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Beyond the “Babel problem”: Defining simulations for the social studies



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ABSTRACT

Simulation research has become a growing area of interest in the social studies in recent years. Problematically, the term simulation is used without consistency among practitioners and researchers. The conceptual confusion regarding what simulations are (or are not) muddies the field and makes it difficult for scholars to make sense of this phenomenon or to talk about simulations across findings. In order to bring clarity to the field, this paper is framed around two conceptual and analytic constructs: conceptual analysis and the theory of language games. In this paper, I will provide a rationale for why the social studies field requires a specific definition for simulations. Next, simulations will be defined using four specific criteria: verisimilitude, dynamism, active human agents, and pedagogical mediation. Finally, simulations will be differentiated from three related phenomena with which they are often conflated: games, role-plays, and models.

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Introduction

The term *simulation* conjures up many different ideas depending upon who is asked. For some, it is highly specific; for others, simulations may encompass many different pedagogical tools, including games, role-plays, theatrical performances, historical reenactments, and more. The recent reviews of simulations research reflect this tendency to erroneously lump simulations in with other pedagogical phenomena (Fogo, 2014; Stephens, Feinberg, & Zack, 2013; Thieman & Carano, 2013). Further, in research specific to simulations, there is presently no clear agreement as to what constitutes a simulation. In this regard, little has changed since Blaga (1978) observed that “there is a great deal of confusion among educators as to what constitutes a simulation” nearly four decades ago (p. 9). Aldrich (2009) refers to this confusion as “the Babel problem” (p. xxxii). This issue poses a problem for the research community insofar as the term *simulation* is used without clarity, and yet treated as if it were equally clear to all who use it. The research community has responded by attempting to over-define specific simulations for the particularistic needs of individual research studies (e.g., Colella, 2000; Gehlbach et al., 2008; Leigh & Spindler, 2004).

The goal of this conceptual paper is twofold: first, to provide a definitional framework for simulations that enables researchers and practitioners to overcome the Babel problem in order to promote clarity across a growing body of research specific to the social studies; and second, to extract simulations from other related phenomena.

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Literature review

The purpose of this review is instrumental rather than comprehensive. Although there is a broad base of research on simulations in the social studies leading up to the turn of the century, much of this literature is dated, based on practitioner accounts (DeLeon, 2008), or lacks the kind of methodological rigor we have come to expect of more recent research in the field. I conducted a comprehensive search of social studies journals for research and practice relating to simulations, and works that sought to define simulations in this field. Works from other disciplines that appeared in related searches were also included when they were useful for contextualizing the present state of simulations research and for illuminating the concepts – or elaborating upon the problem – highlighted in this paper. Rather than providing a comprehensive review of this literature, I have sought to present the reader with an overview of the trajectory of simulation research in the social studies, as well a selection of the literature that helps to illustrate the Babel problem and serves to resolve the semantic validity problem regarding simulations in the social studies.

Recent interest in social studies simulations

Social studies simulations have been a topic of research for decades. The majority of this scholarship occurred in the period from the late 1960s to the early 1990s (e.g., Chapman & Cousins, 1974; Charles & Stadskev, 1973; Cherryholmes, 1966; Marsh, 1981; Pierfy, 1977; Randel, Morris, Wetzel, & Whitehall, 1992; Zeleny, 1974). This body of research led to two broad conclusions: (1) simulations are no more effective than lectures for teaching content, and (2) simulations are more engaging for students. Research on simulations between this period and the present resurgent in interest was scarce. Currently, simulations are undergoing a revival of interest for a small, but growing number of social studies researchers and practitioners over the last decade. As the scholarly record indicates, the vanguard publications in this recent surge are mainly comprised of practitioner accounts of specific simulations or of teachers' reflections on using simulations (DeLeon, 2008). Of the studies conducted after the millennial turn, only a few focused on student outcomes before 2008 (e.g., Else, 2006; Lay & Smaric, 2006; Schweber, 2003, 2004; Williams & Williams, 2007), and only Schweber (2003, 2004) addressed effective teacher practices with a social studies simulation.

Since 2008, research on social studies simulations has blossomed. A number of researchers have begun attending to various facets of what simulations and practice with simulations has to offer social studies students and teachers. With the exception of DeLeon's (2008) content analysis of two simulations, research on social studies simulations falls into four core categories: Student learning (e.g., Johnson, Boyer, & Brown, 2011; Parker et al., 2011), student engagement (e.g., Ganzler, 2010; Gehlbach et al., 2008), student orientations (e.g., Johnson et al., 2011; Maitles & McKelvie, 2010) and teacher/teacher educator perceptions and practices (Wright-Maley, 2013a, 2013b; DiCamillo & Gradwell, 2012; Fogo, 2014; Stephens et al., 2013; Thieman & Carano, 2013).

Interestingly, there are conflicting analyses of teachers' perceptions of the value of simulations. Fogo's (2014) survey of social studies teacher educators indicated that simulations held about as much value as textbooks. This finding would seem to indicate that simulations have gained little esteem since Blaga's (1978) study of Ohio social studies teachers revealed a similarly dim view of simulations. Likewise, Thieman and Carano's (2013) study of social studies teachers in Oregon indicates that simulations and role-plays are among the least frequently used pedagogies in the classrooms of the teachers they surveyed. In contrast, the national survey Stephens et al. (2013) reported on indicated that simulations and role-plays are used regularly in social studies classrooms, but that their use diminishes in middle and high schools when compared to elementary schools. These contrary findings are confusing both for researchers and practitioners who are left without a clear sense of why these apparently contradictory findings exist. To be sure, the Babel problem is at least partly responsible for this confusion, because in each of the three accounts by Fogo (2014), Stephens et al. (2013), and Thieman and Carano (2013), simulations are conflated with role-plays which, I will argue, are conceptually distinct from simulations. Thus, the lessons we can draw from these findings are limited by the lack of conceptual differentiation between simulations and other related phenomena.

Conceptual confusion

The term simulation, as it is currently used, is not useful for serious research, and may even stymie efforts of practitioners to communicate with one another about their pedagogical choices. The conceptual burden facing simulations research is not limited to the problem of being bunched with other pedagogical strategies, but it must also attend to the issue of consolidating the dramatic variation of what different practitioners and researchers mean when they use the term simulation; we thus return to the Babel problem. Anecdotally, and in my own research, I have noticed that the term simulation has become something of a catch-word for teachers who use it to describe any pedagogy they believe to be both interactive and engaging. Although simulations may share both of these features, so, too, do many other pedagogies.

A conversation I had with a teacher several years ago helps to illustrate this confusion. She described how her students would be assigned point-of-view roles for them to carry with them throughout the year; some would be minorities, women, land-owners, children, and so on. The students would have to write about the events during each unit from the perspective of their assigned role. I nodded and agreed that this was a novel and innovative pedagogical device, but I stopped short of saying, "that's not a simulation". Part of my hesitation was that I could not, then, say just why I thought it was not. If perspective-taking were

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