

THE PARADISE ISLANDS REVISITED: TROUBLE IN PARADISE

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ABSTRACT

The Paradise Islands is a semester-long simulation in which the students are faced with the challenges inherent with developing a third-world economy. The results of the original simulation were presented to ABSEL in 2007. The simulation was also conducted during 2008, but unexpected internal problems developed. A junior faculty member who stepped in at the last moment to fill a vacancy brought a hidden agenda that threatened to disrupt the entire simulation. This paper discusses the problems that this created and the actions taken to remedy them in real-time.

INTRODUCTION

Simulations and games are designed to teach general or specific skills. A well-designed exercise can provide a genuine learning experience that cannot be matched by other types of instruction. But there is one aspect of the design and operation of a simulation that is seldom discussed, the background infrastructure. It is typically assumed that the instructor will have enough freedom of movement and control to create an environment that will allow the simulation to be conducted efficiently. Exercises often contain design elements that take physical or organizational constraints into account so that the background infrastructure will not negatively affect the learning goals of the simulation. This paper reports the actions necessary to keep an established simulation on track in a situation where the background infrastructure failed.

BACKGROUND

The Paradise Islands is a semester-long simulation created to give students an unstructured problem and help them develop critical thinking skills, conflict resolution, problem solution techniques, and formal presentation skills (Brozik, Joy, and Brozik, 2007). Due to staffing restraints, the course can only be offered on an occasional basis, and the staff may change with each class. The three instructors come from different disciplines in order to present the students with alternate viewpoints and problem solving styles. The simulation is robust enough to accommodate instructors from virtually any discipline as long as they work together to move the situation forward.

The simulation creates a small island nation with specified resources and the need to develop those resources to meet social and economic goals. The resources and goals can be designed to address specific questions. Students are organized into groups that have seemingly reasonable yet inherently conflicting goals. For example, one group can be tasked with environmental protection while another can be required to create economic development activities, some of which can only be done in environmentally sensitive areas. The groups of students are kept apart to work on their individual goals until midterm when they present their findings and their preliminary solutions to the other groups. It is at that time that they realize their conflicting goals and solutions, and the second half of the term is used to reconcile those differences and develop a mutually acceptable solution. The critical thinking and investigative skills that the students develop during the first half of the term are thus augmented with experience in conflict resolution.

The simulation was first conducted in Spring 2006 and was well received by the students and the administration. The second presentation of the course was scheduled for Spring 2008, but there was a class scheduling conflict for one of the original participating instructors. This conflict actually helped demonstrate the robust nature of the simulation. The first version was designed to explore the conflict between economic development and environmental protection. The biology professor was unable to participate, so the theme of the second presentation shifted to economic development versus the social/political structure by enlisting a cultural geographer.

The Fall 2007 term was spent revising the structure of the simulation and changing the nature of the background data to fit the new direction of the simulation. This involved friendly cooperation between both the business professor and the geography professor and resulted in a complex relationship between the various design aspects of the simulation. In December, the geographer took another job and moved out of state. Spring class schedules had already been set for the campus, but a member of the sociology department was able to rearrange other classes and fill in. This individual had no previous experience in simulations of any kind and had not been involved at any step in the design of the exercise. It was understood from the beginning that the junior faculty member would follow the lead of the experienced instructors.

A special design feature was added to the second presentation. Two students who had participated in the first

class were recruited to be “peer mentors”. The rest of the class was not told this, however, so the peer mentors effectively acted as “moles”. They were able to report back information concerning progress and student attitudes that were unavailable to the instructors. They also took leadership positions within the class and helped steer the simulation away from problem areas when they developed. Since these two individuals had experience with the simulation and knew of some of the hidden aspects, they were able to identify problem areas much more quickly than would have been possible for the instructors. Their feedback played a crucial role in keeping the simulation on track.

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN

The Paradise Islands was designed to create conflict, and the instructors actively encourage such behavior during the first half of the course. The second half of the course requires the students to overcome their differences and create a cohesive poverty reduction plan that would be presented to a panel of outside experts. The conflict/resolution nature of the exercise is one of the key features. This design puts stress on the students, but the process is exempt from human subjects testing restrictions (45CFR46.101(b)(1)).

There were 24 students in the class, and on the first day they were divided into two groups of twelve, one to work on economic development problems and the other to work with social and political problems. Each content instructor worked with his/her specific group of 12 students; during this first phase no collaboration was allowed. Each group of 12 was further divided into four groups of three students each, and each smaller group was assigned a specific function, such as the Interfaith Council or Economic Development Commission. The responsibilities of each group were designed so that there would be conflict with at least one other group.

In addition to the two content instructors (finance and sociology), a third individual worked with the groups on process. This individual was titularly the supervisor of the two content instructors and had the authority to review their work by talking to the students. The process instructor also served as a sounding board for the students and an indirect conduit for information between the students and the content instructors. The students were led to believe that there was little or no communication between any of the instructors, and so they often made candid comments concerning the simulation and the people involved. As might be expected, all three instructors were in close communications, and student comments helped to guide the actions of the content instructors.

The two student “peer mentors” were positioned one inside of each of the major groups of 12. This established a link between the student groups and the faculty that was unknown to the “normal” students. The peer mentors met regularly with the faculty members outside of class hours. During these discussions, the peer mentors reported on the mood and any specific problems the students were facing and were given instructions concerning how to “guide” the student groups away from unprofitable courses of action.

The meeting times for all sections were identical, and the meeting rooms were in close proximity. Students were separated or allowed to mingle according to the needs of the

session. During the first half of the term when the groups were devising their particular solutions, they were kept apart. During the negotiation phase in the second half of the term, the students worked together to develop common solutions for their specific problems.

The class pattern for the first half of the term was for the content instructors to meet with their groups on Monday and Friday to discuss progress and possible directions of investigation. During these sessions the instructors kept the various groups working in opposite directions. This effort was reinforced by scripted comments from the sociology instructor like “you can’t trust those business people because all they are concerned about is money” and from the business instructor like “those touchy-feely types care more about holding hands than making real progress”. While such comments were never a major theme, they helped to create a bit of tension between the students.

On the typical Wednesday during the first half of the term, the process instructor would meet with both groups for half the class period. The students gave progress reports to someone who supposedly did not know what was happening and received comments from a supposedly neutral third party. The content instructor did not have a scripted role, but discussions among all three instructors occurred regularly, and suggestions made to the students through the process instructor were mutually agreed upon. Sometimes the comments were placating, and sometimes they were divisive. All were designed to keep the students working towards their individual but mutually exclusive goals.

The end product of the course was to be a “Poverty Reduction and Economic Development Plan for The Paradise Islands” that was suitable to all parties. Students were to be given some fast training on how to make formal presentations, and the final presentation was to be given to a group of outside experts. The presentation was to be followed by a question and answer period to demonstrate the students’ mastery of the plan.

That was what was supposed to happen.

WHAT DID HAPPEN

Since this second version of the simulation was going to deal with issues different from the original, new information had to be developed. Demographic and cultural background material was created that reflected a society widely divided on the basis of wealth and power. This set of information was developed with the assistance of the cultural geographer who left for another job just before the class began. The replacement, a sociologist, had never been involved in a simulation of any kind and had had no part in the development of the background scenario or information. It was understood at the beginning of the course that the new faculty member would seek guidance and follow the lead of the experienced faculty members. On such understandings disasters are built.

Every professional educator has a deep belief in the validity of his or her own discipline. We all carry the baggage of our convictions. Some of us are able to set that baggage aside, and some of us are not. The new instructor was one who could not. She brought with her a dogmatic approach to the problems presented inside the simulation and tried to steer her students in specific directions. While such behavior was well-intentioned, it did not allow the students to find their own answers. The result

was that one group of students was seeking answers while the other was being force fed specific points of view.

The students quickly became dissatisfied with this situation, and several planned to drop the course after the first two weeks. This was where the moles (peer mentors) proved invaluable. They were able to counsel restraint, and they reported to the professors the seriousness of the situation. The two experienced faculty members then began to modify the structure of the simulation in order to minimize the impact of the inexperienced instructor.

At one point the inexperienced instructor thought it appropriate to have her group of “socially active” students conduct a demonstration. With no prior warning to the other instructors, these students forced their way into the classroom of the “economic development” group with posters stating their grievances. This was a silent demonstration, and after the initial surprise, the economic development group ignored the invaders and went back to work. This little bit of theater could have been ignored or even appreciated except for one factor. The inexperienced instructor had one of her students leave a tape recorder hidden in the classroom so that they could hear the comments made after they left the room. It is doubtful that anything of substance was learned, but the action indicated that the inexperienced instructor could not be completely trusted for the rest of the term. The incident was reported back to the experienced instructors through the mole. The experienced instructors decided to ignore the incident at that point rather than jeopardize the remainder of the simulation. The incident was discussed at length during the debriefing session at the end of the semester.

One of the design features of the simulation is that at the halfway point of the term the “opposing” groups of students are brought into contact and made to realize the differences between the various groups and their proposed solutions. This “crash point” was moved up to the fourth week of class in order to minimize the time the new instructor would have to affect any given group of students.

It quickly became evident that the student group working with the experienced instructor was further advanced in developing solutions to the problems. The solution to this problem was an entire restructuring of the groups. If the eight groups are thought of as eight horizontal layers of effort, there was a vertical shuffling of personnel. Only one of the original persons was retained in each group, and the others went to work with other groups that had similar problems. This was explained to the students as a “cross-pollination” effort to expedite the development of viable solutions; it was in reality a way to get more students in contact with the experienced instructors and make sure that all students were becoming actively involved in the main problems of the simulation.

The second third of the term was spent with the re-formed groups working together to find a common solution. Individuals and groups produced weekly papers about their concerns and proposed solutions. These papers were collected by the process instructor and served as a basis for the final report. A “new” procedure was developed where the content instructors periodically met with the other group of students. While this was done ostensibly to give the instructors better knowledge of what all the students were doing, its real aim was to give all the students exposure to the experienced instructor who could direct their efforts toward productive outcomes.

The last third of the term was used to create the final document and prepare the students to make the final presentation. The instructors now changed roles from guiding the students toward their own solution to instructing the students on specific written and verbal presentation techniques. Four students were tasked with writing the final document and preparing the graphics for the final presentation. One of those four was one of the moles who had been involved with the preparation of the final document in the earlier version of the simulation. He “volunteered” to be editor-in-chief and provided the nucleus for the writing effort. The inexperienced instructor was assigned the task to supervise this group, a group that needed no supervision, in order to keep her away from the students who were working on presentation skills.

Both of the veteran instructors had extensive experience in making formal presentations and teaching these skills. Those students not involved in developing the written document were given a crash course in public speaking. Each veteran instructor had a “student assistant”, one was the other mole and one was a student who had significant stage acting experience. These two faculty/student teams created speaking exercises and critiqued the other students. Having a student critique other students proved to be quite beneficial. Those students being critiqued could not simply feel that an instructor was picking on them. A fellow student was also an active participant. Due to the short time frame, the critiques were often blunt, but no one felt that he/she was being singled out, and within three weeks all students had improved their speaking skills. This is actually one of the most productive portions of the simulation. Most of the students were freshmen and sophomores and had little public speaking experience. In a period of less than four weeks, these students received a crash course in making presentations. The final presentation was given to a Review Panel that included the President of the school and a State Supreme Court Justice. The students were able to handle themselves well under direct questioning and impressed the panel. Most panel members thought the students were seniors, and when informed otherwise they were pleasantly surprised.

During this period the new instructor began to feel a bit isolated. The students being prepared for the speaking roles were somewhere else, and the editor-in-chief was running the show in the preparation of the written document. She began to develop alternate approaches to the problems, some quite creative but none of any value. At one point she introduced a video tape concerning sheep. There is indeed a small mention of sheep in the background information on the Islands, but it is so small as not to warrant attention in light of other more pressing problems. What might have seemed cute was in fact a distraction, a distraction that could have been avoided with proper communications between instructors. When she presented these ideas to the veteran faculty, her thoughts were given due consideration and quietly buried. The veteran instructors knew the members of the final Review Panel and so understood the specific types of materials appropriate. The new instructor spent the last two weeks as a spectator.

The structure of the final presentation put the effort fully on the students, and none of the instructors played a major role in this effort. The presentation went well, and everyone was congratulated for their efforts. A final debriefing was held the next week, and the discussion helped the students recognize the nature of the simulation and some of the underlying

machinations. Professional ethics became an unexpected topic, and students were reminded of their personal responsibilities in such actions. The “peer mentors” were identified as moles, and the other students began to wonder about what they had said in their presence. This taught them the lesson of being circumspect in all communications. The students were also told that the instructors had been in continuous communications, but they were not told that such communications had been problematic. By the end of the briefing, the students knew that they had been in a controlled environment and that any semblance of chaos was part of the simulation. Though this last observation was not totally true, it taught them that it is a good idea to try to look behind the curtain to see who is moving the levers in the Emerald City.

LESSONS LEARNED

Simulations are designed to provide students with a special learning experience, and sometimes the instructors learn things, too. Personnel changes, especially those at the last minute, can create situations not anticipated in the design of the simulation. Sometimes it is necessary to make real-time changes to the structure of the simulation in order to accommodate these new realities. During its second presentation, The Paradise Islands underwent personnel changes that threatened to derail the entire simulation, but procedural and process changes were adopted that effectively isolated a disruptive faculty member. The structure of The Paradise Islands simulation was robust enough to absorb the necessary changes, and the students received the full benefit of the experience.

This episode also demonstrates that it is necessary to establish a team approach before the simulation begins. Coworkers must understand their roles, and any organizational structure should be agreed upon in advance. Facilitators must understand their role and the types of actions they are allowed to perform. Establishing behavioral boundaries and lines of authority will make the conduct of complex simulations easier to achieve.

REFERENCES

Brozik, Dallas, James Joy, and Doris Brozik (2007). “The Paradise Islands.” *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, Vol. 34, 228-245. Reprinted in the *Bernie Keys Library*, 9th edition [Available from <http://ABSEL.org>]

THE PARADISE ISLANDS

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The Paradise Islands is a large-scale simulation that is conducted over an entire semester in which participants are tasked with developing a third-world economy. Groups are created with specific responsibilities such as economic development and environmental protection. What the participants do not immediately recognize is that the goals of the various groups are mutually incompatible. This creates a situation in which negotiation is critical to developing the final plan for economic and social development.

A key aspect of the simulation is the creation of a self-contained, artificial environment, The Paradise Islands. The history, location, and economic status of this developing country were created to provide a total experience without the need to refer to other existing countries. The boundary conditions can therefore be changed so that different versions of the simulation can address different problems. There is even an extensive collection of maps and photographs of the islands to allow participants to visualize the environment. The detail provided by the extensive documentation allows the players to suspend disbelief and treat the exercise in a realistic manner.

The many questions that need to be addressed in the development of a country require extensive background information. Students are furnished with a CD that contains relevant public domain information on topics such as agriculture, energy generation, foreign trade, and environmental conditions. This CD contains over 25,000 pages of information, so the players must also face the task of determining what information is relevant to their respective questions.

The players are initially divided into six to eight groups of three to four persons. Each group is given a specific task related to the development of The Paradise Islands. Each task is reasonable in and of itself, but most of the tasks are mutually incompatible at some level. The groups are initially kept separated and work on their individual projects. This is an individualized critical thinking exercise since it requires the players to define the problem, identify the

relevant information, and develop a feasible solution to their problem.

Approximately half way through the term, each group presents its findings to the entire class, and the embedded conflicts are made apparent. The second phase of the simulation begins when the groups begin to negotiate from their relative positions of knowledge to develop a final plan for the economic and social development of The Paradise Islands. Two to three weeks before the end of the term, a group of four to six students is split off from the main body for the task of preparing the final written report. The rest of the students begin a period of intensive training on making professional oral presentations. The final exercise for the class is to present its findings and recommendations to a panel of outside experts and take questions concerning the results.

The Paradise Islands is a full immersion simulation that requires all participants to exercise critical thinking and develop solutions in an environment requiring negotiation skills. The final report and public presentation require the participants to find closure and take ownership of their work. While this type of simulation requires a substantial commitment of time and effort on the part of the instructors, most participants report that their experience has been their most “complete” learning experience.