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Simulation-Based Training for Enhancing Professional Competencies in Teacher Education: A Study on the Role of Dissonant Profiles in Fostering Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

Szkolenie oparte na symulacji w celu zwiększenia kompetencji zawodowych w kształceniu nauczycieli: badanie roli profili dysonansowych we wspieraniu umiejętności krytycznego myślenia i rozwiązywania problemów

Abstract: This study investigates the potential of simulation and virtual exchange as a pedagogical strategy for training pre-service teachers in a Master course. The research focuses on the role of professional profiles in shaping the simulation scenario and the impact of embracing dissonant profiles on understanding complex educational systems. The study employs a qualitative case-study design to explore the effectiveness of simulation-based learning in teacher education. The results indicate that simulation-based learning can enhance professional competencies by fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership and contingency management. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of incorporating theory and research on experiential learning, embodiment, and situated cognition to better understand how professional profiles influence the simulation scenario and the development of professional competencies. The findings suggest that embracing dissonant profiles in simulation can help pre-service teachers better comprehend the complexities of professional practice and develop the skills necessary for effective teaching.

Keywords: virtual exchange; simulation; dissonance; profile roles; teacher training

Abstrakt: Artykuł bada potencjał symulacji i wirtualnej wymiany jako strategii pedagogicznej w szkoleniu przyszłych nauczycieli na kursie magisterskim. Badania koncentrują się na roli profesji zawodowych w kształtowaniu scenariusza symulacji i wpływie przyjęcia profesji dysonansowych na zrozumienie złożonych systemów edukacyjnych.

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Niniejsze badanie wykorzystuje jakościowy projekt studium przypadku w celu zbadania skuteczności uczenia się opartego na symulacji w kształceniu nauczycieli. Wyniki wskazują, że uczenie się oparte na symulacji może zwiększyć kompetencje zawodowe poprzez wspieranie krytycznego myślenia, rozwiązywania problemów, przywództwa i zarządzania sytuacjami awaryjnymi. Ponadto badanie podkreśla znaczenie włączania teorii i badań nad uczeniem się przez doświadczenie i poznaniem sytuacyjnym w celu lepszego zrozumienia, w jaki sposób profile zawodowe wpływają na scenariusz symulacji i rozwój kompetencji zawodowych. Wyniki sugerują, że przyjęcie profesji dysonansowych w symulacji może pomóc przyszłym nauczycielom lepiej zrozumieć złożoność praktyki zawodowej i rozwinąć umiejętności niezbędne do skutecznego nauczania.

Słowa kluczowe: wirtualna wymiana; symulacja; dysonans; role profilowe; szkolenie nauczycieli

INTRODUCTION

Simulation as a pedagogical methodology holds significant potential for elucidating key dialectical dynamics, many of which are crucial in the context of teacher training. According to Shirts (1975), simulation encompasses a set of "norms that define a specific model that reflects reality" (p. 76). Feldman (1995) further describes it as "a model of events, items or processes that do or could exist" (p. 347). Within this framework, a simulation refers to an activity where participants are assigned specific responsibilities and provided with essential information about the scenario, enabling them to perform their roles without resorting to play-acting or fabricating crucial details (Bogost, 2007; Jones, 2013).

Simulations are particularly effective in addressing educational issues, environmental threats, sustainable economic practices, and human rights concerns (Klabbers, 2006, 2009; Crookall, 2010; Harteveld et al., 2011; Jones, 2013). Participants in these activities engage with realistic scenarios requiring them to develop solutions to various problems or situations. This necessitates self-directed learning about the scenario's content, the formulation of innovative concepts, negotiation, and the exercise of critical decision-making skills. To support their understanding of the subject matter, participants are provided with diverse educational resources, including written materials, audiovisual content, and current online news (Duke & Greenblat, 1981; Greenblat, 1988; Crookall & Oxford, 1990; Angelini & García-Carbonell, 2019).

In light of this, during the simulation, participants draw not only on their individual learning but also on their communicative and social skills, making their roles crucial for the simulation's success (Kriz, 2017, 2020). Each participant must visualize and address the needs of their assigned profile, thereby analysing the scenario from that perspective (Angelini & Muñiz, 2022; Angelini et al., 2024). As participants respond to their profile's demands, they may encounter moments of frustration due to conflicts or disagreements arising from the diverse roles and perspectives represented. Participants might face situations that challenge their own views or knowledge or compel them to advocate for positions they do not personally support. This confrontation of ideas, lack of knowledge, and the need to empathize with contrasting standpoints can generate feelings of discomfort (Angelini et al., 2024).

This article examines the sense of disappointment experienced by participants, particularly focusing on the construction of knowledge when confronted with the so-called "valley of despair" during the performance of dissonant profiles. According to de Wijse-van Heeswijk (2021), the "valley of despair" is a period in the simulation where participants "feel unhappy and frustrated about their results [...] since the behavior they performed was not sufficient to meet their goals" (p. 318). This frustration may stem from insufficient knowledge about the issue or the impossibility of achieving their profile goals. The valley of despair can evoke negative feelings and emotions, potentially overwhelming participants with the simulation and their learning process (Álvarez, 2023; Carrera et al., 2016; Dieckmann, 2020; Jones, 1998, 2013; Kato, 2010; Kriz, 2010; Rudolph et al., 2014).

In the literature, the valley of despair is often considered a situation of blockage when participants realize their inability to solve a problem. Despite the risk of blockage, these periods of difficulty, as many authors argue, can enhance metacognitive skills by forcing students to identify weaknesses at various levels: educational, social, or emotional (de Wijse-van Heeswijk, 2021; Van Laere et al., 2021).

From an experiential perspective, the most significant learning occurs through experimentation and the application of knowledge to real-world challenges (Reime et al., 2017). This academic study aims to investigate the effectiveness of simulation as a pedagogical strategy for training prospective secondary school teachers in a postgraduate course. The study seeks to explore how participants, by engaging in various professional roles within the scenario and adopting different profiles, can deepen their understanding of professional dialectical phenomena within a complex educational system.

A notable example of a simulation used in teacher training is the "Think-Tank School" scenario, as detailed by Angelini and Muñiz (2022). This simulation aimed to facilitate thorough analysis and discussion of various educational challenges faced by the Think Tank School, including:

1. Active Methodologies in ESL: The simulation addressed the need for innovative and engaging teaching methods in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. This challenge required teachers to develop strategies that catered to diverse learning styles and promoted student autonomy.

2. Parents' Concerns about Homework: The simulation also focused on the issue of parents expressing dissatisfaction with their children's inability to complete homework independently. This challenge necessitated teachers to develop effective strategies for homework assignments and to communicate with parents about their children's progress.

3. Classroom Management: The simulation highlighted the importance of effective classroom management, particularly in ESL classes where teachers may face unique challenges. This challenge required teachers to develop strategies for maintaining a productive learning environment and managing classroom dynamics.

4. Shared Teaching through Lesson Study: The simulation involved pre-service teachers observing how children learned through Lesson Study, a collaborative approach to teaching. This challenge required teachers to adapt to the disruption caused by having observers in the classroom and to develop strategies for incorporating feedback from peers.

5. Other Educational Challenges: The simulation also addressed other challenges faced by the Think Tank School, such as managing diverse student needs, integrating technology into the classroom, and developing assessments that accurately measured student learning.

The general objective of the simulation was to encourage participants to analyse different perspectives with sound arguments and negotiate innovative strategies and proposals. The ultimate goal was to ensure that the Think Tank School could develop a robust and thriving model of education in the specific field of English language instruction.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This section describes the participants involved in the study, simulation topics, data sources, the procedure followed and declarations.

Participants

Pre-service teachers from the Faculty of Education in Valencia ($N = 45$), Spain carry out virtual exchange and simulation with pre-service teachers and some in-service teachers from the University College of Teacher Education Lower Austria, the Tunis Virtual University, University of Stavanger, the Northeastern University in Chicago and Mills University in California. During a postgraduate training course focused on Didactic Resources in English as a Second Language (ESL), participants engaged in a significant large-scale simulation. This simulation, serving as an assessment tool in teacher training-related subjects, was a mandatory component of the course. Academic teachers from participants' respective home universities provided training and coordination for the simulation. The simulation was structured around the formation of multicultural teams by the leading university in Spain. Each team comprised 5 to 7 participants, fostering collaboration and diverse perspectives within the simulation. This approach aimed to enhance participants' understanding of multicultural dynamics and promote effective teamwork in addressing the didactic challenges specific to ESL instruction. Table 1 shows information about participant groups, area and number. Virtual interaction consists of synchronous and asynchronous meetings via Teams (Microsoft). In order to foster participation and reward the effort, certificates are given to all students.

Table 1. Project participants

Country & University	Faculty	Type	Subject	No. of students
Valencia Catholic University	Education	Compulsory	EFL/ESL methodology	45
the University College of Teacher Education Lower Austria	Education	Optional	Teaching Degree	3
Tunis Virtual University	Education	Optional	Advanced English	14
University of Stavanger	Education	Optional	Teaching Degree	6
Northeastern University	Special Education, Teacher Training	Optional	Teaching Degree	25
Mills University	Education	Optional	Teaching Degree	15

Source: Author's own study.

Mixed teams are created (2 Spanish, 2 American, 2 Tunisian, ...), and a flexible schedule is designed in order to plan synchronous and asynchronous meetings via Teams. Profiles are assigned randomly to each participant.

Simulation

The study utilized a simulation called "The National School of Valtance" (version 1, see Annex) as its primary research tool. The simulation employed a thematic approach to analyze the impact of decisions in an educational context, focusing on the identification of individual and group interests, as well as the discussion of institutional policies related to active methodologies, special education, internationalization, co-teaching, cyberbullying, and equity in education. The sociolinguistic approach adopted in the simulation aimed to develop participants' social and language abilities in the context of higher education. Specifically, it targeted the following objectives:

1. Debating, negotiating, and making decisions in higher education
2. Controlling simple and some advanced grammatical forms
3. Improving pronunciation at the segmental and suprasegmental levels
4. Managing a wide range of vocabulary when speaking on specific topics
5. Producing extended stretches of appropriate language fluently
6. Improving intercultural communication competence
7. Developing critical awareness of global realities

Qualitative study

For the qualitative study, data was collected through a multifaceted approach. Students submitted final reports detailing their experiences, which were complemented by

structured direct observations conducted by academic teachers during synchronous sessions. The items analysed in the reports included:

1. **VE Description**: A detailed description of the simulation experience.
2. **Pedagogical implications**: The pedagogical implications of the simulation on teaching practices.
3. **Pedagogical strategies**: The strategies employed during the simulation.
4. **Learning Outcomes**: The learning outcomes achieved through the simulation.
5. **A Small Personal Voice**: A reflective component where students shared their personal experiences, highlighting the impact of the simulation on their learning and profession. This included what they learned, what they knew now, what they still needed to improve or discover, and the applicability of the simulation in their career.

To identify dominant themes within the data, a descriptive frequency analysis was performed using DEDOOSE-9.2.005 software. This analysis informed further analysis and interpretation of the findings. The qualitative research approach employed in this study is consistent with the emphasis on participant perceptions and their own discourse in social sciences, as highlighted by prominent researchers such as Goetz and Le Compte (1988), Vallés (1997, 2002), Sandín (2003), Harris (2005), and Twining et al. (2017) among others.

Procedure

For the simulation, the scenario and profiles are given to the students in each team. Facilitators also create the Teams sessions so they can follow up the synchronous interactions and check participation with no intervention in their discussions. After the interactions, students conduct a debriefing session and individually answer an open question about their experience. Table 2 describes the complete procedure.

Table 2. Complete procedure

Briefing	Simulation	Debriefing	Data collection	Data analysis
Week 1–8	Week 9–11	Week 12	Week 12–13	Week 13–16
Content presentation: ESL didactics, classroom management, AI, ICT in the classroom, special learning needs, education for peace …	Synchronous/ Asynchronous simulation	Oral and written reflection about the experience (report), individual and collective learning	Likert-type questionnaire (participants'); Written reports (participants')	Main researchers' analysis and conclusions

Source: Author's own study.

Data analysis

The analysis of the debriefing reports, as discussed by Crookall and Oxford (1990) and Crookall (2010, 2023), identified 9 categories of analysis. These categories are depicted in Figure 1 and are as follows:

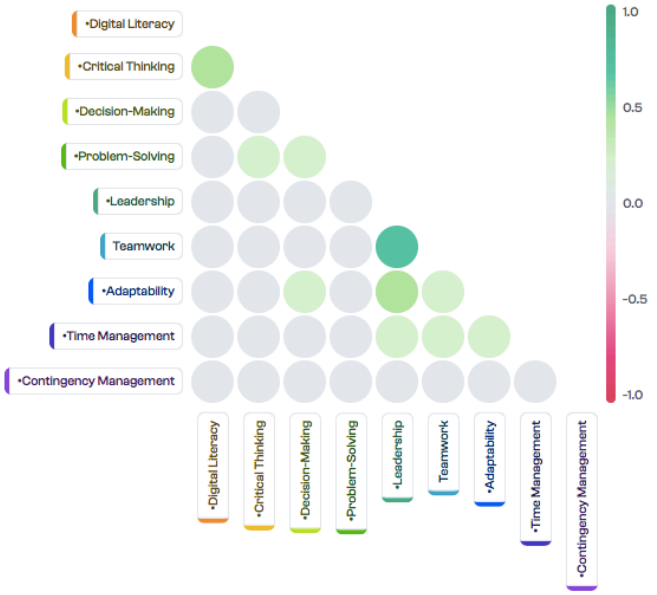

Figure 1. Correlation among categories of analysis
Source: Author's own study.

Correlation among categories of analysis is a common phenomenon in qualitative studies. In fact, the relationships among categories are often complex and interdependent, reflecting the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the data. This interdependence can be observed thematic interplay: themes often overlap or intersect, revealing the intricate relationships between different aspects of the phenomenon under investigation (Twining et al., 2017).

DECLARATIONS

The study adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring the ethical treatment of human participants. Prior to participation, participants provided informed consent through a letter that detailed the absence of anticipated risks or discomforts associated with the research. Furthermore, participants were as-

sured that their names and any identifying information would remain confidential and not be disclosed at any point during the study. Regarding data availability, the findings of this study are supported by data from the IGALA Research Group. Although these data were used under license for the current study and are not publicly accessible, they can be made available upon reasonable request from the authors, subject to the permission of the IGALA Research Group. No competing interests were declared by the author, indicating that there were no potential conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research or its outcomes.

RESULTS

Interacting with peers and receiving feedback facilitates the development of self-awareness and the ability to assess one's own strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement among students. Some participants reported mild discomfort or disagreement with certain profiles, particularly the "parent" profile role.

> I felt I had to explain things in such a way that the parents could understand. I realised it drew a lot from me. It was a nice practice as this is precisely what we will end up doing in the future. (Participant Teacher Training Degree – Stavanger)

> It was a fantastic opportunity for all the class to meet pre-service teachers from abroad. With my team, we could have glimpses of what teaching EFL/ESL was like in cities such as Baden or Stavanger. As a parent, I found out of place in the discussion because I thought all the justifications provided were right. I think I was not able to interact more because I do not have much experience teaching English. (Participant Teacher Training Degree – Valencia)

> I really learned from the other students from abroad. I got a bit anxious as I felt I questioned the teachers a lot as I was a parent in the simulation. They did it very well but could not solve some of the problems I presented such as the lack of speaking abilities of my "child" and some of her classmates. (Participant Teacher Training Degree – Baden)

These comments suggest the potential for disagreement or dissonance with certain profiles, which can lead to a personal conflict. It is crucial to note that dissonant profiles can induce a sense of despair during the simulation, as seen in our study where inquisitive parents prompted interesting reflections aligned with the realization of what participants knew and what they still needed to consolidate.

> Upon reflection, I realize that certain profiles, particularly the parent role, unsettled me. As an educator, I acknowledged the need for enhancements in my teaching approach, but justifying the requirement for written homework seemed excessive. I felt uneasy about having to pro-

> vide explanations and equally uncomfortable with the possibility that the parents' concerns were valid. (Student Teacher Training Degree – USA)

Through the simulation, leadership skills were demonstrated in each team's performance. The collaborative nature of the simulation allowed participants to work alongside other educators to achieve shared educational objectives (teamwork). Some participants were assigned a profile role that they did not initially expect, which led to a mixed emotional response. Initially, they experienced anxiety, but as the simulation progressed, they developed a sense of control and confidence in their role (adaptability).

> Simulation has been revealing in many positive ways. It was the first time I do something like this. My mates were all involved and took it very seriously. I personally observed how my initiative to introduce flipped classroom more often in other subject rather than English to provide more practice to pupils and also parents. (Student Teacher Training Degree – Valencia)

Critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities are highly correlated, with a strong positive relationship between the two. This correlation is evident through some participants' testimonies:

> This is the first time I participate in a professional discussion with people from abroad. Their points of view helped me become aware of the importance of diversity in the classrooms. Now I understand more some of the issues, especially the one on special needs and how to manage a class inclusively. (Participant Teacher Training Degree – Valencia)

> As a student engaged in my educational journey, I have come to realize the significance of problem-solving skills in navigating the complexities of the simulation. Through the various meetings, I have honed my ability to analyze the educational challenges in the scenario critically and to explore alternative solutions. (Student Teacher Training Degree – USA)

Simulation is a ground-breaking pedagogical strategy that together with virtual exchange cleverly engages students in online intercultural dialogue with many advantages that very rarely can be achieved with more traditional teacher training.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that integrating dialogic practice through simulation aligns with the United Nations' Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development Goals. Simulation not only enhances teamwork and problem-solving skills, as highlighted by Shulla et al. (2020), but also cultivates critical thinking and transformative learning by challenging student teachers to critically analyse pertinent educational issues and

their role in fostering a more equitable and peaceful world. A participant succinctly expressed this transformative effect by stating, "This simulation has given me the confidence to tackle academic challenges head-on, making me more adaptable".

Furthermore, these findings affirm that simulation serves as an effective self-realization strategy. Participants not only recognized success in their learning but also identified their own limitations, a phenomenon supported by previous studies that emphasize the interactive and immersive nature of simulation, as noted by Bogost (2007), Crookall (2010), Harteveld et al. (2011), Jones (2013), Kriz (2017, 2020), among others.

Simulation inherently presents challenges that are readily observable by participants. Consistent with de Wijse-van Heeswijk (2021) and Van Laere et al. (2021), the "valley of despair" emerges from the demanding simulation scenarios and the presence of "dissonant" roles during the simulation. The study underscores that participants' realization of their educational needs in terms of methodologies, strategies, and dialogic skills stemmed from the difficulties encountered during the simulation.

Moreover, a critical discovery pertains to two specific professional competencies: the proficiency in conducting professional meetings through constructive dialogue and the confidence in utilizing English for communication. Extensive research has highlighted the impact of simulation on language development and professional dialogue, as evidenced by studies such as Duke and Greenblat (1981), Greenblat (1988), Angelini (2019), and Reime et al. (2017).

Lastly, in alignment with Crookall and Oxford (1990) and Crookall (2023), participants' testimonies revealed that the guided debriefing sessions led by the facilitator prompted a deeper understanding of their limitations, areas for improvement, and the influence of their contributions within their teams.

In conclusion, the study underscores the transformative potential of simulation-based pedagogy in fostering students' engagement in professional dialogue, promoting collective learning, and refining communication skills. Future research endeavors will investigate the variables that influence learning through the strategic integration of dissonant profiles to assess participants' preparedness and improvisation abilities within simulation-based instructional settings.

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ANNEX

The National School of Valtance – Version 1

Briefing Sheet

At the National School of Valtance we take our responsibility seriously in order to prepare children for life in the 21st century. The acquisition of fundamental values lies at the heart of everything we do and all areas of the curriculum are a vehicle for underpinning these values.

The school aims to expose every child, every day, to experiences that will help them understand the need for mutual respect, tolerance and understanding of people from different cultures. We pride ourselves on our success in this area as we see our students embrace difference with respect and integrity.

In order to achieve our values and goals, National School of Valtance will:

- have only an initial fee every year course of 140 € to cover administrative costs;
- maintain a school culture of excellence in teaching, student achievement, innovation and self-advancement;
- maintain a supportive, healthy and secure environment for teaching and learning;
- utilise technology and innovative pedagogy to advance student learning;
- raise student awareness and engagement in social, environmental and inter-cultural activities, both within and outside the academic programmes of study;
- provide excellent facilities and resources to support the programmes of study, minimizing negative environmental impact;

- recruit, develop and retain teachers and support staff, who inspire students, contribute to the professional learning community and are positive role models for our students;
- maintain stable and effective governance focused on financial soundness, operational efficiency and the long-term advancement of the school;
- engage parents, alumni and the local and wider community in support of the school.

Early Years Foundation Stage

The Pre-School caters for children from 18 months to 4 years of age and follows the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. The main approach of the Early Years Foundation Stage is to recognise and develop the many ways in which children express themselves. This involves following a curriculum rich in language, words, movement, play, painting, drawing, sculpture, music, role play and most importantly outdoor experiences in the natural environment.

Primary School

The Primary School aims to offer a balanced curriculum that promotes the acquisition of key skills through inquiry based learning. The IB philosophy and approaches to learning provide a curriculum that is engaging, relevant, challenging and significant to learners.

This thirst and enthusiasm leads children to developing the self-confidence and capacity to realise their expectations. The children are on a journey, discovering themselves and their future place in the world.

We achieve this special environment by employing inspirational teachers who respect every child and believe that whatever background or prior learning the child has, he/she has the capacity to excel.

We design fun learning experiences that build on children's prior knowledge and interests challenging their thinking. Learning experiences are both individual and collaborative, with every child encouraged to be a team player and a valued member of his/her class, year group, the school and society at large. Languages are fostered, being English taught through English lessons, Physical Education and Arts and Crafts.

Secondary School

Secondary School programmes of study build on the firm foundations established in the Primary School and begin to prepare students for secondary education. All programmes of study centre around guiding questions that open up and develop thinking skills, subject knowledge, concepts and ideas. Technology is rapidly changing in our

world and this stage of learning is a vital time for our students, who need to become skilled in its use and as a tool for learning.

The National School of Valtance will be part of a consortium and will share the same principles. The National School of Valtance has been providing accessible education since 2010. As a new model of education, several issues still have to be discussed and improved.

An elected Committee meets three times a year to discuss and share information pertaining to the whole school. This term, the Committee is meeting to deal with some inquiries presented to the Head of the school. This Committee is made up of the following people:

1. Head of the National School of Valtance
2. ValPE, the Valtance Pedagogical Advisory Board
3. ValPAR, the Valtance Parent Association
4. ValED, the Valtance English Department (x2)

The inquiries and requests for clarification are classified into:

1. Teaching methodologies in ESL-language teaching/skills/
2. Classroom management
3. Shared teaching through lesson study
4. Storytelling and drama in English