



Vol.6 Special Issue No.1 (2023)

Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

ISSN : 2591-801X

Content Available at : <http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/index>

Contending with controversy: Using a decision-based simulation for preservice teacher education on addressing challenged books

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Keywords

Diversity;
equity;
inclusion;
justice;
simulation;
teacher education.

Abstract

This paper shares an innovative use of an online decision-based simulation to help preservice teachers examine contentious issues, such as challenged books in elementary and middle school classrooms. Challenged books, particularly those around gender diversity topics, can be contentious as well as emotionally laden. The online simulation that uses a combination of recorded actors, writing exercises, and various decision paths requires the preservice teachers to contend with multiple stakeholders and various priorities in a rich sociocultural context. The teacher educators share key strengths of this use that include using a mistake-friendly learning environment, replaying the simulation multiple times to connect decisions with consequences, and engaging in a complex, nuanced, and responsive learning context. This article provides an overview of the simulation and what was found to be useful when using simulations to address contentious topics.

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Article Info

Received 9 July 2023

Received in revised form 10 October 2023

Accepted 24 October 2023

Available online 25 October 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.S1.7>

Introduction

As teacher educators in the context of the United States, we are attempting to build new teachers' efficacy around various competencies such as supporting all students and enacting tasks such as planning, classroom management, and relating with various stakeholders, such as colleagues, parents, and administrators which have been found to be challenging for new teachers in the classroom (Kozikoğlu et al., 2018). In the United States, where we currently prepare future teachers, we are faced with an increasingly contentious environment regarding "controversial" topics such as gender and race, which novice teachers find particularly challenging to support and address (Pace, 2019). This lack of efficacy of novice teachers can impact their effectiveness in the classroom. Moreover, research shows that teachers' implicit biases cause a lack of confidence among students that can lead to diminished expectations, particularly for students from diverse groups (Hanselman et al., 2014).

Teacher educators have tried to support their college teacher candidates by providing content, classes on diversity and diverse practicum placements, and support learning through in-depth cultural experiences within communities. Despite these efforts, research has pointed to the problem of what teacher candidates learn in university coursework and its divergence from what is practiced in the field, especially regarding culturally responsive practice and addressing diversity (Daniel, 2016). More recently, in the last decade, teacher educators have turned to the school practicum, particularly in "diverse settings," as a critical opportunity and a potential solution to connect coursework and practice to build future teachers' confidence and skills to support all students (AACTE, 2018, p. 14). However, researchers and practitioners are finding that the practicum, which focuses on skill development, often does not provide time or space within the mentor teacher's schedule to address issues dealing with diversity; the diversity issues, such as curriculum that is challenged or supporting student identities. In addition, concerns have long been raised about the moral and ethical issues when children, often with the most needs, are subjected to novice teachers who often do not have the skills or confidence to address issues of racism and inequities (Carrington & Troyna, 2012; Hixon & So, 2009). Over three decades ago, Delpit (1992) pointed to the problem of teachers practicing on other people's children, which is traumatizing for students who may be dealing with issues of oppression, implicit bias, and racism from our teacher candidates. To address the need to build our future teachers' efficacy in supporting all students in the classroom and navigating the complexities of multiple stakeholders in a contentious environment, we sought out the use of a simulation approach where children would not be "practiced on", and our teacher candidates could make mistakes.

This paper aims to share the power of an online simulation that is decision-based and used to engage elementary and middle school future educators in addressing the complexities of a challenged book. This online simulation effectively provides a space for emotionally laden and sometimes contentious discussions around diversity and provides a rich sociocultural context intended to build candidates' thinking,

efficacy, content knowledge, and problem-solving skills. In the next sections, we will provide a short background on the literature regarding the use of simulations, then turn to online simulation and our experiences using it over the last few years.

Literature review

Teacher education institutions worldwide are beginning to recognize the benefits of simulations and are incorporating them into their curricula. They provide spaces for teacher candidates to practice teaching skills and some to examine challenging topics within a simulated context (Kaufman & Ireland, 2016). For example, studies in Australia and New Zealand have highlighted the benefits of virtual reality simulations in helping pre-service teachers develop their classroom management skills and enhance their professional experience (Ryall et al., 2021). Similarly, European institutions are integrating simulations into teacher education with encouraging results (Goldsman, 2010). In North America, current simulations using virtual reality computer technology and video gaming have been effective in raising teacher candidates' efficacy regarding certain tasks, such as classroom management (Bautista & Boone, 2015), student-teacher interactions, and teacher-parent interactions (Mursion, 2021) and teacher preparation such as Quest2teach, a suite of game infused learning experiences for pre-service teachers. In terms of addressing the needs of various clients, various fields, such as nursing, have been using different types of simulations to increase knowledge regarding the use of an "equity lens" that informs how to apply nursing skills to patients from varied racial and cultural backgrounds (i.e., Buchanan & O'Connor, 2020) and even with particular genders (Tyerman et al., 2021). Unlike the focus of this best practice example, these simulations often use avatars or actors and focus on specific targeted skills. For example, in a recent study by Chen et al. (2021), a mixed reality approach that used avatars for the online simulation was used to help geoscience faculty increase their knowledge and efficacy regarding infusing a more inclusive environment and content in their courses.

Though these efforts are lauded for helping the field to examine the power of simulations to address issues surrounding diversity, equity, and their ability to increase efficacy in terms of skill development and awareness (i.e., Chen et al., 2021) they often lack a deeper immersive and complex context that requires preservice teachers to engage address multiple stakeholders and competing priorities. In addition, Sternberg et al. (2007) found that many teachers do not even understand the importance of sociocultural differences among students and do not possess practical knowledge to enhance their students' academic achievement from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Also, research has revealed that teacher education institutions do not often embed content or experiences that help candidates address issues of bias and critical thinking regarding institutional structures that reinforce inequitable schooling (Marchitello & Trinidad, 2019). The need for a more immersive online simulation that addresses these concerns led us to the current online simulation that we have been using for two years.

The next section describes the creation of the simulation and our collaboration with Schoolsims and then the specific simulation that we have been using for the past three years. We will end with learnings and suggestions for those using such simulations to engage in discussions on diversity within elementary and middle schools.

Overview of the simulation

The genesis of the simulation began with undergraduate researchers who were developing problem-based learning modules to foster learning about diversity-related issues in the elementary classroom. With the student's permission, the two faculty expanded the story greatly and collaborated with the company Schoolsims to house it on their online domain. The online system uses a decision tree structure to move the teacher candidates through the story. Candidates make choices that then move them through various situations. There are no avatars, but rather, actors were used to create the videos and narrations that help the story come alive. As candidates engage in the simulation, once they make a choice, they must move ahead to the next situation and decision, just as one does in life. When the candidates reach the end of the story, they will receive a report that chronicles the decisions they made and suggestions that were developed by the teacher educators. Candidates can engage in the simulation as many times as they would like. Throughout the simulation, candidates engage with varying stakeholders who, including families, students, administrators, community members, and colleagues. Depending on the choices that are made, you encounter particular individuals and groups as well as their responses to the decisions made. Below is the overview of the simulation platform.

SchoolSims is an innovative educational platform that offers immersive, video-based simulations in a choose-your-own-adventure format. . . . participants enter a virtual world of education where they face a series of linked scenarios, each presenting them with critical decisions and challenges. These simulations are powered by artificial intelligence, guiding participants down different paths based on their choices and showcasing the consequences of their actions realistically and interactively. (<https://schoolsims.com/product/>).

The overall goal of the simulation, *Building inclusive classrooms: Defending challenged books*, is to help candidates foster an inclusive environment in the elementary and middle-level classroom. Gender diversity is often missing from teacher education coursework and rarely discussed in these settings (Gorski et al., 2013). This 'hard topic,' due to its developmental nature in schooling and the emotions and politics surrounding it, provides an excellent example of the potential power of simulations to help candidates think through how to support all families in their elementary classrooms. This simulation is based on books that are challenged in the United States due to their connections and content regarding diverse family structures. The early childhood book *And tango make three*, by Peter Parnell and Justine Richardson, and the upper elementary-middle

school book *George* by Alex Gino, now titled *Melissa*, have been consistently challenged in school districts.

Simulations can provide safe spaces for mistake-making and engagement in deeply analyzing emotionally laden topics, such as supporting students and families within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersect, Asexual collectivity (LGBTQIA+) school context and curriculum. The learning is achieved by allowing users to consider options, make mistakes, and draw conclusions from experience. In the case of this sim, participants examine how to expand the curriculum that validates students' lived experiences and build allies within their community to advocate for their students. Therefore, a simulation's overall goal is not to provide participants with a recipe for addressing decisions in the classroom and school but to examine and fully understand that we have various decisions to make, which have consequences for perpetuating systemic inequalities as harming students.

The simulation scenario

In this simulation, *Building inclusive classrooms: Defending challenged books*, on the Schoolsims website, a narrator sets the scene of you being a 3rd- or 6th-grade teacher who is promoting reading in your class by asking your class to read 1,000 books by the end of the year. To foster reading, you have had your class do 30-second commercials on a book they read to encourage other students to read it. These are posted weekly on the class website, which is available for you to view. The story begins with a phone call about one of these videos of a book commercial, either *And tango makes three* (in the 3rd-grade sim) or *George* by Alex Gino (in the 6th-grade simulated story). The message does not reveal the concerns at that time. Your first decision of which you will have four choices are to either call immediately, text the parent, call on the weekend, or wait until Monday. Though seemingly inconsequential, this decision can set up the next series of events. Based on the decision you choose, the simulation takes you to the next part of the story. The story continues in this fashion, with you choosing an option out of four to five at each decision point. The simulation is designed to embody some key decision points and factors for you to weigh. There are over seven decision points that have various outcomes depending on what you choose. These include balancing parents' concerns while supporting students and dealing with the administration and school board while helping students advocate for their interests. Each point also brings in different stakeholders, depending on your previous choice, that includes other parents, the students involved, the librarian, and administrators. You cannot reverse any decision but must move forward. Each decision can have consequences in terms of impact on students, colleagues, and families. In addition, you must deal with competing priorities, actions, and decisions that seem to be simultaneously amidst busy teaching days. For example, whose phone calls do I respond to first? When do I bring in my principal? How do I deal with any weekend fallout as parents talk amongst themselves? How do I support students who may have heard about the books or issues through families? Peers? Do I understand all the opinions regarding book contents and the LGBTQIA+ community?

Though actors are not playing avatars, the emotions surrounding the situations that emerge are communicated through the tone in the video clips representing various stakeholder perspectives, as well as any written text.

The following sections will point to how the simulation has been used and the three opportunities the use of the simulation has provided to teacher educators and their students. These include creating spaces for difficult discussions, making mistakes, and engaging with educational issues within a complex set of circumstances, relationships, and contexts. The next section first discusses the ways teacher educators have used the simulation.

Simulation use

Teacher educators and their candidates have engaged with the simulations in multiple ways. For example, some faculty have candidates engage in homework where they individually participate and then reflect. In contrast, other faculty will have a whole class engage as a community through the simulation or a combination of both. In whatever way candidates engage, the teacher educators have been able to embed the experience within their curricula, connecting to various topics and themes. Three predominant strengths emerge in using the simulations in all these variations. One, the simulations create spaces for difficult discussions and serve as a vehicle to assist teacher educators in teaching this "hot" topic. Two, it provides candidates with a safe space to make mistakes as they struggle with the messiness of schools' sociocultural context embedded in communities. Moreover, it requires candidates to address the needs of multiple stakeholders with competing agendas and needs, thus increasing an understanding that there are not often right or wrong answers, just better decisions informed by the school's sociocultural context. We explore these three foci in depth in the next section.

Creating spaces for difficult discussions

Addressing complex or controversial topics when planned can be challenging for teachers and, more so, for novice teachers. However, when these conflicts arise unexpectedly, anxiety, avoidance, and fear emerge, making it difficult to deal effectively with the situation (Caser et al., 2021). There is this fear of potentially causing harm by making 'mistakes' with their decisions and actions. The simulations provide a space of safety in that candidates can make 'mistakes' and redo the simulation multiple times. Also, candidates know that they are not possibly harming students, families, or colleagues as they work through these situations. The candidates and novice teachers can make various decisions, some better than others, to address the situation without harming children, breaking relationships with colleagues in the school, or harming a relationship with an administrator or family.

This online space allows our candidates to put themselves in a sticky situation that raises anxiety and often confusion. They must deal with the competing perspectives of one parent, Kate, who wants to limit access to books connected

with LGBTQIA+, and Angela, who wants students to engage. Candidates may not be comfortable discussing the topic of LGBTQIA+, as well as what they believe. The strength of the online simulation is that candidates can engage in private spaces and with their peers in a safe context; this allows, especially candidates outside of the LGBTQIA+ community, opportunities to feel it is okay to be confused and to 'make mistakes.' At the onset of the simulation, candidates can engage with the various educational resources before engaging with the scenario. Providing private spaces increases engagement with the topic and a feeling of safety.

The other safe space is for the teachers' educator, who may not feel comfortable addressing topics such as LGBTQIA+ identities or curricular materials. Using the simulation can divert or shift the topics away from the personal beliefs of the instructor to the content within the simulation. Fear of sharing one's beliefs on challenging topics can derail discussions and engagement within the teacher educator's classroom. One of the first activities is that candidates must self-assess their feelings and comfort level in dealing with the situation. This provides a beautiful opportunity to talk about the fear, anxiety, and challenges of addressing conflicts in your classroom community and among your future families. In addition, conversations arise regarding their knowledge base and comfort in addressing books dealing with LGBTQ content.

The simulation provides a way to deflect from the personal embarrassment candidates and their teacher educators may feel in not knowing terms or the topic. In the initial pages, candidates can privately educate themselves about terms and other issues with the suggested links. This allows them to come to the class with some knowledge. The same goes for the teacher educator, who may feel uncomfortable or knowledgeable. The simulation provides a facilitator guide and background information in preparation for a discussion. Examining this privately allows teacher educators to prepare and "save face" in front of their candidates. It also provides opportunities for teacher educators who may not know how or be uncomfortable addressing LGBTQI identities using the simulation to guide the discussion.

Moreover, the facilitator guide will provide the teacher educators with ways to consider their context regarding political, emotional, complex, and hot topics. The facilitator guide provides questions at critical points. Not all of these are regarding identity issues, but they involve several topics, such as family relationships and building relationships with colleagues.

Another safety point is for the live children in a practicum or student teaching placement. Such discussions in a space where the children are absent provide candidates and teachers a space to share confusion, concerns, and responses. There is no mistake-making at this point on children but thinking ahead of the situation(s) that may occur. Because of this safe space, candidates can make mistakes, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Making mistakes

Schools are complex environments where teachers must navigate and use their emotional intelligence, professional dispositions, and educational skills. Novice educators or teacher candidates only sometimes have accountability for decisions regarding hot topics, such as a challenged book. The focus is often on skill development, particularly in practice and student teaching. In addition, classrooms and learning take place in complex settings. These complexities may be missed in a practicum or even student teaching due to those situations controlled and essentialized nature. In addition, they have a protective net from experienced teachers and mentors, as they should in these situations. They also will not take risks in addressing complex topics, as their success in student teaching and practica is critical to subsequent graduation and certification as a teacher. A struggle for novice teachers is being able to examine the complexities of the sociocultural context of the classroom. In the simulation, they can take those risks without harming anyone. They have 'accountability' with their decisions as they can see where it leads them next.

As novices who have never had to deal with administration, colleagues, or families on these topics or even in situations where there is conflict, they get to play out the impact of their decisions. This is remarkably freeing as they do not directly impact real children or colleagues as they progress through the simulation. They can essentially try out various decisions and see their impact. It is emphasized that there is no one right answer, though given the context of the situation, state politics, and school procedures, there may be better decisions than others. This is particularly important given the diversity of contexts across the United States and district responses to such situations. To support candidate learning at the end of the simulation, each user is provided an overview of their decisions with feedback. The feedback raises points to consider regarding the decision that was made, prompting reflection. One of the teacher educators remarked, "I also loved the feedback form at the end of the experience. What a great conversation starter to use in our courses. Also, I see these leading to discussions on what else could be done. Or what would you do differently? Why?" (AC). The following section focuses on the power of examining decisions within a complex set of relationships, realities, and perspectives.

Engaging issues within a complex set of circumstances, relationships, and consequences

Due to the complex nature of the classroom and school context, teachers must navigate multiple needs daily, read various situations, and respond in the best ways possible. As a teacher, we try to anticipate, but issues can emerge as families, students, and administrators react to a decision that was made with unexpected consequences. Depending on how the teacher addresses the issue, it can be even more controversial and contentious (Casar et al., 2021). Due to the nature of practice and the student teaching experience, candidates often focus more on teaching skills and practicalities than the nuanced environment and sets of relationships. So sometimes, in the complex system within

a classroom, something that seems inconsequential can become a significant, thorny issue in the classroom. For example, in this simulation, a simple assignment of having your students record 30-second commercials about a book they read to encourage others turns into a hot topic, as one of the books and its related commercial is requested to be removed from the website. The candidate must wrestle with how to respond. Should they immediately take the commercial down? What does that communicate to the students, their families, and other students if they do? Should you stop the book challenge overall or just the assignment? Is this a single situation? Who should be involved in this decision with this issue when the book comes from the library? The simulation provides a space to reflect and respond to competing perspectives and potential consequences.

For example, Decision Point 1: Initial response to the incident. For novice teachers or teacher candidates, this type of situation, when quick decisions are required, can increase anxiety and stress. This first decision provides an opportunity to discuss 'what should I do first' and then what might be the implications. This is also an excellent opportunity to help teacher candidates look at the priority of safety, order, and learning. We begin with the candidate checking in on how they feel about the situation. This provides a beautiful opportunity regarding novice stress in addressing complex situations.

Another decision point after this one is how to address the competing perspectives of the two parents. In several decision points, you need to decide whom to call first and how to deal with the different perspectives on the situation. One parent, Kate, wants the commercial taken down and possibly have library books on LGBTQIA+ put in a particular section, while other stakeholders believe that families and their students should have access to these books. Later, the parents' students become aware of the conflict and express confusion. You must decide among these stakeholders whom to address when, how, and what related implications from the administrative level. You have to wrestle with multiple perspectives and potential impact on what you communicate to students about books and hot topics and address the concerns of your class families. Having these multiple stakeholders, possible implications, and competing perspectives provides you with opportunities to wrestle with such hot topics in a safe space. The simulation provides opportunities for candidates to engage or discuss these topics within a classroom environment privately. Teacher educators can facilitate multiple discussions, including curricular decisions, family relations, organizational priorities, one's own beliefs and ethics, and others.

At each decision point, candidates must decide how to address or respond to a previous decision. Often, these are in relationship to their colleagues, students, and administrators. By basing these decisions within a broader context, they will experience how one's decisions do not occur singularly and in an isolated context. Often, this is the way in our courses because of the nature of discussing possible actions I might take. In the simulation, the candidate is provided with a response to their decision, thus simulating the emotions and even confusion that can emerge as they engage in real-

time decision-making. The decision's contextualization and simulated reality are critical to building a more ecological framework for teachers' work.

The discussions help candidates to see in their context what would be a typical approach, as well as some issues that can arise that open the door to support students who are reading about this topic or are members or allies of the LGBTQIA+ community. Though teachers in the classroom do not want to address pedagogically controversial topics, there is research on the challenges associated with hot topics that emerge. When doing this, the candidates must examine the issues as they emerge within a provided context.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, simulations can provide safe spaces for candidates to examine complex and contentious topics and experiment with decision-making in ways that do not harm themselves or the students. Faculty can also build curricular pieces that support the rich learning available in a simulation. We have found that the simulation provides teacher educators with a 'ready-made' learning opportunity to facilitate discussions based on the simulation. The simulation supports teacher educators who need to be more comfortable or knowledgeable. It also provides a safe space for our candidates to examine these topics. Candidates have appreciated the realistic nature of the simulation and the messiness they may face in their future classrooms. One key learning has been how and when to use the simulation. Some have found that full class discussions reap many rewards in learning as the class struggles through decision points. At the same time, other teacher educators and their students have appreciated first individually engaging and then discussing the simulation and individual responses. In any of the approaches, the candidates will benefit if the simulation is embedded purposefully into the course and includes reflection and discussion. Furthermore, it provides candidates with resources.

Overall, there are particular strengths that are especially aligned with preparing teachers to address complex and challenging issues in the school environment. Below is a list of five.

1. Preservice teachers can play the simulation repeatedly, making different choices each time. This helps them understand the consequences of their choices.
2. A friendly environment provides safety, which improves engagement, knowledge retention, and efficacy. In the real world, mistakes can have serious consequences. However, in a simulation, teacher candidates can make mistakes without real-world consequences. This safe space for error allows candidates to learn from their mistakes and improve their teaching strategies. It helps them engage more fully in the learning process, retain the knowledge they've gained, and improve their teaching efficacy.

3. Conversations compel learners to understand not just the 'how' but also the 'why' and often reveal hidden biases and uncover areas of improvement. The discussions foster deeper understanding and self-reflection. Participants don't just learn how to do something but also why they're doing it. For example, a teacher candidate may realize, through discussions, that they have a bias towards a certain teaching style, which may not suit all students.
4. Simulations provide opportunities to wrestle with school policies and relationships with families, students, colleagues, and administration. They can be designed to mimic the complexity of real-life educational contexts.
5. The 'messiness' that is more the reality of teaching than the simple steps to addressing every situation: Real-life teaching involves complex challenges that can't be solved with a one-size-fits-all approach. Simulations can mimic this 'messiness' by presenting teacher candidates with nuanced, complex situations that require careful thought and decision-making.

Despite the noted benefits, implementing simulations in teacher education is not without its challenges. These include technological barriers, costs, time investment for training, and resistance from stakeholders. Solutions may involve securing funding sources, conducting professional development for educators in effectively using and integrating simulations, and fostering a culture that supports technological innovation in teacher education. Beyond these challenges, the pedagogical design of simulations must also be considered. To support the development of socio-cultural consciousness among teacher candidates, simulations should authentically represent diverse learning contexts and student identities. This requires collaboration between simulation designers, teacher educators, and cultural competency experts. Furthermore, it is critical that such simulations not only expose teacher candidates to diverse contexts but also foster critical reflection and discussion about the decisions they make within the simulation. The Schoolsims decision-based simulation that we use provides a rich, story-based context that mirrors an actual situation with decisions and related consequences that reflect the ways that schools in the United States react. Simulations embedded in a particular sociocultural context can provide safe spaces for candidates to wrestle with the relationship between their actions and decisions, student learning, community building, and addressing difficult topics in their teaching.

Looking ahead

As technology advances, the potential for simulation-based teacher education grows. For example, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) can further enhance the realism and personalization of simulations. In the near future, simulations could adapt to users' responses, offering a highly individualized and responsive learning environment. Moreover, research on the long-term impact of simulations

on teacher candidates' skills and efficacy, particularly their ability to address various contentious situations in their classrooms, is needed to inform the continued evolution of simulation use in teacher education.

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