

Learning Team Leadership Skills Through Simulations

Introduction

A simulation is a form of experiential learning which promotes the use of critical thinking, engaging interaction and self-reflection. This is especially important for leadership courses for which students need to experience and apply theories to specific scenarios. This experiential activity is designed for late undergraduate or postgraduate students who are studying team leadership or communication-related courses. It can be used in both an online environment and a face-to-face classroom. Learning activities are integrated before, during and after the simulation.

Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications

I adopted the experiential learning cycle (ELC) (Kolb, 1984) with some adjustments. The ELC (Kolb, 1984) includes four repeating steps: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The integration of these steps would ensure active learning from experience. I adjusted and added preparation step to the ELC as the first step because I think it is very important to prepare my students for the simulation (Pelley, 2014).

In the preparation step, I included an information session, introducing the simulation, the objectives and their roles. Following the constructive alignment principle (Biggs, & Tang, 2011), I also included a content structure of the course. It is suggested that one of the best practices in online teaching is to create a content structure and constantly referring back to it (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). My purpose was to provide my students with a clear understanding of the objectives of the simulation and what were the learning resources they should refer to in order to perform well. The second step was concrete experience, which was running the simulation. I offered two practice rounds and a third round as the assessed one so that students can repeat their learning circles and improve. Right after the simulation, students were asked to take a survey evaluating their team effectiveness, psychological safety, cognitive conflict, affective conflict, leader effectiveness, leader directive on process, leader directive on content, and fair process. The survey results were presented to students in the debriefing sessions.

The third and fourth steps were reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation, which were the debriefing sessions after each round of the simulation (Ryoo & Ha, 2015). I asked students to first run a debrief reflecting the experience by themselves before coming to my debriefing sessions because a combination of student-led and lecturer-led debriefing would maximise active learning (Sawyer, Eppich, Brett-Fleegler, Grant, & Cheng, 2016). In particular, I led the debriefing linking to leadership theories and concepts and the objectives of the simulation (Biggs & Tang, 2011), and guided students for solutions to improve their performance in the following rounds. Although my session mainly focuses on the abstract conceptualisation, student-led debriefing also include some form of abstract conceptualisation. Some students may organise another round of student-led debriefing after the lecturer-led debriefing and discussed the changes they plan to implement. This indicates that the steps in ELC are not necessarily linear. It is possible to integrate these two steps and go back and forth.

The last step is active experimentation from Kolb's (1984) ELC. At this step, students actively implemented their initiatives on, for example, information-sharing, communication norms, collaborative decision-making and establishing a clear team goal. The experiential learning cycles went on to the second and the third rounds. Students got the opportunity to repeatedly observe their practice and performance, and reflect on lessons learnt and how to improve.

After the two practice rounds, students will take the assessed simulation with more difficult challenges different from the practice rounds. The results showed a clear learning curve from students and great improvement they've made—from 69/100 and 76/100 in the first round to 91/100 and 94/100 in the assessed round. The simulation used in the Leading Teams course was very welcomed by students as evidenced by students' feedback: "Everest group activity as an assessment was innovative and actually made me learn more." "The lecturer was well-informed about the content and very inclusive and respectful of students. The Mt Everest simulation was an excellent strategy for seeing in action the strategies and theory learned during the course." "One thing I find really effective in this course is the Simulation activity assessment. This assessment gave us the opportunity to apply all theories in a real situation. This is like assessing our ability beyond the academic writing skills. Because I believe that when you are in the corporate world, the information you get from the sources you read for the academic writing is not as important as the chance you get to apply it in the real situation."

Learning Objectives

The aims of the simulation are to help students understand the nuances of leading effective teams, communication and influence, collaborative decision-making, dealing with conflicts and leading virtual teams. Using simulations in teaching is a great way to inform learning because students experience the activity first-hand, rather than hearing about it or seeing it. They are usually more engaged with each other due to the inter-dependent nature of simulated activities. More importantly, simulations help students take better control of their own learning, build on their knowledge and become an active learner.

Exercise Overview

This experiential exercise used the Leadership and Team Simulation: Everest V3 designed by Harvard Business Publishing Education. Students were asked to form teams of five member or more to climb Mt Everest in the simulation. Each team member was assigned a role with conflicting goals and they needed to make collaborative decisions to solve the challenges along the way. If there were more than five members in a team, two members can share one role. Shared roles need to make the decision as one role which required more collaborative decision-making skills. There are in total five advances in six days each has different challenges. The first two days have relatively easier challenges that is similar to climbing Mt Everest: the first few days are relatively easier. When climbing higher, team members' energy level and health status would go down and the weather becomes more challenging. Therefore, the main challenges are in the day 3-5 advances. The five advances can be done in one sitting or separated into several days depending on the preference of the team and the teaching environment/purpose.

Team members have their own goals to achieve. They gain scores based on how much they achieve their goals at the end. Many of the individual goals are conflicting. I designed the assessment based on the team performance. Therefore, in some situations, they need to sacrifice their individual goals to achieve a higher team score. They also receive asymmetric information and some times wrong information, so communication and collaborative decision-making is the key to success.

The exercise takes 1.5 to 2 hours if it is done in one sitting with 10-20 minutes for each advance. To set up the simulation, students need to decide which role they will take. I ask them to follow the collaborative decision-making techniques taught in the course to make the decision and explain why they are the best fit for the role. For online students, finding a time to take the simulation together can be a challenge. I therefore set up the platform and communication channel on Microsoft Teams

and use Polly to select a time suitable for all. They also used the communication channel to solve the challenges and documented their solutions in an Excel Sheet. In the debriefing session, I first ask them to debrief within their team to reflect on what they think worked well and what didn't. After that, we come together to discuss their reflections in class. Following their reflections, I will show the team's score and each member's score. Usually it clearly shows which team member did not do well and I would follow up and ask the reasons. I also show them the survey results on their team effectiveness, psychological safety, cognitive conflict, affective conflict, leader effectiveness, leader directive on process, leader directive on content, and fair process. An important part is asking them to give an example of a moment that show high team effectiveness or poor leader directive on process for instance. Students enjoy the debriefing sessions and will usually schedule another debriefing session to plan for the next round.

Session Description

Before introducing the session content, I will use Mentimeter's live polling function (<https://www.mentimeter.com/>) to understand the audience's familiarity and comfort with the simulation approach. I will also ask the audience what the top three challenges are in using simulations in their classes. For those who haven't used simulations before, they can answer this question based on their understanding. I will create a live word cloud out of the challenges. At the end of the session, I will repeat the questions to see the changes in their familiarity and comfort in using simulations in class and see the changes in the challenges using the live word cloud created.

For the session content, I will present the experiential learning and the adjusted version of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycles. Following that, I will introduce the Everest V3 Simulation and how it worked in my class including the learning outcomes, the pre-simulation activities, the simulation process, the debriefing process, the marking criteria(team and individual) and lessons learnt. The session is anticipated to be a 30-minute session.

References:

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