receiving compliments from their peers during the debriefing. Workshop participants agreed that teachers are often isolated in their classrooms. They are rarely observed by others. In fact, many teachers claim that they feel lonely in the workplace (Flinders, 1988). To prevent feelings of loneliness from developing, there need to be strong communication networks in place for teachers (Dodor, 2010).

The simulation experience provides not only a place for reflection, but also for observation by others, which can lead to an increase in confidence, an opportunity to engage in collaborative discussion and a sense of comradery. For novice teachers, feelings of isolation can often lead to attrition, whereas a sense of belonging has the potential to keep them in the teaching profession. Interviewees acknowledged a need for future simulations dealing with classroom management issues and dilemmas.

It is unlikely that the participants will be faced with a similar set of circumstances for some time, and since, according to Jobe et al. (1997), following the discussion in the debriefing session, it is advisable to reenact the scenario. In my experience, all too often, time runs out too quickly, and the opportunity to repeat scenarios is lost. It is my belief that, already in the preliminary planning stages, time for this must be factored into the timetabling of the simulation experience.

5. Conclusion

As the existence of simulations for educators is relatively recent, there is sparse literature on this topic. My research attempts to fill a void in knowledge, which is the fundamental strength of my study. On the whole, there are many benefits for participants at the simulation center (Cherrington and Loveridge, 2014). This study aims to provide a glance into the many advantages of such experiences at simulation center for educators in general, but specifically for both student teachers and novice teachers. There are currently twenty simulation centers in Israel, each unique in its own way, and my study focused on just one of them. Additionally, I interviewed only five key players, i.e. two student teachers, one intern teacher, a facilitator and an actor. Surely, if my study would have included more people, the results would have differed. For these reasons, I acknowledge that although some general conclusions may be drawn, there is no sense in which conclusions will be seen to be more widely applicable; my intention however, is that they will serve as a base line for future, broader studies.

6. Concluding comments

In this study, I have focused on the experiences of pre-service teachers and novice teachers of EFL, who are literally balancing on the threshold into the world of education. At this initial, embryonic stage of their careers, they are most open to the establishment of good practice, most willing to accept sound advice and to learn about and adopt successful habits. For this reason, I regard simulations as an essential ingredient of teacher training programs.

Interviews with various key players at the center, including the simulation facilitator, an actress, two student teachers and one newly qualified teacher, provided me with valuable, in-depth qualitative data based on personal experiences and observations. I extracted recurring themes that I discovered from the data and my conclusions are as follows.

I believe that the repetition of scenarios following debriefing sessions is absolutely necessary, for fear of losing opportunities for participants to act in the near future based on decisions made at the sessions. Effective planning by the center ahead of the simulation experience is also essential so that a partnership between the facilitator and pedagogical advisor is created and that relevant and meaningful scenarios for the participants are ensured.

The gift of being able to see oneself through multiple lenses is extraordinary. It brings to mind the experience of riding in an elevator whose four walls are mirrored. When looking straight ahead, one sees a one-dimensional image, but a glance to the side shows a different angle and a glance to the corner provides a look at oneself in 3D. This is the beauty of the debriefing session; it magically provides multiple perspectives of our behavior, body language and linguistic expression from many points of view. The skills required to orchestrate this very unique experience belong mainly to the facilitator. It is for this very reason that I would like to suggest that, at the very minimum, both actors and facilitators, are required to attend occasional training sessions, or become members in specialized learning communities, at which they can learn from both professionals and each other.

This study has exposed the potentially sensitive nature of simulations and the deeply seated reactions they can arouse. On the one hand, they can serve as springboards for the elevation of teachers' confidence while simultaneously, awakening an awareness to the fact that there are a bounty of

alternative ways to deal with relationships and interactions. Conversely, when simulations are not handled in a sensitive manner, deep offense can be taken or unwanted memories may surface, unintentionally barring participants from the ability to learn from their experiences. In order to accommodate for people who are generally camera-shy, scenarios should be enacted in a room far away from stares of other participants and obtrusive cameras.

In conclusion, it appears that simulation centers for educators have much to offer in terms of spurring reflection, leading to an improvement in the future performance of teachers. When paying careful consideration to the suggestions that have emerged from the data provided in this study, and ensuring their implementation, stakeholders in simulation centers will have the ability of providing an even more valuable experience to all those who pass through their gates.

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