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Experiencing and exploring conflict together: Survival on the Island of SIMIDEA

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Abstract

This paper describes a conflict management simulation (SIM) titled, Survival on the Island of SIMIDEA. The SIM can be employed to explore how conflict develops and is experienced within oneself and within interpersonal, group, and between-group contexts. Such experiences can be viewed and debriefed through various disciplinary perspectives. The SIM was developed and facilitated at JAMK University of Applied Sciences in Jyväskylä, Finland, for bachelor's-level international business conflict management course students and at the University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna for human resources master's degree group dynamics course. The paper presents a basic guide to facilitating and debriefing the SIM. The paper concludes with perspectives from a previous facilitation and suggestions for future use, research opportunities, and further development of SIMIDEA.

Keywords:

Conflict, simulation, gamification, group dynamics, simulation game

Introduction

Simulations emerge from the desire to play; a childhood love of play continues in adult learners (Corbeil, 1999, pp. 163-180). Ideas regarding play are explored and developed through gamification theory (Landers, 2015; Daniau, 2016), resulting in a broad scope of applications. Games increase engagement by activating learning (Phillips, Horstman, Vye, & Bransford, 2014, p. 558); thus, simulations are typically designed with an educational undergirding (Milliams 1999, pp. 199-226). The pedagogical assumptions driving the development and use of SIMIDEA draw on gamification theory, experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), and meaning-centered education approaches (Kovbasyuk & Blessinger, 2013, pp. 3-23) through which players make sense of the game experience.

Educational SIMs range from brief (minutes to hours) to extensive, time-consuming programs (days, weeks or months). SIMs may involve face-to-face contact between participants or may be facilitated and/or mediated through computer-based platforms (i.e. online, desktop, and mobile systems). SIMIDEA is designed to be facilitated in a classroom, with participants working face-to-face, because face-to-face contact increases engagement (Erb, 2015). SIMIDEA can be completed in 1.5 to 3.0 hours, depending on the goals of the facilitators and the time and other resources available. Flipcharts and other tools for capturing information and participant comments help advance the debriefing.

In SIMIDEA, small groups of participants, typically four to eight, will imaginatively travel to the remote tropical island of SIMIDEA for a two-week extreme travel excursion that includes camping and living off the land. The facilitators organize groups so that, as the end of the session approaches, each group will encounter and interact with another group in the SIM.

At various stages in SIMIDEA, adversity steps in, making tasks difficult and stressful; toward the end of the session, each group faces a particularly significant calamity of their own that tests their decisions as individuals and as a group. Each group's survival depends upon its ability to produce strategies and choose in advance equipment and supplies that are suited to meet various challenges that emerge during the session. After the final calamity, the surviving participants may benefit from their previous learning and experiences as they move into the final round, where they encounter another group.

When the SIM concludes, the facilitator debriefs the participants regarding their experiences. The facilitator's observations of the participants' behaviors and his/ her observations about how the participants themselves reacted to the activity can help to inform the debriefing.

Process

The facilitator may modify the SIM based on various emergent factors, e. g., prior knowledge about participant group's makeup, the goals of the hosting organization, the physical premises, time allowance, etc. Therefore, the SIM process, as it is being described below, is offered as a suggested basis and well tested approach.

The facilitator forms groups of 4 – 8 participants, with the aim that each group will have a counterpart group that they will engage later in the simulation. Ordinarily, the participants will be organized so that one group can interact with another group. However, due to overall numbers it is possible that, for example, three groups of seven can participate. All groups should be present in the same room so that the facilitator can observe them. However, each group is directed initially to play the game on their own, with no interaction with another group. How groups are composed is not prescribed; this decision is based on the facilitator's discretion. Bacon, Stewart, & Anderson (2001) provide a good overview of how groups can be formed. The facilitator should create slides for projecting the following text on a screen for all groups to see. Images may also be included on the slides that are appropriate for the situation presented in each stage.

It is important to note that until the groups are joined with another group (see Slide 9 below), each group follows the same script and experiences the game from the perspective of a distinct group with no contact with other people on the island.

In the following rules, provided here in English, the italicized text provides a suggested script that the facilitator presents to all groups simultaneously. Projecting the script on a slide helps those who need additional language support. A facilitator may also translate the provided slide text as desired.

(Slide 1) *Greetings, extreme adventure travelers. You are about to journey to the beautiful tropical island of SIMIDEA for a two-week adventure tour. But first, before leaving the mother ship, you must select and organize your equipment. Our excursion boat to the island is quite small, so there is limited space for commonly used goods. Therefore, before your departure, you must choose as a group five (5) items, sufficiently sized to fit on the small boat. All items will be shared among your group members. There is no suggested list of items to choose from. Your group may choose your equipment and supplies based on their ideas on how to survive on a tropical island for two weeks. Decide now your equipment choices and write down each item on a sheet of paper.*

The facilitator closely observes how participants negotiated their decisions, e.g., whether leadership is formed and contested, and any conflicts that emerge this early in the process. When this task is completed, the facilitator asks each group to describe aloud the items they chose and their rationales for choosing them.

(Slide 2) *Unfortunately, after several days on the island, the mother ship hit a reef offshore and has sunk into the sea, stranding you. So, you now must survive indefinitely based on your chosen supplies and your ingenuity. Your and your group's survival is now in jeopardy.*

After Slide 2 is digested by the participants the facilitator proceeds directly to Slide 3.

(Slide 3) *For the first month, your group faces a shortage of drinking water, intense heat, a scarcity of wood for cooking, and huge storms with high winds. You also have detected signs that other people may currently exist on the island, but you don't know whether they are friends or foes.*

The identity of the other people on the island should remain a mystery for now. After the participants have digested Slide 3 the facilitator can proceed to Slide 4.

(Slide 4) *Now six weeks have passed. One member of your group is found stealing from the dwindling food supply. When confronted, the accused chose to attack the accuser, resulting in the accuser's death. You have ten minutes to decide the matter and deal with the accused as you see fit.*

The facilitator selects the deceased and the accused in each group. The facilitator asks each group to describe their decision concerning the accused and their rationales. The range of approaches and decisions that may be produced by the groups in this stage provides for a rich debriefing. After this stage the deceased rejoins his or her group as an active member. Usually the participants will take this unrealistic development in stride and the facilitator can move directly to Slide 5.

(Slide 5) *One day, your group is out gathering food and firewood. Suddenly you encounter members of another group. They seem to want to keep their distance from you. They do not speak your language. It seems they are shipwrecked as well, and not "native" to the island. Perhaps most disturbing, you cannot tell what their intentions are toward your group.*

After the participants have digested the content of Slide 5 the facilitator can move directly to Slide 6.

(Slide 6) *You now hold a group meeting to determine how to respond to this new development because surely you will meet them again, and soon. Gather together now in your group and discuss how to handle the discovery of other people on the island.*

The facilitator asks each group to describe their strategy, observing intently whether each group chooses an approach that seems defensive or even aggressive, or whether they evidence a more liberal desire, for example, to somehow establish meaningful contact with the other group. What may arise now can

be revisited later in the debriefing. When each group has shared their strategy, the facilitator may proceed to Slide 7.

(Slide 7) *As the meeting ends, one group member reveals that a large box has washed ashore. Inside the box is a new item useful to your team. Please choose one item from the list provided now. When choosing your item, be sure to keep in mind your plans for handling the new group on the island.*

Handout text: ITEMS FROM WASHED ASHORE BOX (Circle only one item)

- Six large knives
- Two fishing nets
- Pistol with twelve bullets
- Large assortment of survivor meals
- Inflatable raft just large enough to hold your group
- Malaria medicine for 20 people for five years
- Cellular phone and fully charged batteries

After the new item is chosen, the facilitator asks each group to describe the new item they chose and why. Based on previous experiences and insights the groups will likely place much more emphasis and time on this decision than on the other decisions during the early stages of the SIM. After all groups have explained their choice, the facilitator can move directly to Slide 8.

(Slide 8) *A member of each group randomly selects a paper informing you of a calamity about to hit your group.*

Handout text: CALAMITIES

- The monsoon season arrives; floods threaten to carry your team out to sea.
- A 7.5 Richter scale earthquake strikes in the middle of the night.
- One among your group has unknowingly desecrated sacred ground; a warring party of armed natives arrives to seek revenge.
- A large fire is burning its way across the entire island.
- A potentially fatal bat-borne disease threatens your group as members are bitten and infected.
- Your group has eaten all of mammals and birds on the island, making land-based food on the island in short supply.
- Your medicine stores were exposed to rain accidentally; no “western” medicines are left to treat wounds, illnesses, and injuries.

After the groups select a calamity, the participants briefly discuss the implications for their group. A ten to fifteen-minute break takes place, during which the facilitator assesses the survivability of each group based on how well each group’s chosen items were appropriate for survival of their specific calamity. This analysis is subjectively done by the facilitator based on his/her personal assessment. A more structured approach, involving more than one examiner, can be created. For example, three examiners can individually rate the survivability of each group on a scale from 0 (no survival) to 10 (all survived). The three scores are totaled for a possibility of 30 points.

Points	Number of deaths
0 - 5	No survivors
6 - 10	2/3 of the group do not survive
11 - 20	½ of the group does not survive
21 - 25	1/3 of the group does not survive
25 - 29	One person in the group does not survive
30	Everyone survives (an unlikely scenario)

Table 1. Calamity Survival Table

At this point, the process becomes flexible, depending on the observations and goals of the facilitator. When resuming the exercise, the facilitator announces the survival results for each group and explains his/her rationales. Because groups may suffer the loss of members, the facilitator selects the “deceased,” either randomly or based on the facilitator’s strategic discretion. The deceased are separated from their groups and do not further actively participate. Individuals chosen as deceased may find this development personally difficult, and so the facilitator should appoint them as observers to keep them engaged in the process.

At this stage, each group will come directly into contact with another group for the first time in the SIM. In the unlikely event that an odd number of groups are present, the facilitator must be creatively flexible with the script and approach so that, in one scenario, three groups will interact.

(Slide 9) *Your group of survivors has had a period to adjust to recent events. While hiking on the east side of the island, two group members of your group encounter members of another group. One is taken hostage and one escapes to tell the tale.*

The facilitator then chooses two members from each of group and brings them together in the middle of the room. He/she then chooses a captive from one group and moves him/her into the other group. The survivor returns to his/her group; the hostage goes with his/her capturing group to their table.

(Slide 10) *Your group must decide how to proceed based on very limited knowledge about the other group. Decisions must be made based on the following assumptions:*

- *There are limited resources available on the island.*
- *You do not know the other group’s agenda or capabilities.*
- *Your group’s individual survival skills could be better.*
- *Some in your group are unhappy with how things have gone lately.*

Once the plans are made, each group explains how they chose to deal with the situation based on the immediate crisis. Often during this process of explaining, discussion ensues between the two groups. This event, often very lively, will prove important for the debriefing.

END: The simulation part of the activity ends.

It is suggested that the facilitator conduct the process as outlined above at least once before adjusting.

Slide 1	Introduction to the activity	Excitement develops
Slide 2	Mother ship sinks	Participants are stranded
Slide 3	Life gets tough	Signs point to the possibility of other people on the island
Slide 4	A murder occurs	Participants face a dilemma
Slide 5	1 st contact	Tension builds
Slide 6	Coming together	Developing a plan
Slide 7	Unexpected opportunity	New item selection
Slide 8	Facing a calamity	Survival is uncertain
Slide 9	Recovery	A hostage is taken
Slide 10	Potential confrontation between groups	A final plan is made
Debriefing	Review and discussion	Connecting to disciplinary perspectives

Table 2. The flow of the SIMIDEA activity

Debriefing

The facilitator debriefs the participants about the process and results. Debriefing is a key part of the program. Much learning occurs after the simulation is concluded that is informed not only by the participants' direct experiences but also by the facilitator's ability to drive an informed shared discussion based on his/her disciplinary perspectives and learning aims. A debriefing requires a minimum of thirty minutes--preferably forty-five--depending on the facilitator's goals.

Facilitation and Debriefing Perspectives

The facilitator's active observation throughout the SIM is essential. Over time, expect that individuals and groups will change their approaches and strategies as their experience increases; interaction develops between participants and groups, and the stakes increase. Evidence of leadership will certainly emerge. Evidence regarding conflicts and conflict management styles and approaches can be elaborated during the debriefing.

On Slide 4, a murder occurs within the group, and the accused will be judged by his/her peers. The deceased participant does not interact with others during this stage. How the group chooses to deal with the accused, particularly amid the reality that, in a survival scenario, each group member plays an important--if not essential--role in the group's success, thus making the decision process difficult. Expect a wide range of disciplinary or more liberal solutions, and individual values and conflict styles, to emerge. Once a resolution is achieved, the groups share and discuss their decisions in the classroom. After this stage, the facilitator declares the situation resolved, and the accused rejoins the group and the SIM continues as if this incident never happened. The incident may be revisited during the debriefing.

Attention may be focused on the selection of the sixth item (slide 7). Often, this choice is made much more carefully and thoughtfully than the initial item choices at the start of the process, as well as their subsequent experiences.

When the calamity occurs, the items the groups chose at the beginning prove to become exceedingly important. Moreover, a measure of randomness and fate enters because the groups could not anticipate the calamity. That some individuals are “deceased” after the calamity creates interesting dynamics among the participants, forming an emphasis within the SIM. The debriefing session provides a good opportunity to discuss this development further, so that the participants can express more deeply their feelings and needs concerning how they experienced the calamity. It is important in the debriefing for the facilitator to empathize that the outcomes of the SIM reflect a range of possible outcomes, based on what is perhaps the facilitator’s subjective assessment of choices made by the groups earlier in the process, and, also, by a certain amount of uncertainty. For example, the groups have no bearing on what calamity they wind up facing, and yet their previous choices in terms of resources will somehow affect their outcome in the face of their received calamity.

Throughout the SIM, within and between groups, conflict and cooperation may vary significantly. For example, some participants may try to push their own agendas, while others may feel that their voice is not heard. This often produces both positive and negative feelings among group members, allowing for discussion about leadership styles, individual conflict styles, communication styles and group dynamics.

An autumn 2016 Vienna-based (Schuster, 2016: 6-7) SIMIDEA facilitation with 12 master’s-degree students, divided into two groups produced an interesting outcome. During the SIM, participants in Group 1 actively engaged each other, often speaking loudly and joking around. To the two lecturers who facilitated this session, Group 1 seemed enthusiastic and cooperative with each other, “getting along” and exhibiting few problems working together. Group 2, on the other hand, was quieter. They spoke to each other at length and seemed to have difficulties reaching decisions, a process that tended to take much longer to work out than for Group 1. The facilitators agreed that Group 1 seemed to have been the more cohesive and well-functioning group.

During the debriefing, each participant was asked to report three feelings he/she experienced during the SIM. In total, 14 distinct feeling words were identified by both groups, some mentioned more than once. The words were assessed by the facilitators as being positive, neutral, or negative.

Group 1 (6 participants)	Group 2 (6 participants)
+ Excited	+ Relaxed/Calm (2)
+ Happy	+ Excited (2)
+ Interested	+ Belonging
+ Content	+ Good (to be part of a team)
≈ Confused	+ Thankful
≈ Uncertain (2)	+ Safe
≈ Surprised (3)	+ Satisfied

Group 1 (6 participants)	Group 2 (6 participants)
- Insecure (2)	+ Comfortable
- Anxious	+ Positive
- Shocked	+ Happy
- Annoyed	+ Nostalgic (for the island)
- Impatient	≈ Curious (2)
- Tricked	≈ Confused (2)
- Distrustful	- Hungry
Feelings experienced, reported by students	
+ positive, ≈ neutral, - negative	

Table 3. Reported Feelings

The tallied responses, collected in Table 3, demonstrated that the two groups had different experiences in terms of their feelings. Moreover, while the facilitators believed Group 1 was perhaps the better functioning of the two, based on their observations during the SIM, Group 1's reported feelings were dominated using negative (7) and neutral (3) words, and reported only 4 positive words. Group 2, on the other hand, was dominated by 11 positive words, 2 neutral, and only 1 negative word.

During the debriefing, Group 2 members shared that they felt that their individual voices were heard, and this reflects their consistent focus on discussion, taking longer than Group 1 to reach decisions. They also indicated their decisions were made democratically, while Group 1 members did not speak much about fairness and equality among them. Rather, the feelings reported by Group 1 seemed to indicate that decision processes reflected a power struggle, as expressed in the words *distrust*, *tricked*, *impatient*, *annoyed*, *shocked*, *anxious* and *insecure*.

While not conclusive, these results from a facilitation of SIMIDEA invite further and deeper inquiry into the observation of overt communication that is produced by groups and individuals, and how the perception of the communication differs between internal and external observers. SIMIDEA could be expanded into a half- or full-day workshop, allowing for more extensive elaboration of theoretical perspectives. The results also demonstrate that theoretical perspectives related to group dynamics, conflict management, negotiation, and communication are prime areas for further research with SIMIDEA.

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