

A Journey to the Role of Facilitator: a personal story unfolding alongside world trends

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Abstract. Simulations and games for learning require expert management drawing on specialist skills and knowledge. Dick Duke's 1969 invitation to a 'conversation about simulation', initiated a process that has generated 50 years of thoughtful analysis of the design and use of simulations. In the early stages, facilitation was not high on agendas for discussion or research. However, the role of the facilitator has been receiving more attention, as the importance of effective management of simulation events receives more recognition. Awareness of the complexity of human interactions, and the ways in which simulation can both replicate and unsettle them, is leading to more research and attention being paid to the role of the facilitator. Using a trajectory of personal experiences beginning in 1969, this paper uses an auto-ethnographic approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to review my own development as a facilitator of simulations and games, alongside an exploration of the broader, evolving understanding of the role, and the increasing complexity involved in ensuring facilitators contribute effectively to current learning contexts.

Keywords: Facilitation, role of facilitator, personal development, simulations and games for learning

1. Introduction

Meanings attached to the terms 'simulations' and 'games', have evolved through time, as has greater understanding of their nature and potential as educational tools and strategies. In 1969 such activities were rarely used in formal education contexts, which makes Dick Duke's efforts to expand awareness of their potential especially important. Of course military and aviation trainers were familiar with the concept, and the American Management Association had introduced the Top Management Decision Game in 1956. However in the late 1960's as a means of educating the high school students, whom I was learning to teach, the concept was simply not on any horizon I encountered.

This article uses an auto ethnographic approach to trace my development as an educator beginning with a brief skirmish with high school teaching, through time as an adult educator in the Australian version of a polytechnic college, to roles in the finance and entertainments sectors, and finally to an academic role in adult education.

The unifying factor in all these varied contexts is my fascination with learning and education. Australia was not nearly as well connected to international trends at the beginning of this trajectory, as it is now. Most of the knowledge I acquired in those early years originated in Britain and I was blind to the paradox of applying knowledge developed on the other side of the world to my contexts, as if there was no difference.

When Dick Duke and his colleagues met in Bad Godenberg in July 1969 I was halfway through my second, and (while I did not know it) final year, of high school teaching. In an interesting way those two events shaped all my subsequent learning and work. Drawing on the happenstance of that, this article traces my personal development as an educator and facilitator of simulations and games for learning, paralleling that journey with developments in the use of simulations and games for learning and the changing expectations of, and understandings about, the capabilities required of the person charged with managing the learning process.

2.1 Beginning - a high school teacher in 1969

When I began high school teaching in 1968 teachers were definitely 'in charge' of the learning process, students were not. Words like 'facilitation' had no part in the lexicon for training teachers, although the term already much in use in adult education and workplace learning contexts. While simulations and games (S&G) were coming into use for learning, they had not yet arrived in the Australian school system where I was teaching that year. In 1968 Australian school rooms had a clear power ratio - teachers were taught 'how to control the classroom' and students were taught how to obey. Their roles were respectively 'owner of knowledge' and 'passive recipient of it'. These expectations appeared not to bother the early adopters, elsewhere in the world, who were influencing the journey towards students being actively engaged in the process of their own learning. Bruner and his colleagues (1965) for example, did not appear threatened by the idea of surrendering all/some of the teacher's power in the interests of creating engaging learning spaces to challenged support learners' efforts to play with ideas.

I was newly married, and in a strange and almost 'foreign' city more than 4,200 km from my birth town. My qualifications had been earned in New South Wales (NSW) and at that time there were few connections among the eight education systems in the states and territories forming the Australia nation. My first year of teaching was in a progressive school with a relatively (for its time) learner-focused environment, and this proved to be wildly inappropriate for how and what to teach in this new context.

The Darwin High School principal behaved as a narrow-minded disciplinarian, providing no support to a staff member unused to the South Australian education system. Despite passing the required 'teaching inspection' and receiving formal approval to teach in the South Australia system, my application for maternity leave (a relatively new phenomenon) submitted towards the end of the year provided an opportunity to ensure I never returned to secondary school teaching. The 'impregnable certainty' of hindsight suggests I was already on a 'facilitating learning' path in my clearly unacceptable use of practices counter to disciplinary-focused teaching, but that awareness was still some years away.

2.2 Facilitation circa 1969

In the 1960's education was still largely seen as a teaching/learning dichotomy, although the work of researcher-practitioners like Malcolm Knowles (1950; 1968) Carl Rogers (1982) and Vygotsky (1980) were opening up awareness of learning as a 'social' networked process, rather than an 'individualised' power-ratio based exchange of information. The larger story of simulations and games for learning is much older than this, however 1969 provides a starting point for considering what was understood about the facilitation task as such knowledge has evolved through the years from 1969 to 2019.

Psychologists had been researching the concept of 'social facilitation' since the late 19th century (Strauss, 2002), but the concept of a person occupying a formal role called 'facilitator' was not yet common. In particular Carl Rogers' therapeutic counselling approach called *client-centred therapy* (Cross, 1996) was opening up awareness of ways to engage with learning without any one person having a totally directive position in the process.

Of course, at that time, there were major differences between school, academic and workplace learning contexts, so it is useful to note that the changes were emerging in counselling and workplace contexts, rather than formal education ones. Research and practices in each domain were mostly confined to their own ways of 'knowing' with little awareness of, or interest in, the potential for connections among them. Work contexts were considered to be places that only became relevant *after* completing formal studies. Employers were more interested in 'quick results' and fast turn around, so it was natural to expect schools and academic settings would find workplace learning of little interest.

3.1 Professional development - no longer a teacher not yet a facilitator - 1979

In the New Year of 1970 I took my first job as a part-time adult educator (in evening classes) and for the next four years my students and I worked together to develop ways of developing collaborative learning environments. At that time I was still fighting to clear my name and return to secondary teaching, so I was also working as a primary school teacher. When this was resolved by a surprise offer to become full time adult educator late in 1973, I attended my first 'adult education' conference and met the word 'facilitation' for the first time. In 1974 I encountered my first educational board game, a SimCity-like design, and failed utterly to understand its principles.

By 1976, after a cyclone destroyed my home and my workplace, my family and I were back in NSW and I found my way to my first industry trainer role, catapulting me into an environment where facilitation of learning was the prime focus and simulations a key learning strategy. During the next four years I helped establish a local community of practice called ADSEGA - Australian Decision Support and Educational Gaming Association - whose members shared knowledge and skills about simulations and games, and somewhere along the way, introduced me to "Gaming the Futures Language" (Duke, 1974). 'Teaching' had been left far behind and I was now an adult educator, a trainer, and a simulation and games practitioner. Not yet a facilitator nor a researcher, but beginning to dream about engaging with the international community in both capacities.

3.2 Facilitation circa 1979

Simulations and games for learning were developing their capacity to educate and inform, and by the mid 1970's Pfeiffer and Jones were collating original designs and publishing their series of Annuals (Jones & Pfeiffer, 1975) including notes for facilitators alongside original resources. The term 'facilitator' had been in use for describing the persons who managed the immediacy of simulations and games for learning for a few years (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1973) but published research on simulations and games was still generally focused on their design and application.

As yet little attention was paid to the work expected of individual/s managing the moment to moment unfolding of particular activities. Moreover research being conducted, was mostly intent on 'comparing' learning acquired through conventional means with that acquired through active engagement in simulations. This approach privileged conventional teaching and assessment strategies for imparting, and measuring, content-based information. Researchers seemed mostly ignorant of the potential for acquiring - and assessing - knowledge and capabilities through engagement with, and exercise of, new skill sets. Please note that the first paragraph of a section or subsection is not indented. The first paragraphs that follows a table, figure, equation etc. does not have an indent, either.

4.1 Academic educator - exercising facilitation skills - 1989

I had now had 15 years experience in various workplaces in NSW with a deepening appreciation of simulations and games for learning. I had also completed courses of post-graduate tertiary study to support my evolution as a facilitator - no longer a 'teacher'. I knew about ISAGA but lacked the resources to travel to the conferences and inspired by the concept had co-organised and led several local smaller versions in Sydney to share knowledge. Facilitation as a learning process was now reinforced and informed by adult education theory (andragogy) and I was employed to lead learning programs for workplace trainers and educators learning to design and facilitate simulations and games in their particular contexts through public workshops and units of study in adult education degree programs.

Members of the ADSEGA community of practice had dispersed to various careers and roles and my energies were redirected to the Australian Consortium on Experiential Learning (ACEE, 1981) providing an opportunity to explore educational concepts underpinning the shape and form of simulations and games as educational tools and strategies. This period also expanded my knowledge of research and work in the field of adult learning including that of Jack Mezirow (1991) David Boud (1996) David Kolb (1984) Stephen Brookfield (1995) and Nod Miller (2001) - all of whom I met at various times. Their interest in the role of educators of adults paralleled - but was not always seen to be pertinent to - my own continuing focus on use of simulations and games for learning.

4.2 Facilitation circa 1989

Wikipedia notes that the "role of facilitator emerged as a separate set of skills in the 1980s to actively participate and guide the group towards consensus." In a review of terms in use during this period Rees (1990) identified an array of terms used, and a variety of types of roles now recognised as engaging in managing learning environments. Most of the available literature on facilitation at this time seems to have con-

cerned business management, community and social consulting projects like Rees' - where a framework for practice was beginning to evolve. Clarity is emerging about the importance of breaking away from 'teacherly' modes of behaviour, but as yet simulations and games researchers are not paying much attention to the role - although there is, by now, an emerging body of literature about key tasks (e.g. briefing and debriefing) requiring focused attention from the person managing an activity.

Of course educators using simulations were already clear about the importance of the distinction between 'teaching' and 'facilitating' and while there was not yet a great deal of literature in the simulations and games field there was more discussion about it.

At the end of this decade John Heron had published *The Facilitator's Handbook* (1989) creating a sound and well-balanced framework for the role in any context. While he did not pay specific attention to facilitating simulations and games, his frameworks and advice were - and still are - relevant for all in the field. Thus his book arriving at the turn of the century was a signal that facilitation - as a practice and a named role for educators - was well and truly part of the fabric of education. As I encountered the book through academic colleagues it was also signalling that those engaged in workplace and academic learning contexts were beginning to recognise the similarities in their interests.

5.1 Emergent Practitioner-Researcher - researching facilitation skills - 1999

I attended my first ISAGA conference in Riga in 1996, and was invited to host the 1999 conference in Sydney. Late in the decade, and parallel with the work towards the 1999 conference, I began part-time doctoral research. Initially my goal was to explore Peter Senge's concept of 'Team Learning'. However I had also now using an extended simulation to teach organisational behaviour, which was generating more complexity in regard to facilitating learning than I had ever previously encountered. When ISAGA 1999 arrived, my research was squarely focused on the special skills needed to facilitate what I was beginning to call an 'open-ended' (Christopher & Smith, 1987), 'chaordic' (Hock, 2000) simulation.

Becoming part of the ISAGA network was altering my perspective on every aspect of my own learning and teaching and I was beginning to engage in research focusing ever more closely on the role of the facilitator (Elysebeth Leigh & Spindler, 1998). I was a member of the ISAGA Board and had begun publishing conference papers about simulations and facilitation.

5.2 Facilitation circa 1999

The International Association of Facilitators (IAF) was founded in 1993 to promote facilitation as a profession. By the end of the decade it was developing a Certified Professional Facilitator program which has now been in operation for nearly 20 years. Facilitation has become a recognised and viable role for educators. Thousands of articles are - or are on their way to - being published around the world and many educators are thinking differently about their role in education.

The IAF program does not directly address the particular set of skills required of facilitators of simulations and games although its general principles are relevant. By 1999, some researchers are taking a specific interest in 'how to manage' simulations and this work continues into the 21st century.

6.1 Senior lecturer and a career change

By 2009, I had served four years as General Secretary of ISAGA and seen the beginning of its transition from an informal international community of practice to a formally registered legal entity. My doctorate was completed. I had published two books and was working on the third one. I was also a member of Simulation Australia (SimAust) and had begun helping organise SimAust conferences and publish the proceedings

I had also decided to leave my full time academic role and shift to a part-time role allowing for time to relax and travel. This has brought new adventures in research and a change in my focus of attention such that I have been able to reflect on my own facilitator practices and research and write with new energy about simulation and facilitation. It has not, as yet, included much time for the kind of relaxing I had initially anticipate

6.2 Facilitation circle

In 2005 I collaborated on a review of Simulation&Gaming (Elysebeth Leigh & Spindler, 2005) that found “less than 10% of all articles made reference to requirements of the person/s facilitating a simulation or game.” We noted then that: “It seemed that many writers did not regard facilitation as sufficiently important, or were unaware that its nature can be problematic.” So while the role was now well known and widely accepted, at that point there still seemed to be assumptions that occupy it was unproblematic and did not need close attention. An alternative perspective is that facilitators are quintessential practitioners and disinclined to devote time and effort to the detail-driven task of researching what they do and how they do it (E. Lei

In his dissertation exploring his own ‘facilitator educator’ practice Thomas (2011) noted that “the role that a facilitator plays has been likened to the conductor of an orchestra ...; a catalyst, chameleon, and cabdriver ...; midwives ...; a choreographer ...; and a change agent ...”. Perhaps it is this very complexity that is making the facilitator role not an easy subject for research

7.1 Researching, writing and travelling

Theoretically I am ‘retired’ but am instead working on an engaging and fulfilling array of writing and teaching projects in Australia and Finland. Facilitation is now a key focus of my writing, and has similarly gained increasing attention as teaching methods slowly adapt to changing social and educational conditions. I have co-edited several books, published conference papers and book chapters and now work sessionally in Australia and Finland

I am looking forward to being part of the 50th celebrations in Warsaw and to continuing my exploration of the tasks and role of the facilitator. There is still much to be explored

7.2 Facilitation circle

Reprising that 2005 search of the index of Simulation&Gaming issues I checked the issues between 2010 and 2019 and found only three additional articles that directly reference facilitation (only one mentions the facilitator). In addition there are

mentions of debriefing -which is one of the three key structural components that any facilitator must manage effectively to ensure learning intentions are achieved. A search of the Internet reveals numerous sites providing advice and information about how to be a facilitator of group work and other educational activities, and how to do the associated tasks well. There are not so many academic articles or research items. Thus it seems that the task of focusing on the skills and capabilities of the facilitator is still not a priority for researchers.

Concluding comments

If - at graduation in 1968 - anyone had suggested that I would only work in my chosen career for two years I may have been devastated. All that work and focus - not to be used! But in fact it was, in roles and contexts that I would not have conceived of as possible or relevant at that time.

As John Lennon (1981) noted 'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans' and while my education qualifications and passion have continued to shape my work and my life they have done so in entirely unexpected ways.

Similarly simulations and games for learning have travelled along an evolving trajectory from the 1960's. We know so much more about how to design them for effective learning outcomes, how to structure them to create particular replications of the real world, and how to manage them to achieve particular intentional results - while always being aware of their capacity to derail such intentions.

And, as always with human endeavour, there is so much more to be learned. I am looking forward to increasing attention - by way of research, analysis and thoughtful observation - being paid to the role of the facilitator in simulations and games, and of course, intend to continue my research and writing with collaborators from the IS-AGA community who have travelled along this road with me.

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