

ONCE UPON A TIME . . .

by
Ron Krull

I was sitting in the crowded living room of a typical university student apartment. Denny, the young man across the room was about to graduate, looking forward to his first full-time job. Along with his wife and newborn son, he was about to embark on a new chapter in his life.

Despite all his optimism, our conversation tended less toward the future than the past. Denny, in talking about his educational experience, focused on an event from his senior year in high school that clearly left a lasting impression. He recalled a simulation game which revolved around a hypothetical world crisis situation complete with ideological conflict, competition for limited resources, political intrigue, public perceptions and reactions, good and bad characters-the works! Always a bright student, the gleam in his eye, four years after the fact, spoke louder than words. To him it was more than just a game. It was life itself and it breathed a breath of life into what he considered an otherwise stodgy social studies class. The memory of our conversation is as clear today as it was then and the lesson it contained has not been lost.

I jumped at the chance to write this article in hopes that it might encourage other social studies teachers to use simulations, to risk breathing a bit more life into their courses. There are however, some risks involved, for when students begin to take a simulation seriously, the intensity level, the stakes and the problems all increase. The teacher next door may become upset with the heightened noise level that results from a high-participation student activity. Goal-driven, high-achieving students may initially be less successful and less satisfied with this mode of learning compared to traditional courses. Other teachers may be unsupportive asserting that they don't have time for this type of activity because they are too busy teaching content. But are the risks worth it? You bet.

There are a number of issues which need to be addressed if you are to use simulations successfully in your classroom.

First, the individual evaluation of student work is difficult at best. Through the years I have discovered enough role-playing and full-scale simulations to integrate into nearly every unit of United States Studies I teach. However, because of the need to teach content and skills and provide an objective rationale for grades, I have not been able to use as many as I would like. Not that simulations don't teach content - they do. Not that they don't build skills - they do that too, but how do you justify to young students that they just flunked World War I because their economically-disadvantaged and militarily-weak country of Quasmurk got overrun by Orphio, the internationally-infamous bully next door? Simulations are inherently educational, but the evaluation of their outcomes can only be done by the recipients of their lessons - the individual student.

Second, from a pedagogical standpoint, when beginning to work with simulations, start small. This will guarantee you and your students some measure of initial success. Just as the track coach teaches proper running form before teaching proper hurdle form, so don't organize an all-school, mock nominating convention before you've run a number of smaller-scale experiences in your own room.

Third, make sure that you have read and re-read the student and teacher manuals for your simulation well in advance of starting. Check and double-check the number of copies that need to be run off to complete the activity and when in doubt, run more than you expect to use. Someone will always want to issue more position statements than you thought or will have their chief witness turn up absent the day of the trial, requiring you to appoint a substitute to fake their way through your extra copy of the witness statement.

Fourth, whenever possible, find a fellow teacher who will run the simulation with you in another classroom or jointly in the cafeteria. You will have a lot more fun and feel more comfortable throughout the experience if you have the support of a fellow colleague when the camera crews start setting up those incredibly bright lights to record for posterity the monster you've innocently loosed in your school. When those things start happening, you will know that the term "live" has taken on a new meaning in your classroom thanks to the magic of simulations.

It is very hard to write about the potential of simulations without getting a little excited. But it is even more exciting to overhear secret strategy sessions going on in the hall; to hear complaints that a certain historical figure "is just impossible" to deal with on a key issue; to watch students quietly accept that three years of farming and sacrifice can really be wiped out by a drought or early frost; to see the student you weren't quite sure about, play the role of an attorney and then take charge of the trial and win their client a counter-historical acquittal; but most importantly, to hear years later that the opportunity you gave a young man or woman in class really did make a lasting impression.

Simulations are your chance to influence this year's Denny's. Go on--take the chance!

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