FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Collaboration is the key to innovation.

Dr. Benson Sexton

SIMULATIONS

Thank you, Dr. Sexton, for your willingness
to share and collaborate!

Teaching with Simulations

Simulations provide experiential learning opportunities by creating real-world scenarios in which students take on decision-making roles. Students actively apply course concepts and engage in critical and evaluative thinking. Simulations present complex challenges that facilitate the transfer of knowledge from the classroom into professional and civic contexts, and these highly memorable learning activities increase long-term retention. A simulation can serve as a sandbox in which students experiment with new concepts and safely examine the consequences of their actions or decisions. Simulations can be effectively designed for in-person, hybrid, and fully remote courses, and students may engage individually or collaboratively in groups. As formative or summative authentic assessments, simulations provide deep insight into student learning. A repertoire of skills is needed to complete the contextualized, complex tasks and often reveals otherwise hidden strengths and practical skills among students. Pre-simulation preparation, periodic debriefing, and post-simulation discussion are necessary to ensure that students make important connections between the simulation and the course goals.

What motivated you to design simulations for your course?

As I prepared to teach COMM 4203 – Crisis Communication I wanted to implement an opportunity for students to engage in simulated real-world crisis events. For weeks, I searched academic resources and the internet for examples. Most of the interesting content and materials were behind paywalls for organizational consulting firms or did not meet my specific needs for the classroom. After an unsatisfactory search, I decided to brainstorm scenarios to develop my own simulations. In doing so, I stepped outside my normal creativity to dig deeper into applied scholarship. As I worked through my first idea my excitement and energy increased with each step of the process.

How have you implemented simulations and what have you learned is important?

I included 5 crisis simulation events in the spring 2022 course schedule spread out over the semester. As we approached the first simulation, students asked a lot of questions to which my only reply was, "Expect the unexpected." For a simulation to be as close to a real-world crisis as possible, I knew the element of surprise was critical. Therefore, students did not receive any information or directions prior to the first simulation. As the first simulation, a hostage situation, approached I started to think of all the possible outcomes, contingencies, and potential consequences. Not only would I have to adapt my "covert text messages" during the simulation as students reacted in certain ways but I had to prepare for potential issues that may emerge during the simulation. For example, I contacted Public Safety, Student Services, and Academic Affairs to inform them about the simulation in the event someone overheard the students talking about "Dr. Sexton has been taken hostage" and believed it to be an actual crisis event creating chaos, panic, and a PR nightmare.
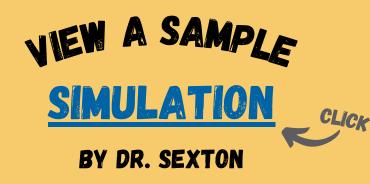
How have students responded to the simulation experiences?

At first, students thought the simulation experiences were just another activity/assignment. However, when I didn't show up for class the morning of the first simulation they quickly realized the learning experience was different. As hoped, the students did not just leave class when I didn't show up because they knew right away it was not normal for me to be late to class or at least communicate my delay or absence via email. As a result, they were suspicious from the moment they realized my absence and they actively participated in the simulation. When the simulation was activated, the students forgot most details and best practices to follow during a crisis event and the situation in the classroom was described as "chaos" at times; just like an actual crisis event. In the end, students raved about the experience while acknowledging they enjoyed writing the reflection paper and engaging in the class debrief as much as completing the simulation. The reflection paper and class debrief allowed them to evaluate their preparedness for a crisis event and reflect on their mistakes to become more aware and prepared for crisis events in the future.

Do you plan to continue offering simulated learning experiences in your courses?

Absolutely! I've learned that simulations promote deep learning while helping students develop and sharpen critical thinking skills as they take more control of the learning process than they do during typical classroom activities. I plan to identify future courses where simulations can be integrated into the curriculum to help students put theory into practice. Currently, I am working to design simulation experiences for COMM 4103 – Conflict Resolution and COMM 4713 – Leadership.

VIEW A SAMPLE SIMULATION

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BY DR. SEXTON

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