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Review of Using Simulations to Promote Learning in Higher Education: an Introduction, by John P. Hertel and Barbara J. Millis.

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Using Simulations to Promote Learning in Higher Education: An Introduction. By John P. Hertel and Barbara J. Millis. Sterling, Va.: Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2002. x + 182 pages. ISBN 1-57922-052-5. \$22.50 (paper).

It is well known that the best learning takes place when the student is actively involved with the subject matter. *Experiential* learning can take a variety of shapes, including case studies, internships, and simulations. Like case studies, simulations are rooted in real-life situations. Well-designed simulations in religious and theological education provide students with the opportunity to practice their skills in interpretation of life situations in light of their theological commitments. Simulations give students the chance to reflect upon how the gospel message relates to specific situations in human life with all their inherent complexity – social, political, economic, and interpersonal. In short, simulations in religious and theological education provide a relatively controlled environment for developing a true theological praxis, rather than simply conveying theological doctrines.

Underlying the use of simulations in religious and theological education are three key assumptions: (1) education requires a community of learners who work together to create knowledge; (2) the classroom itself should model the kinds of power structures that students are encouraged to utilize when they leave the classroom; and (3) that theological knowledge is continually open to challenge, adaptation, reform and development, depending upon the specific situation to which it is addressed or which provokes this religious response. Simulations require students to work together, thus building the kind of learning community necessary for the theological endeavor, both for students and in the wider church. Using simulations in the theological classroom shifts the center of power from the instructor alone to the class as a whole, modeling the kind of shared power that is important to building healthy and vibrant parish communities. Finally, because simulations are based on real-life situations and even can be designed to include use of community resources beyond the seminary or university setting, students early in their program of studies can be exposed to the kinds of challenges to their theological convictions which otherwise either would not arise at all, or would be postponed until their parish internships or clinical pastoral education settings, toward the end of their educational programs.

John Hertel and Barbara Millis have compiled this book on educational simulations (not simply simulation games) to help educators design their own near-to-life simulations for experiential-based classroom instruction. Hertel was introduced to educational simulations through experiences teaching in law schools where the simulation method was used, and especially through pedagogical work in collaboration with James M. Brown at George Washington National Law Center. Convinced of the efficacy of such a method, Hertel joined with Barbara Millis to develop this guide “for teachers who have used others’ simulations and want to know how to design and implement their own” (ix).

Chapter 1 presents an argument for “Why Simulations Further Educational Goals.” Hertel and Millis suggest that simulations not only provide a way to meet “the general educational goals of (a) transfer of knowledge, (b) skill development, and (c) the application of both knowledge and skills” (1), they also teach the methods and strategies involved in the discipline, introduce students to significant organizations in the field, and provide more realistic interactions with other disciplines, and with people and organizations in the real world beyond the classroom. Simulations motivate students and foster “inquiry-based learning” (2).

Like other forms of active learning, simulations encourage students to go beyond the surface level to a “deep learning” approach, which is characterized by (a) motivational context, (b) learner activity, (c) interaction with others, and (d) a well-structured knowledge base (4–5). Students are encouraged to integrate their new knowledge with their prior knowledge and experience. Simulations can accomplish the same kinds of learning objectives as a traditional course, but they have the added advantage of creating the kind of “tension-to-learn” desired in experiential learning, while granting the autonomy and valuation to personal experience as a learning resource that is recommended by contemporary research on adult pedagogy (7).

In Chapter 2, Hertel and Millis define educational simulations as “sequential decision-making classroom events in which students fulfill assigned roles to manage discipline-specific tasks within an environment that models reality according to guidelines provided by the instructor” (15). The authors describe the structure of a simulation, the teacher’s role in implementing one, the students’ roles, and the simulation environment.

Chapters 3 through 6 are focused on designing, managing, debriefing, and assessing educational simulations. Debriefing the simulations is probably the most critical part of the educational process because this is when “students relate their experiences to the substance of the course’s content, discipline-specific processes, and skills” (60). Hertel and Millis include rules for a debriefing, and sample questions to uncover the learning that took place during the simulation.

Chapter 7 presents an extended simulation designed to take an entire term or longer, and the seven Appendices provide sample documents for implementing one.

This book on educational simulations is a readable discussion of this kind of experiential learning process. True neophytes who would benefit from a simulation handbook, which lays out the design process step-by-step, may find this volume too cursory to be very helpful in that regard. Instructors already familiar with simulations and eager to take on the substantial task of creating their own will find it interesting, and the discussion of debriefing could be particularly useful. It would have been very helpful to find some sample scenarios in the book taken from fields other than law. Educators in many of the traditional liberal arts disciplines (e.g., the humanities, math) will find it challenging to create scenarios that suit their needs; this volume includes no suggestions of how one might do so. As a result, this book is somewhat less useful for undergraduate instructors than for those involved in graduate studies and professional programs.

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