SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WEEK SIMULATION

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*If you want creative workers, give them enough time to pla*y (John Cleese)

**Abstract**

Professional Learning Week (PLW) involved a five day simulation exercise with students on social science courses who participated in a consultancy exercise. It was introduced in March 2007. The exercise used relational autonomy approaches based on the subjects studied by the students. Relational autonomy refers to a move beyond individualistic approaches to autonomy towards a recognition of the value of using dependent relations positively. It supports a social form of autonomy and is particularly associated with feminist scholarship. PLW is readily exportable with appropriate modifications for other student groups across most subject disciplines. The simulation can be adapted to three day and single day versions so suggestions are given for such adaptations. Key learning experiences for students included: enjoyment of working on academic discipline issues in new and different ways, gains in personal development, new group relations. Students learned that sometimes conflicting pressures within a group can be used positively. They also learned to respond to contrasting demands quickly using feedback in positive ways.

1. **Introduction**

This introduction outlines the literature review carried out for the Professional Learning Week (PLW) simulation exercise held in March 2007. The review explored both ‘relational autonomy’ and the theory and practice of simulations. Relational autonomy is distinguishable from mainstream theories of autonomy in its avoidance of individualistic approaches. It locates autonomy through the social embedding of persons in relationships which are structured *inter alia* through class, gender and race. Relational autonomy does not deny the importance of the individual but seeks to avoid casting outcomes in terms of individual agency (Meyers, 1989). Theorising on relational autonomy has emerged particularly in feminist philosophy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000: Friedman, 2003). This work replaces the individualistic conception of autonomy characteristic of some liberal-individual models with an understanding of how intersubjectivities and social identities might be used to foster shared understandings (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000: 10). Relational autonomy is by no means the only approach to autonomy that questions individualistic approaches. Work in political philosophy such as that of Seyla Benhabib and Cornelius Castoriadis critiques liberal individualism. However, as yet, scant attention has been paid to how relational autonomy might ground pedagogy in higher education classroom settings. The PLW simulation is a response to this absence.

Edelheim and Ueda (2007) refer to a standard definition of simulation from the Society for Advancement of Games and Simulations in Education and Training (SAGSET): ‘a working representation of reality; it may be an abstracted, simplified or accelerated model of a process’ (cited in Ruohomaki, 1995: 13). Simulations provide a controlled environment which stands in relation to a realistic experience in the world. They may involve learners in working together on a problem where they have to solve problems, derive action plans, and reflect on their own learning. Simulations may be highly complex, for example, modelling of responses to major disasters. They can of course be relatively simple with structured role activity, data analysis and report. Undoubtedly, one of the most significant developments over the last seven to eight years has been the use of online environments for simulation activity including ‘Second Life’. These lie outside the scope of this project which used a face-to-face classroom based model.

There is a substantial literature on simulations including projects from the social sciences and higher education. In brief, developers and users have commented on how simulations can bring complex material to life for students, develop content knowledge, and promote negotiation skills and skills of critical thinking (Hess, 1991; Jones, 1995; Ellington, Gordon and Fowlie, 1998; Wolfe and Crookall, 1998; Ruben, 1999; Brown and King, 2000; Hertel and Millis, 2002; Asal, 2005).

The literature also draws attention to potential problems with simulation activity which developers and tutors need to consider: over-simplified scenarios, reduced validity, difficulty of maintaining student participation if the activity is voluntary and non-assessed, complexity of timetable arrangements, and some difficulties in persuading both colleagues and students to value the activity.

The view taken for PLW Learning Week was that if the simulation is well designed, caters for subject knowledge, involves opportunities for learners to follow different and demanding activities, is linked as far as possible to institutional and faculty strategies, then the strengths and advantages of simulations should come through. A well constructed simulation should also address some of the concerns about simplification and lack of application to other learning activity.

PLW organisers recognised the potential risks with the exercise and took steps to pre-empt problems, as well as responding to those that arose.

1.1 Setting the simulation exercise brief

The exercise required learners to:

* work with prepared materials linked to their subject areas as part of a problem-solving exercise;
* take on roles or activities drawn from existing real-life cases without requiring acting or drama;
* conduct ongoing review and evaluation of personal progress and to report on such appropriately;
* use prior subject-based knowledge as well as new subject-based knowledge gained through the simulation exercise;
* give and receive different sorts of feedback.

Such requirements are common to many extended simulations. Further requirements were made to set the exercise in terms of relational autonomy. Following the literature referred to above these were based on developing different forms of dependencies and interdependencies in groups with the need for explicit reflection. Learners had to:

* identify feedback challenges, act on them with others and reflect publicly on the value of feedback;
* identify how they as individuals worked within changing group relations over the week;
* adopt a critical perspective to provided material and link their judgements to increasingly complex situations.

1.2 Simulations: Attendance and Assessment

The literature shows that if there is a formal attendance requirement coupled to assessment then attendance can be up to 80%. Inevitably this figure declines with longer simulations. It also declines markedly if participation is voluntary. The average attendance figure cited by the US Political Studies Association for voluntary, non-assessed simulation exercises is 10-15% of the available cohort depending on length of simulation activity.

PLW had to be offered on a voluntary, non-assessed basis as it was not a validated credit bearing entity

2. **Background**.

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| Professional Learning week (PLW) was offered to second year (Level 5) students from the following courses: BA Social Policy and BA Sociology, BA Criminology, students on joint degrees involving Criminology and Psychology with either Social Policy or Sociology. The simulation was offered for a whole week (25 contact hours plus additional student group work in the evenings) and was offered as a package, i.e. students could not choose to attend one or two days only. Participation was entirely voluntary.  At the end of the five days each student was awarded a certificate signed by the Executive Dean of Faculty. This certificate outlined the skills acquired, the types of activities involved. Students were offered a guaranteed reference from the lead tutor for any job they might apply for on completing their degree.  The simulation was run by a lead tutor supported by two colleagues from Applied Social Sciences with experience of running consultancy projects in both the public and the private sector.  The focus of the week was on consultancy in the public sector. Two scenarios were used   1. responding to evaluation data on performance in a Police Force over a one year period and developing an appropriate strategy; 2. responding to evaluation data on performance over a one year period against NHS targets in a Health Trust.   Students worked in groups throughout the week except for a small number of whole group sessions. Groups A, B and C worked separately developing their senior management team brief for a police force based on the provided data, while groups D, E and F represented imaginary consultancy firms responding to invitations to bid for a consultancy to help these police force management teams with their plans. A further two groups (G and H) worked independently in their representation of a Health Trust senior management team while a further three groups (I.J.K) represented imaginary consultancy firms seeking to help the health trust teams with their responses to league tables and a recent critical evaluation. Students first opted to be either members of the senior management teams dealing with evaluation and target setting, or to be members of imaginary consultancy groups seeking a tender in which they had to demonstrate their approach to consultancy and their methods for working with management teams from the two public sector groups.  Students had an initial orientation day where they worked on a specific scenario that brought in what consultancy was and how it might be used in public sector provision. They also had an introduction to evaluation reports and services for the police and health trusts with specific reference to the North Yorkshire Police Force and the Barking, Havering and Redbridge Health Trust who gave permission for this work. On the second day students had skills training working with an experienced external consultant which they then applied to developing consultancy briefs for either the police force or the health trust.  By the third morning each senior management team had decided on its particular needs. Similarly, each consultancy group had analysed the same data sets as the management teams and identified what they felt to be strengths and weaknesses within the performances of the police and the health trust. Management teams decided on their own role composition but in fact all teams included a director, a head of human resources, a liaison or communication manager, a finance director. The consultancy groups had decided on their names, considered their strengths and also their approaches, e.g. working on specific problems in a targeted way, or developing change strategies for an organisation.  Throughout the final three days students worked on developing, presenting and justifying consultancy briefs or in refining the requirements of the management teams where those requirements changed as a result of the exercise. They of course also questioned the consultancy teams on their bids.  Students representing the consultancy firms had to present their outline applications and analyses to the relevant senior management teams. The management groups gave them feedback and the tutors then gave both consultants and managers feedback to help them with their overall performance. The management groups refined their understanding of their data and their requirements while the consultants refined their applications. The consultants made a second submission to each relevant management team. Thus the consultants for the police had three senior managements to whom to present and each such team had identified slightly different priorities for consultancy. The consultants bidding to the health trusts had two managements to present in front of, who again had slightly different requirements. On the fifth day the consultancies made a final presentation and bid to each of their relevant management teams and then found out whether or not they had been successful in obtaining a contract. The management teams made the decision on which consultancy team(s) they wished to award contracts to and in their feedback to the successful and the unsuccessful they had to elaborate on the criteria behind their decisions. Each successful consultancy team then had to meet with their police force or health trust and start to elaborate their brief by demonstrating the consultancy approach they had adopted.  49 students attended the first day and from day 2 onwards 45 students participated in every session, an attendance rate of approx 24% of the available cohort. While far from satisfactory, this figure is noticeably higher than the average figure for this type of exercise cited above. It was sufficiently high to enable the tutor team to create five management groups with four students in each group and then five groups of consultants with five members per group. |

3. **Rationale**

This approach to simulation (emphasis on personal development through critical reflection directly related to subject knowledge) was adopted for the following reasons:

* There are few reported simulations that specifically engage with principles of autonomy. The literature review showed that simulations frequently support the development of both team work and independent learning. While valuable, such outcomes do not meet the requirements of a relational autonomy approach: the need to think through dependencies in groups, the adoption of ethical stances as a starting point for learning.
* Students could build upon the activity in subsequent studies, e.g. final year dissertation. The PLW exercise was referred to in the BA Applied Social Science revalidation for 2005/06 as an example of one way in which CPLA was integrated into the work of the subject groups. PLW also linked to one of the findings of the ‘Transitions’ Special Interest Group raised in that SIG’s student-led conference (Summer 2007): students find applications of material from one context to another difficult unless there is a framework which gives practical experience of applications.
* The approach adopted for the simulation integrated principles and practices of relational autonomy into subject-based activity.

4. **Professional Learning Week: The Approach**

4.1 Preparing for the week

The following tasks were conducted prior to the exercise. The planning stage began in April 2006 (a year before the exercise).

* signalling its presence in the CPLA annual operating plan for 2006/07; liaison with the following: the ASS programme leader, faculty administrative support and the timetabling department with room bookings completed by May 2006.
* establishing a steering group of relevant academic, administrative and facilities staff. One lesson from PLW is of the importance of working with this diverse staff body long before the exercise takes place.
* making applications to use web site material and other sources from a police force and a health trust (September 2006). The support and interest of the North Yorkshire Police and the Barking, Havering and Redbridge Health Trust is acknowledged.
* determining an appropriate week for the exercise with the steering committee. March 26th-30th 2007 was chosen as there were no seminar groups that week and it occurred towards the end of the student courses.
* Flagging PLW in 2006 to the students who would undertake it in 2007 so they first heard of it just before they completed their first year undergraduate studies.
* Convening a focus group with a sample of second year students at the beginning of the academic year (2006/07) to identify some student expectations that could be built into the exercise.
* Informing all tutors through route and subject leaders, using blackboard organisation sites to inform students and also using a *YouTube* site to announce the exercise. The latter was more effective than traditional email or Blackboard organisation sites in eliciting student interest and response.
* Considering the position of associate lecturers and their contracts. Two associate lecturers with experience of different forms of consultancy joined the developer as the tutor team. Choosing a week when no seminar groups were running meant associate lecturers were unlikely to miss teaching their seminar groups.
* Preparing a single day exercise for the first day so students worked in groups on a social science topic with reasonably strong quantitative elements (the majority of students expressed dislike for quantitative materials as reported in the focus group). The purpose of this exercise was to show that achievement of a level of quantitative skills is important in conducting evaluation activity and need not be particularly difficult to acquire.
* Inviting an external consultant, to run a one day workshop on developing skills relevant to consultancy activity within the overall programme.
* Preparing the main activity of either representing a police force or health trust or a consultancy firm. The data was obtained from the web sites of the North Yorkshire Police and the Barking, Havering and Redbridge Health Trust. This data was copied to c-d and distributed to all participants who were encouraged to bring in laptops to download particular sections. University laptops were also provided for student groups.

4.2 Activities in the PLW Week (26th-30th March 2007)

After an initial briefing on day one, the students were placed in prepared groups and worked for the day on a single project activity requiring data analysis. Projects included: preparing how to meet a breakdown of electricity services in the city in 2007, responding to threats of rural insurrection at a city level based on an analysis of riots in England in the 18th century. Both tasks were supported by prepared materials and gave students opportunities to identify how specific groups might respond, how information might be communicated in two different settings. For the last part of the day tutors went through the prepared CDs with the data from the public service bodies. Students were given an overview of each topic as well as a brief exercise on interpreting one of two tables: traffic offences, waiting lists. Overnight they had to think whether they wanted to be part of a management team or to act as part of a consultancy firm.

On day 2 students participated in a session with the external consultant, where they had practical group work based on listening, communicating, responding to difficult situations, giving feedback. Towards the end of the day students were divided according to their preferences into management groups or consultancy firms. The managers were then divided by the tutors into either senior police management teams or senior health management teams according to their preferences. There were three police management teams and two health trust management teams. Students who chose to act as consultants were divided by tutors into five groups with each group given the task of preparing a consultancy brief for either the police or the health trust. The consultancy groups were told they would be making a bid to secure a tender from either all the police management groups or all the health trust management groups on the final day. Equally, the management groups learned they would be receiving tender bids from all the consultancy groups who had chosen their service and that at the end of the week they would be awarding the contract to one or more groups and giving feedback to the unsuccessful. All students learned they would build up to the final presentation through practice runs.

The work with the external consultant gave students an awareness of what was involved in different consultancy approaches and also some insights into how management teams might respond to external demands.

So, at the end of the second day the newly formed consultancy groups went away to think about logos, consultancy approaches, and, hopefully, to start analysing the issues that either the police force or the health trust might face. The senior managers had to think overnight about what exactly they wanted from a team of consultants and what sort of approaches might work in their settings. They also had to decide how they would cover finance, human resources, and leadership issues in addressing the evaluation tasks. It soon became obvious to them from the data sets that having specialised roles would be helpful.

On days 3 and 4 and 5 students had to develop, defend and re-develop emerging scenarios according to whether they were management teams or consultants. The consultants had to make three formal presentations to all relevant management teams over these three days and receive feedback from each management team each time. Each management team differed in the emphasis it placed on findings from the data sets that informed the evaluation material and had to communicate its specific needs to the consultancy teams.

On day three each senior management team decided to choose a director, a human resource manager, a finance director, a communications director. The consultancy groups also worked on their own to complete their initial analysis of the relevant management team needs. In fact the consultancy teams had by now given themselves names and logos with titles such as 'Visions', or combinations of their own names. By late morning the groups were ready so each consultancy firm made a brief pitch to the relevant senior management teams, going round these teams one after the other. The latter were able to introduce themselves and to outline their needs. Neither party was expected to role play (role playing was signalled as a 'no no' in the focus groups held ahead of the simulation exercise). But at this point (midway through Day 3) each consultancy group established itself with the management teams and indicated both their strengths as consultants and what they felt the key issues were for each management team. Of course each management team had their own sense of key issues so there was discussion on this.

At the end of day 3 each group realised they had considerably more work ahead of them. The consultancy teams had to refine their messages so they addressed the stated needs of each management team in front of them. The management teams in their turn had to know more about their particular public service and justify what they felt was required of a consultancy team. We had a situation now where groups were having to take account of diverse set of needs and perceptions. Group recording through note taking was important.

In addition to this all the groups were given a further completely separate task to prepare over night - they had to develop a practical task for a group of people with little experience of working together. In fact it was the sort of task many employers will give potential recruits as part of a selection process.

Day 4 opened with each group carrying out its problem-solving task with at least two other groups in rotation completing the requirement. Tasks that the students produced included making something out of a set of objects they provided, deciding how to cross a river with minimal equipment and with additional hazards being suddenly introduced by the 'enjoyably cruel' task organisers.

This additional task helped each management and consultancy group refine their style of working and also gave further opportunities for feedback. It was now back to the main task and each management team called in the consultancy groups and gave them further details of requirements as well as listening to their emerging plans. For instance, a health management team agreed that waiting times and staff absence were critical factors - a point they had tried to conceal during the previous day. A police management group felt their key problem was one of maintaining public confidence over dealing with burglary and street crime at a time when they had to provide resources to deal with a single high profile murder case. This arose from their thinking about the data they were given.

By the end of day 4 the consultants had made a further detailed appraisal of management team needs which they addressed through a further ‘practice’ presentation which received feedback. There was clearly more work to be done over night ahead of the final day.

On day 5 consultancy teams made their final presentations to all their relevant senior management teams. The management teams then had to award a contract. Given that there were unequal numbers of management teams and consultancy groups it was always likely that a consultancy group would finish the week without receiving a contract. In fact while there were tensions between some management teams and consultancy groups every consultancy was successful. Management teams had been persuaded that their needs were diverse and that they needed the offerings of different consultancy groups to fulfil different tasks. So some contracts were split and were awarded to different consultants with negotiated costings. The exercise ended with management teams and their respective consultancy groups meeting to decide in more detail how the consultancy was to be taken forward.

*Giving and receiving feedback*: this was the most challenging task and was recognised as such in student evaluation. Each individual had to give and receive feedback at least three times during the week. The feedback demands became increasingly difficult as the week progressed with the consultancy brief increasing in complexity.

*Simulation Outcomes*: The groups divided equally at the outset between interest in the Health Service and the Police. The further subgroups of consultants and senior management teams were also fairly equally split although a deliberate imbalance was built into the exercise to make it more difficult for consultancy teams to be selected on the final day. Fortunately each group of 'consultants' was taken on by at least one senior management team.

*Key learning outcomes*: all students commented on how demanding giving and receiving feedback could be. They also commented on how easy it was to use a wide range of difficult material once they were embarked on the tasks but they found the total volume of material unnecessary. Students all felt the real learning was in how to use group settings effectively and there was 100% plea for more teaching to be organised on this basis. The level of presentation improved during the week. In terms of the professional requirements of the public sector bodies represented the exercise was probably insufficient for training purposes, but in terms of the learning required by the week's outcomes it was successful.

4.3 How could this exercise be adapted?

Students commented on the length of the week and the majority felt it could be reduced to a three day exercise but with the day with an external consultant maintained.

An external consultant was used simply because consultancy was the focus of the exercise. A change in focus would obviate the need for this. However, having someone from outside the setting can be positive.

To adapt it to a three day task the initial project task on day 1 could be linked directly to the main task and then students could go through one of the cycles only - agreeing a brief through an initial presentation and refining this for one final presentation. For shorter one day versions the exercise would need far simpler data sets, e.g. one or two problems only for service providers and consultants to tackle. This might require a single presentation, opportunity for revision, and then a final revised presentation. Shorter simulations are easier to link to ongoing module activities.

Whichever approach is taken it is important for staff involved in developing simulations to create sets of large building blocks of materials as well as approaches that offer alternative ways of tackling tasks. Staff can then either drop or simplify some of the blocks. Starting from an extended simulation and working backwards to the essential elements is a good strategy for well thought-through short simulations.

*Costs:* this exercise cost £1,200 in 2007 to cover additional payments to associate lecturers, payment of external consultant, publicity material. This does not cover simulation development time. Shorter simulations would have lower costs but repeated use of simulation materials can reduce overall costs. Materials can also be adapted to different uses.

Simulations are regularly used in higher education but many such exercises become ‘one off’ events. The sheer complexity of timetabling and other logistical needs make simulation activity very time consuming. Many academic staff remain unconvinced either of the content value of simulations or of the pedagogies employed. Simulation exercises are not the place for lectures or formal seminars. They need extensive preparation. However, if staff with less experience of such work can join a planning team and perhaps make a small contribution initially, e.g. listening to and responding to one particular student group throughout the exercise, then more staff can see this work has value, as recognised here by the students.

5. **Evaluation**

All participants completed an extensive evaluation form before the end of the week and these were analysed independently. A report was submitted to the ASS Programme Management Team. Follow up evaluative comment was obtained from a number of participants in their final year. Some of the findings have been incorporated above.

Student evaluations included the following:

* The week tested students and over 70% felt it was the hardest task they had undertaken at university - and a sizeable proportion of these suggested it was one of the best things they had done.
* clear gains in relevant knowledge, increased skills of self-understanding (essential to autonomy), understanding of different aspects of giving and taking responsibility.
* 80% reported they felt a three day exercise would be more useful given the pressure they were under to complete course work a few weeks after the exercise.
* All commented on communication about the exercise. The majority felt it would be helpful to know in advance what they were expected to do but all students commented favourably on communication effectiveness during the week and on tutor support.
* 10% of students felt the exercise should be held at the start of the academic year. The rest all felt that the holding of it towards the end of the second semester was the best possible time.
* Most reported that their initial motivation was the guarantee of a reference and a certificate they could use in the future. But over 50% commented on their changing recognition of the value of the exercise as the week went on.

Academic staff on the programme not involved in the exercise also commented on communication. Many felt they were dealing with student uncertainties and that the timing (towards the end of the second semester) was inappropriate.

The perceptions of the exercise leader and the two participating staff included the following:

* It is essential to have local academic programme management, administrative and technical support which was evident throughout the planning and delivery of this exercise. Communication about the week to students is never going to be ideal. If you say too much, you risk putting people off. However, the communication level needed to be improved. Understandably perhaps some students who did not participate complained to staff that they were not prepared to give up a week for such an exercise. An analysis of those who complained did show they included students with low attendance records anyway.

Most academic staff supported the project and indicated such to students. But a few academic staff advised students not to participate. Such mixed messages can be avoided and this really needs better preparation of academic staff by simulation developers. Do the direct explanation yourself rather than rely on anyone else to do it for you!

* If simulation activity of an extended sort is to be built into academic programmes then it is important full-time colleagues become part of the teaching team and that simulation development becomes a shared activity. It is important students have formally organised opportunities to practise further the skills and knowledge they acquire through simulations.
* Problems will arise - a sudden additional room booking necessitating a room change, absence of booked equipment. Have at least two alternatives to every main task.

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