

Educating future aid workers? The role of simulations in international development education.

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Introducing the problem

Just how many people work as expatriate workers in the field of international development, either directly or indirectly is difficult to know. However, the range of employment opportunities in the development sector can be gauged from a glance at the many websites offering advice and advertisements for ‘international development jobs’ ranging from the UN recruitment site - careers.un.org - to NGO specific posts and jobs listed as ‘idealist’ or ‘ethical jobs’¹. One of the principal sources of information on employment in the development sector, Reliefweb, listed over 2628 open posts in May 2018, across a range of professional, volunteer, intern and consultancy categories². While the majority of these are likely to come from countries in the global north, increasingly, the instance of South-South experience transfer is becoming more visible.

Even less is known about the education, training or general level of preparedness of those who work in international development. Some will be specialists in a particular field - engineers, health specialists, agriculture experts; others will be generalists, perhaps having followed development oriented education options or, indeed, finding themselves as accidental development workers, possibly as a result of the increasing trend towards ‘volunteer tourism’ (Palacios 2010; Ong et al 2011). Those for whom work in international development has been a deliberate choice may have taken courses in development theory, political economy, conflict, or colonialism but may often end up finishing their education with limited knowledge or understanding of the implications of working in a developing country. Other ‘accidental’ development workers may have simply pursued specialist, vocationally oriented education routes, without any exposure to the politics, economic, management, sociology, psychology or, indeed, the anthropology of aid and all that it entails. However, there is limited evidence in academic literature that third level education courses adequately attend to preparing for the practice, profession and personal challenges of being an international development worker.

This article describes one effort to bridge this gap, focusing specifically on the experiences of efforts to enhance students understanding of and engagement with the world of development practice. It describes and analyses an annual simulation exercise undertaken over a three-year period within a

¹ <http://www.ethicaljobs.net/>

² www.reliefweb.int/jobs

module on development practice and programme management, designed to bring masters level students as close as possible to the details and dilemma of project management without actually being present in the field. The article sets the broader context for the simulation, with particular reference to the links and gaps between third level education and applied skills requirements and the role of simulation based education in bridging those gaps. The mechanics of the simulation are then described, including its purpose and location and how the simulation operates. The penultimate section reviews the learning from the simulation, drawing on three years of student feedback and voice. The paper concludes with some reflections from the simulation facilitators.

Making the link between education and the labour market

Accusations of real world – academic disconnect are frequently levelled at third level education programmes, the suggestion often being that students only learn real applied skills when they enter the work force. In the past some might have argued that the purpose of third level education is not to be concerned about the labour market but to prepare students to think, to understand, to interpret, to analyse, to plan, to design and to critique in a more informed and challenging manner. Nowadays however, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) globally are under increasing pressure to justify their existence and contribution to society. Many HEIs increasingly market their distinctiveness and contribution by referencing graduate attributes, not least employability. Graduate attributes are described as the *'skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable in a range of contexts'* (Barrie, 2006:217). A 2012 survey reported that 72% of education provider respondents believed their graduates were ready for entry level employments. However, only 42% of employers shared this belief (Mourshed et al 2012:2). This same survey, drawing from education to employment initiatives in more than 20 countries, and *'survey data from more than 8000 youth, education providers and employers in nine countries'*, also reports that despite the importance of hands on practical, hands on learning, only 24% of *'academic based programmes'* offer such an approach. In response, the authors of this report advocate for programmes that *"bring the workplace to the classroom'* through physical and computer/digital simulations as successful alternatives to internships and other workplace-based opportunities'. In the field of international development, the dilemma of the education – employment divide becomes somewhat more complex, with graduates potentially facing into employment in political and cultural context that are unfamiliar to them, where they may be literally making life and death decisions in their professional and personal capacity.

In the field of development studies not unrelated questions are being posed as to nature of how teaching is designed and delivered. Development studies have been broadly defined as *'knowledge and understanding of the world in which we live'* (Sen 2005). Informed by practice and facts on the ground, it includes ideas, concepts and theories that constitute our knowledge of how societies change' (Currie-Alder, 2016). Cameron et al (2013:349) ask, whether theory based teaching and the fostering of critical scholarship, the traditional approach, need to cede some space to *'the skills needed by practitioners'* and a stronger linking of theory to practice and, crucially, to different types of practice not just including aid management but also extending to solidarity and political activism. This leads Cameron to suggest, in the Canadian case at least, that while academic programmes foster critical thinking an analysis, that the *'critical perspective often disappears and the managerial procedures of the mainstream development industry are offered up as constitutive of what it means to practice development'* (Cameron 2013:356). Nef (2011) goes a step further, observing *'persistent absence of critical analysis and consciousness. A reluctance to challenge assumptions, to explore empirically, to raise probing issues related to the context, values and effects of development...'* Of

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course, the nature of international development studies is broad and is approached differently in many different institutions, both in the global north and south.

Not unrelated to this discussion is the degree of attention focus on the role of the 'personal' in aid relationships and the degree to which international development studies programmes introduce such a dimension into their programmes. This is perhaps most famous raised by Chambers (2004) who expressed his concern both about the absence of a focus on values or on the role of the personal within academia:

'The neglect of the personal dimension in development at first sight seems bizarre. It is self-evident to the point of embarrassment that most of what happens is the result of what sort of people we are, how we perceive realities, and what we do and do not do' (Chambers 2004: ???)

Of course, having the opportunities to test and challenge the personal in development, to reflect on the 'human dynamics of aid' (Mac Lachlan and Carr, 2005) by making strong connections with the professional world is more complex in the global north given that typically students of development studies are physically removed from the setting they are studying, creating barriers in observing practice or gaining direct field experience. While traditional pedagogical approaches can convey information and data about a place 'they are not effective at allowing students to experience in some way the realities of life in unfamiliar places' (Murray et al. 2011). This creates the conundrum of course because within the often challenging work environment of international development, amongst other competencies, a demonstrated ability to be effective in complex environments, allied with relevant work experience, is even more highly valued than in other professions. Those new to working in the field face an array of challenges which can include understanding a new country and culture, complex bureaucratic structures, high pressure work in a difficult or hostile environment and removal from personal support structures (McDonald, 2011). Hence, some knowledge and experience of 'the field' is seen as important (Murray et al 2011).

Whether the route into international development practice, it is likely that the education / training received (if any) for most development workers was received at distance from the reality of the day to day context. Posing the question 'Are you ready to be an international aid worker' the Canadian Red Cross identifies a range of factors that it suggests the aspiring aid worker needs to consider including: the ability to be away from friends and family for extended periods; the state of one's mental health and resilience; adaptability to difficult living conditions, including threats to personal security; professional competencies, including the ability to operate in a multi-cultural, collaborative work environment (www.redcross.ca). Others emphasise organisational skills, including flexibility and openness; awareness of self in relation to others, including communication and relational competencies; analytical skills; intercultural knowledge and awareness; and personal attributes (MacLachlan and Carr, 2005:4). The same authors have identified process skills as being repeatedly 'rated as the most important skills to have – above and beyond technical skills'. Alongside these of course has to be the ability to contribute something useful which implies that the development worker has skills not already available in the local work environment

Adding to this already demanding cocktail, are the complexities of working in an aid environment or 'Aidland' beyond the discharge of professional responsibilities: the potential or otherwise for cross cultural friendships (Heuser 2012); the challenge of 'living well while doing good' (Fechter, 2012); enjoying often high or relatively high levels of pay (MacLachlan and Carr 2005); recognising and addressing racism as an issue in 'development discourse and practice' (Kothari, 2006); how particular forms of knowledge and expertise are recognised and validated (Roth, 2012). All of these present a challenge to the potential development worker, but to those who would purport to teach them about it.

The role of simulations in higher education

It seems clear that education for the world of international development and particularly its practice dimensions needs something more than more traditional class based, conceptually dominated approaches - the 'more' being an emphasis on practice understandings and skills and ways of learning that not just foster theoretical knowledge but that push students to recognise the role of values and the personal as a key dimension of international development training. While internships and field placements might provide the ideal means to foster and test the types of competencies described above, such avenues are not easily available to many educational institutions in the global north. In their absence, simulation based approaches may help to bridge the gap.

The use of simulations in teaching emerged among the military in the 1950s, quickly moving into politics and conflict resolution. By the 1990s simulations were being used in many fields including business and medical training (Ben-Yehuda 2015, Murray et al, 2011). In general, simulations are used to approximate 'real world' experience within the classroom, introducing the complexities of decision making, communication, collaboration, competition, skills development and, sometimes, personal crisis (Asal & Blake, 2006; Bell et al 2008). As such simulations need to '*reflect the nature of real world problems*' and if they fail to do so run the risk of being misleading for students (Moizer et al 2009:208). Reflecting the nature of real world problems could mean choosing real cases or creating fictional scenarios designed to approximate real world experience (Asal & Blake 2006:6). Thus, for those designing or even applying pre designed simulations, knowledge of the 'real world' situation would appear to be essential. Of course the particular type of simulation chosen also determines the exact nature of the 'real world' knowledge required. Efforts to classify simulations arrive at three main types, role playing; gaming and computer simulation (Moizer et al 2009: 208). In the simulation described in this paper, a role playing model is used, based in a partially fictionalised reality which demands a high level of 'real world' knowledge and experience, not just to design the simulation but also to adjust, disrupt and facilitate it so as to maximise the potential for learning.

While there is some debate as to the effectiveness of simulations in enhancing learning (Bell et al 2008), many report improved learning outcomes and student engagement and motivation as a result of the use of simulations (Faria, 2004, Murray et al; Ben-Yehuda et al, 2015, Wellington 2016). It is suggested that simulations trigger creative initiatives, increased motivation, and a wider array of experiences beyond the traditional modes of classroom teaching. Personal and team activity create an interplay between the cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions. And emotional stimuli encountered in the simulation and make the overall learning impact much greater than the sum of its separate efforts. Advanced knowledge comprehension is often accompanied by memories of intense simulation episodes that endure far beyond short-term information retention for a final exam course (Ben-Yehuda et al, 2015:13).

While validating the role of simulations in generating additional learning outcomes it must be acknowledged that simulation based teaching is seen as being more intensive and involving a higher work load by comparison with traditional methods potentially involving additional preparation, facilitation, monitoring time as well as potential conflict resolution. (Moizer et al; 2009; Murray et al, 2011). It is also seen to have a higher risk content:

- Students may resist a form of learning that is different from what they have been acclimatised to.

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- 'In simulation' conflicts between students may also arise, bring the virtual experience into the non simulation classroom.
- Fears by students of a heavier workload resulting from involvement in the simulation may temper enthusiasm.
- The presence of a 'role play' element of a simulation may lead it to being treated less seriously than other courses;
- Inevitably some students may freeload while others may be unable to engage in their role due to shyness or cultural factors.

Lecturers / professors too may be risk averse and may be reluctant to give up the control a more traditional type of teaching approach affords or because they cannot control how students might or might not engage with a simulation exercise (Moizer et al 2009). However, all of these risks can be managed and mitigated to produce a rewarding simulation experience.

Welcome to Bemori – the why, where, what and how of a simulation in development practice

Having set the education and employment context and having briefly reviewed the possible contribution of simulations, we now go on to discuss a simulation designed to specifically expose students to the world of development practice and project management, looking the why, the where, the what and the how of the simulation set up.

The why?

For a simulation to be most effective there is a need to be clear about its purpose and objectives (Asal and Blake 2013). The reason for undertaking the 'Bemori' simulation is twofold. Firstly, we wished to introduce students to the world of development or 'Aidland' practice and in the process, move them beyond the narrower confines of conceptual consideration of aid and development, introducing rarely encountered discussions about values, challenges and reflections on the role of the personal could be raised. However, we also wanted to equip students with some practical project management skill-sets applicable in any number of organisational or administrative settings. Thus the simulation is not primarily about deepening a particular conceptual understanding, though important conceptual issues do arise. Instead it is concerned with practice conundrums and with a variety of techniques, skills, approaches, values, and dilemmas that might confront an aspiring development worker.

The where

Our simulation universe is located in two realities; the first, an immediate physical or natural reality, the second a virtual, simulated realm. The immediate physical or natural reality is a university campus, populated by postgraduate level students, participating on a variety of programmes - Peace and Development; International Studies; Politics; European Governance – but who have signed up for an elective module on Development Practice and Programme management. When these different simulation dimensions come into contact with each other and overlap some of the most challenging learning experiences are produced.

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The virtual world is located in a water and sanitation project in a fictional village called Bemori in the real world country of Timor Leste (East Timor) in South East Asia, the combination of the fictional and the real being necessary to provide concrete anchorage for student engagement with the fabricated simulation. Situating the simulation in a real country helps in enhancing the simulation environment, as did the use of the development practitioner's own photographs of villages typical of the fictional setting as well as Google Earth place marks, aerial maps, government and donor policy document and press releases, news and weather reports. Using real world material such as these also reduces the burden on the simulation moderator in terms of creating content to use in the simulation.

The what

The Bemori "Water for Life" pilot project is intended to be a typical, in so far as possible, development project which aims to provide clean drinking water to a small village in a remote mountainous region, and then to scale this up to nationwide coverage. The project is funded by a bilateral and a multilateral donor, is implemented by an imaginary UN Agency (UNIMAG) working closely with the Ministry of Infrastructure, and contracting out project work to local and international NGOs. Students are assigned roles such as UN agency Chief Technical Advisor, donor agency Program Offices, Senior Ministry of Infrastructure staff, NGO staff and Village Chief etc. In different iterations of the simulation we have oscillated between using real agencies and fictional ones, with potential arguments being made for both.

Each role has a two-page character outline, setting out the character's objectives and responsibilities, some public information about their character, how the project funding mechanism works for them, some private objectives and some private information. All the students see all the public role profiles of all the other characters. They themselves can decide if and who with, they wish to share their private objectives. Techniques to assist the students to get into their roles included getting them to think up a name for their character, create a CV for that person as well as one-to-one meeting with the academic practitioner to become more comfortable with what was a novel form of learning for nearly all students. This proved a very useful way of helping the student to 'inhabit' their character and to see the world from their character's perspective.

Over a real world six week / virtual world six-month timescale, participants are expected to bring the project from inception to delivery, during which they have to establish and operationalise relevant bilateral relationships as well as participating in formal, project steering committees.

The how

The Bemori simulation was supported by a field practitioner i.e. an 'Aidland' professional with many years' experience working in bilateral and multilateral aid organisations and by an academic facilitator, who also had a background in development practice, both in a developing as well as developed country context. We used what Ben-Yehuda et al (2015) characterise as a 'hybrid' model of face-to-face and cyber environments, in our case high quality video conferencing; blogging via a university digital learning environment (SAKAI) and directly via email. Support for the operation of virtual world was provide by the Univesity's Education Technology Division and this proved vital to its operation.

While an initial simulation environment with objectives was provided for each individual, the simulation did not have a master pre-defined narrative and there was no pre-determined trajectory.

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While the moderation was generally hands off, the development practitioner acted as moderator, intervening as a 'deus ex machina' by adding additional information, directing players to adopt certain behaviours, or disrupting the simulation environment e.g. by creating cyclones, car crashes or other external events. There was no element of computer based rules directing the action, rather it relied on the field practitioner's and academics³ extensive knowledge of the real world of development practice.

Scaffolding learning

To help students understand the context of the simulation a variety of scaffolding exercises / assignments were developed, at least some of which were introduced as part of a pre-simulation preparation phase. The first of these involved preparation of a country profile of Timor Leste, through which they learned to research a developing country through a variety of lenses- geography, history, political and developmental challenges. Secondly, to help students get into role, they are also given an assignment to research the role character they were playing, be it a traditional leader or a UN aid worker or a local or international NGO field officer. Through these assignments students were encouraged to review relevant literature, discover job descriptions or explore personal accounts that might provide an insight into the character they were playing.

Each student /character also had to produce a short inception plan, designed to encourage them to strategise about their characters engagement with the simulation at a very early stage. Using these inception plans the students were also required to develop a collective project plan. Inevitably students struggle to a greater or lesser extent to understand and adopt their role. Giving them a defined task, where they had to act and make decisions in role early on, helped them be more comfortable in the simulation universe and their role.

Finally, in terms of scaffolding, parallel, more traditional lectures accompanied the simulation exercise, though the number of these class was much reduced in recognition of the substantial volume of work created by the simulation. The themes of these classes supported the focus on development practice and included the role and place of values; planning for difference; results based programme and project planning and approaches towards monitoring and evaluation.

Duration

The pre-simulation stages took place over two weeks, with guidance from the academic facilitator in the classroom, and in one-on-one sessions as requested by students. The following week the simulation kicked off with all students and the academic facilitator meeting with the field practitioner via a video conference for a "Project Steering Committee Inception Meeting". Once the scene was set, the students and the field practitioner conducted the meeting in role, introducing the characters to each other and setting out the agreed project plan. Having the field practitioner calling in from a developing country added an element of reality to the simulation. The simulation then progressed with students communicating face to face or via email with each other, and by email with the field practitioner, who was cc'ed on all email contacts between individual students in role. It was important that the field practitioner, who was the simulation moderator, was copied on all communications so they were aware of actions taken by the characters in role. This aspect of communication could also work well using a number of social media platforms, such as Facebook.

There were two to three additional live video conferences with the field practitioner, which simulated 'midterm progress' and 'end of pilot phase' steering committee meetings at three and six weeks. We also organised a final simulation debrief session out of character. At the end of each

³ In this case the academic facilitator also has extensive international and domestic development experience.

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video conference, the academic practitioner would give an analysis of the meeting, and suggest how actors might have handled situations differently in the real world, and learn lessons from the in-role proceedings. Video conference meetings were recorded and made available to students.

Encouraging reflection

A simulation can only be of value if students are encouraged and facilitated to engage in reflexive practice, reflecting on their own experiences, their reactions, links between theory and concept and the world of practice. In the Bemori simulation students were required to complete and were graded on a weekly, out of simulation character blog. As well as aiding engagement this afforded the two simulation facilitators the opportunity to engage privately with the student blogs were it deemed useful e.g. if a student was raising a particular issue or were reflecting on a particular difficulty or just needed some encouragement. As well as supporting reflection, the students were encouraged to see the blogs as a form of (simulation) project monitoring tool, providing regular and reliable data for an end of project 'evaluation'. In 'Bemori' the end of project evaluation took the form of a graded reflective essay, where students were asked to consider their engagement with the simulation, how they achieved their public and private objectives as well as the effectiveness of the simulation as a learning tool.

Assessment

While it would be nice to be able to undertake a simulation without the pressures of assessment, it is likely that neither the HEI nor indeed, the students, would appreciate such a course of action. Our assessment had five requirements:

- Completion of country profile, designed to anchor the students in the reality of the simulation and to contextualise the fictionalised dimension and to develop applied research skills;
- Completion of a role profile, again to situate the role play in a real world context but also engage students in the world of development practice;
- In the final year of the simulation, completion of a monthly reporting matrix to ensure ongoing engagement with the exercise;
- Writing a weekly blog to act as a reflective, monitoring exercise.
- Completion of a final, reflection piece on the simulation.

These components were designed as an integrated, scaffolded assessment framework, blending applied research skills with the challenge to engage in reflective practice.

Identifying the benefits of a simulation based approach to learning

'It is really odd to be "spending time" in a fictional place, and then never go back. I am really tired of Bemori, but I think I might miss it somehow.'

In deciding upon and designing a simulation based approach to teaching about development practice and programme management we anticipated that a number of benefits might accrue, namely that students would learn and absorb learning about the world of international development practice and in the process they would gain some practical skills in the field of project management. However, we recognised that there might well be other benefits; students would gain insight into their own learning processes, they would learn about themselves as people and as potential practitioners, about how to deal with confusion and uncertainty and about how to manage difficult decisions, situations and colleagues.

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A frequent critique of simulation based learning and problem based learning more generally is the inability to ‘prove’ that it produces learning outcomes that are superior to more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. However, it could be argued this is only really relevant when simulation / problem based learning is used as a direct substitute for the traditional. In our case, simulation is the primary approach to teaching and learning on a module about development practice, it is not an alternative. Moreover, the discussion on learning outcomes and their measurement is often limited to those learning outcomes that are produced at the end of the teaching / learning encounter e.g. does one approach increase knowledge about a particular topic by comparison with another approach. In our case however, we are aiming to produce learning outcomes that may well only become visible some years hence, when students enter the world of work, in international development or elsewhere. These types of learning outcomes cannot be measured at the end of a module but they can be hinted by capturing students’ reflections on their learning.

Using reflections recorded in student blogs from 22 students⁴ over a three year period, coded and analysed using NVIVO software, this section of the paper outlines some of the actual and projected learning resulting from the simulation. It focuses on the learning gained in four distinct, albeit interrelated areas:

- i. Development practice
- ii. Learning about self
- iii. Learning about how we learn
- iv. Encountering a simulation environment

Nodes				
Name	Sources	References	Cr	
Overall simulation impact		3	16	0:
Learning process		3	25	0:
Learning about self		3	36	0:
Learning about development practice		3	37	0:
Making difficult decisions		1	3	
Improving the simulation		3	8	0:
Encountering difficult issues		1	3	0:
being in a simulation environment		3	32	0:
using technology		2	3	
maintaining simulation integrity		2	3	
embracing confusion and uncertainty		3	19	
competing obligations		3	10	

Table 1: First round coding of student blogs

Within these four areas a number of main learning outcomes were recorded by students.

⁴ Students were drawn from the following countries: Ireland (8), USA (3), Malaysia (1), Rwanda (1), Germany (2), Belgium (1), Iceland (1), South Africa (1), Russia (1), Cameroun (1), Sweden (1) and Palestine (1)

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Learning about	Outcomes
Development practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation for the world of work • Planning • Experiencing bureaucratic procedures • Realising the challenges of working in ‘development’ / being put off working in development • Collaboration and co-ordination challenges / team working • Dealing with values clashes • Learning beyond the technical • Recognising the limits of aid impact • Dealing with difficult issues e.g. corruption
Learning about self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New perspectives on the world and self • ‘Realising I don’t know as much as I thought I did’ • Managing personal values and professional (simulation) realities • Taking initiative • Learning about feelings (does the simulation do it enough) • Learning to think outside the box • The challenge of working collaboratively • Exercising / not exercising voice
As an approach to learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing things never done before • An alternative, hands on practice oriented way of learning, • Valuing other contributions, exploring options • Combining the traditional and the non-traditional learning • Independent learning emphasised • Researching, especially using grey literature • Delayed knowledge transmission
Encountering a simulation environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When virtual and physical / natural realities collide • Embracing confusion and uncertainty • Preparation, preparation, preparation • Making the virtual more real! • Recognising and dealing with simulation fatigue • Maintaining simulation integrity • Managing competing obligations – academic and otherwise • Limitations

Table 2: Principal learning outcomes recorded by students

A number of these outcomes are discussed in more detail below. For the purposes of this paper we are including direct student comments so as to let the voice of the students tell the simulation story rather than the interpretations of its facilitators.

Development practice

Building preparedness for the world of development practice was one of the main reasons for undertaking the simulation in the first place and much of the student feedback suggests that this ambition has been realised, both in equipping students with a critical analysis of aid as well as with some basic project management skills. Even more importantly, the simulation has provided a safe space where mistakes can be made:

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Sometimes I think I get in my own head because I want to do this so badly, development work that is, that when I mess up or I don't get something right away, or something doesn't turn out the way it was in my head, I start to doubt my own abilities. But I need to just push forward and remind myself that I'm just starting out and it's okay if I mess up because that's how I learn.

In this section we look at some of the practice learning around planning, collaboration, the role of values and tradition and recognising the challenges of being a development worker.

Planning

Planning is a key skill in the world of development practice, one that the more traditional lecture components of the module addressed. However, in the simulation students were required to engage in planning activities, confronting fears and overcoming obstacles, in some cases related to the perceived absence of planning skills:

I used to hear some people talk of projects and designing them, would wonder how hard it is and not to ever see me doing it. Now here I here I am having a test of it. It's really been tough but love the challenges, they are truly worth it!

In any planning simulation allocating roles and responsibilities is an important function but one that won't always be clear cut. Inevitably, as in the real world, overlaps occur, showing where gaps in planning and organisation arise. Demonstrating the learning from the 'not doing' as well as the 'doing', one student commented:

It was also hard to figure out which duties and responsibilities each of us had. No one knew who was in charge of hiring staff and ordering materials. Now I conclude that it would be a good idea to get together with other participants and define our rights and responsibilities at the beginning of the month 1 but this chance was lost.

Of course, it is rare that a development project has a single goal and many overlapping objectives may have to be met. This was recognised by many students, typified in the view of one who concluded:

I think too often there is a sense of tunnel vision within a water project where the end goal is first and foremost to bring water to people. Now, I agree that bringing water to people is important, but it needs to be done the right way. Part of a successful sustainability plan is to implement a gender balance and promote long-term gender empowerment. It will ultimately be a waste of money and have a negative impact on a community if the water project becomes derelict in the first few years, as so many do

Collaboration and co-operation

For many HEIs that articulate a suite of graduate attributes, collaboration and co-operation competencies are likely to be writ large. However, opportunities to develop such competencies in a more challenging environment may be limited. The Bemori simulation necessitated a high level of collaboration and co-operation and many lessons are reported about the potential challenges of working in a collaborative way even in our fabricated 'Aidland'. Commenting on how personal

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relationships impact on collaborative disposition and practice one student noted that:

It is conspicuous how much easier it is to exchange ideas with persons I tend to spend more time with in general and with whom I get along with pretty well, independent from their role and their role's use for my objectives. This is probably the only "weakness" of a role play among people who know each other. It also makes me wonder to what extent a personal relationship can shape the outcome of a real project.

Taking up the communication theme another commented on the importance of communication in a development setting:

I have definitely learnt much from this exercise, both in terms of planning and communication. I am not sure exactly what I have learned, but I think I have improved my communication, and gotten a clearer idea of how different actors relate to each other in a development setting. Together with academic literature, it is really helpful to observe the interaction between development partners.

Communication of course is essential in development scenarios where multiple actors are involved:

I think we learned a lot about development projects and that it is a lot more difficult and complex than one would expect.... The intercultural and interpersonal differences can make cooperation very difficult and have to be kept in mind constantly. This became more and more obvious as the project went on. I can only imagine how much work and thought one would need to put in, to work for an INGO [International NGO] in real life.

For some though, negotiating the tricky development environment proved enjoyable:

I'm actually getting a thrill from all this diplomacy and manoeuvring. At the beginning, I thought that there are some people who just enjoy hindering the process with platitudes, and that that's why nothing ever gets done in organisations such as the UN. But I've come to realise that in a lot of ways, diplomacy is generally the best way for everyone to get at least a part of what they want.

The role of values and tradition

The modules in which the simulation is located placed considerable emphasis on values and indeed the first exercise students were required to complete was a personal value mapping exercise. It is encouraging therefore that much of the student feedback, in different ways, identified the role of values in development and how they may not always be shared, even within the student cohort. Value clashes were surfaced by the simulation exercise, requiring management both by the participants themselves and in some instances by the simulation facilitators.

Today I learned about the attitudes of some in relation to gender issues and how that can effect a working environment. I myself have never encountered issues like this and am not a strong advocate of women's rights I prefer a more relaxed approach to life and just get on with it. But today I learned a big lesson in what some women face in relation to attitude. I had a lesson in biting my tongue also

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because I was really irritated by this even in a simulation situation I could never say such condescending things.

Identifying the difficulties of accepting competing cultural constructs, another questioned their own ability to embrace aspects of another person's culture or society that is completely at odds with their own. This of course is a fundamental challenge of life in international development work.

I know cultural awareness is an important aspect of foreign aid work, but this week, I've realized it's more difficult than I originally thought. How do you work with someone's culture without condoning the aspects of it that you think are misguided or even wrong? Are those aspects wrong, or is everything relative? If they are wrong, how do aid workers and other officials correct or attempt to mitigate them without looking domineering or Western-centric?

Addressing the same issue but from a different standpoint, another student recognised the importance of understanding local traditions and their potential valuable contribution to building and maintaining resilience.

It is interesting how in so many places, people are holding on to their old traditions, which are really specific to each area, such as how she describes the meaning of "Lulic" having different specific meanings in different areas. This often feels like a lost element in most Western "developed countries". I really like the way they describe an ability to naturally reconcile after conflict, by focusing on "golden times" of the past. It reminds me in ways of The storytelling traditions in Palestinian culture, which also involves many stories about lands and towns of ancestors (often located in areas inside Israel today). The retelling of these stories also contribute to some resilience, and to maintaining a strong sense of culture and belonging, after being displaced from one's ancestral areas.

Challenges of working in development

Apart from collaborative working across multiple agencies and cultural contexts, students also identified other challenges of work in the world of development practice. The simulation was described by one student as giving 'an idea of the dysfunctions and overwhelming nature of development projects'. While the objective of the simulation wasn't to portray a negative impression of development work it was considered essential that a realistic and challenging experience be provided. Student feedback suggests that, for many, this was achieved:

You're going to get a shitload of information, documents, reports, etc. thrown at you and you need to decipher what is important for you to know as well as what is important for you to share with your colleagues. You're going to question why the hell you're even here and what other things you could be doing that wouldn't give you as much anxiety, but then you remember you're passionate about this and it's not always going to be easy. You're not always going to agree with your colleagues or your friends and that is something you need to deal with head-on because communication is the key to everything.

While the objective was not to overload students, it was important to create a condition where relevant information and documentation was recognised and utilised. It was also important to introduce students to the realities of aid bureaucracy, something that many idealistic northern aid

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workers may initially find difficult if not downright unacceptable. A student observed:

Since I have been fairly unexperienced with “aidland” in my studies, it was extremely interesting to see what it takes to get and keep a project running. Of course, I was aware that the degree of administration in such a project is quite high. However, I would have never expected that issues with regard to this still occur during the project (e.g. ineffective reporting and financial system). I have always had the impression that everything is set out properly before a project starts and that ambiguities are quite low. Thanks to the simulation, I realised that even in such a professional work environment things do not always run smoothly and effectively.

Dealing with highly bureaucratic systems is an inevitable feature of development practice, something that the simulation managed to successfully inflict on students:

Also, the bureaucracy of how to implement this project is beyond me. I think for the first time in my life I was able to understand how and why development projects in real life take so long. Sometimes I feel like we can simplify this project by cutting a few steps, but in some ways, they are almost necessary and you kind of understand why they are there.

Of course, a balance has to be struck between sugar coating the world of development practice and an excessively negative portrayal.

I have heard several people express that this simulation has “turned them off” development or international aid work, but even if the simulation didn’t go perfectly, I have not been deterred.

Learning about self

Beyond learning about the world of development practice this simulation was designed to stimulate reflection and engagement on the role of the personal and on the types of personal attributes students might bring or might need to bring to that world. And as the Nvivo coding exercise showed, learning about self was one of the most frequently referenced themes in the student blogs:

I am learning every week that working in development projects is very challenging and demands knowledge and skills in many areas. I have difficulties seeing the whole picture when there is a lot going on and so I am not always aware of all my tasks. It is also a test of character, personality and work ethic that bring out weaknesses and strong points in myself. It seems that this side of the job is harder to learn than the technical part

This chimes with the importance of developing ‘process’ competencies as well as technical skills, something that can be personally challenging but which can cause exciting awakenings.

I have learned a new side of myself. And this probably the most positive result of the whole simulation project. It created new thoughts and perspectives on things in the world and, more importantly, on my own character.

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Another wondered whether she and others could have taken more initiative and been more creative:

But I still think it would have been interesting if we all would have “taken on” the project in a creative fashion. I believe it could have been possible for us to initiate more meetings, do better planning, and maybe come up with some interesting outcomes between us. I suppose what I am trying to say, is that it could have been possible for us to “lift” the project by bringing in even more “real” elements.

Role – personality conflict

Playing a character in simulation is not so straightforward when that character may have values and perspectives that are different and in some cases at odds from those of the student. In some cases, students were consciously matched with simulation characters, either to enable or to confront embedded values, with a view to deepening the learning experience. In other cases, simulation characters were randomly assigned or self-selected. In both situations students reported challenges in playing the role of a development actor whose values did not align with their own outlook or ways of working.

In terms of going into the role of a local govt. official, I think that I tried to do so, but probably failed to let go of my personal values. I still wanted to promote gender equality, participation, and equal allocation of resources, which I assume the local water engineer might have cared less for.

For one female student tasked with playing the role of male, traditional leader, the exercise proved to be both frustrating but also perhaps illuminating:

As I begin the simulation, I find myself feeling a little frustrated with the character I'm portraying, the village chief. It's odd to kind of step outside myself and play someone who's not really like me at all. I'm frustrated especially by his reliance on traditional values. When people call for a return to "traditional values" in my country, it usually conjures up for me a picture of ignorance, racism, and sexism. So it's hard to play someone who doesn't really want women to participate in village affairs, and who wants to keep some of the money for himself instead of sharing it with the villagers.

Overall though, it is encouraging to see an evolving confidence in most participating students:

It is becoming clear to me, how little I actually think outside the box, even when I think that I do so. Each week there are new "ahaa" moments, all providing some new clarity about the direction this simulation is meant to take. Moments when I realise that something could have been done in a very simple way, but we just haven't thought about it.

Working in teams

Group based learning is nothing new in a university setting. In a simulation exercise, the idea of team working and collaboration is taken a step further. Whereas traditional group work is often designed to co-operate on the production of a graded academic output, in simulation exercises different types of outputs are generated, in our case, a group plan, a water supply project, capacity building etc. Moreover, the basis or motivation for collaboration is not always clear, the ‘water’

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being muddled by students having a range of public as well as private objectives, some of which might say 'co-operate' on the tin while holding something far less palatable inside. This produced interesting learning:

You learn about teamwork at a professional level. You get over how much you don't like team work/ group projects. Instead you learn how to successfully work as a team. It can be a headache and it has not been easy; especially because it's not like a regular project where you do your piece and be done, and it doesn't matter what other people choose to do; it requires working and communicating well with others.

Having the experience of working in teams when values clash can be even more difficult but is ultimately beneficial.

I have a hard time listening to people that are stuck in their opinion and want to exclude women. So, even if I know that we are in role I feel repelled and I have a hard time accepting exclusion and unfairness. This week taught me that working with others can be challenging. I have to become more patient and accept that there will always be people who don't do their job or are rather passive. I will try to work on my patience the next week.

Knowing how to communicate discordant views is a skill relevant to any context but in the world of development practice it is particularly important. Simulation based education approaches create opportunities to practice judgement and restraint and to recognise where deeply held views may come from.

I need to work on when I bite my tongue and when I express my feelings; as well as how aggressively I put forth those feelings. This is something that I grapple with frequently and it's a complex issue. I really believe that being silent in the face of injustice is basically complying with the oppressor, so I want to use my voice as much as possible, but I know there's a time and place. What those appropriate times and places are, I haven't quite figured out. But to be honest, I'd rather use my voice too much than not enough and that doesn't just apply to this simulation. (Yes I know this shows my privilege and I am aware of that; also something I grapple with).

Simulation as an approach to learning

As well as generating learning about development practice and about self-development, the student feedback addresses the value of simulation based learning, in its own right as well as how it contrasts with more traditional approaches. A number of students instance its relationship to the world of work:

The lessons we are learning transcend the classroom. In real life, as I start to look for entry level jobs within international development institutions and NGOs, I noticed that sometimes they want some form of experience in project management / implementation. Given that I have very little professional experience, I have been able to put the class on my resume, and elaborate on the key, relevant concepts that I have been learning on my cover letter. It's been encouraging to see how it's already translating in real life

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Another student commented on the transferability of the learning from the simulation exercise:

The module (lectures) and the simulation really complement each other. The two, together, have taught me a lot of important professional lessons. I have learned about project management, and about the knowledge you need to successfully work in the world of international development. The skills we learned, however, I do not think are limited to development/ working for an NGOs, or bilateral/ multilateral agency. They could be applied across the spectrum, in other projects as well.

Much of the student feedback highlights the complementarity of a practice oriented, simulation based learning approach:

It was a great experience to have definitely a major change for the standard 'read two articles and discuss'. I'll definitely remember this module for a long time to come. It was a struggle at points but overall a success.

It's practical and engaging. It's not about reading all this assigned text and reciting it in class next week and then going home and doing it all over again; rather, the entire module requires you to be engaged, think critically, and be creative in your assignments and projects. It's a really unique approach to learning.

I find it really interesting in that respect to move away from theory and notions of development and get into the reality of working in development. That's my general look at the module, in the most recent class, however, we started the simulation which is the most practical way of doing an assignment ever, it literally drops you in at the deep end

Of course, after an extended period of participation in more structured and more traditional approaches to learning, many students experienced some concerns about how they would deal with a less structured and more self-directed learning style, echoing some of the earlier discussions about the risks of using simulations as a pedagogical tool:

At the beginning of the exercise I was unsure how the simulation would fit with my way of learning and I think that it has suited me. As I am the type of person that likes to engage with reading, writing and doing in order to learn and the simulation experience has encompassed all of these aspects.

The entire simulation project is really engaging but also requires a lot of out of you. I'm so used to doing an assignment and being done with it and moving on. This simulation is consuming. It's not like you can do it and be done—or you can wait the day before, or you'll sound like an idiot in the meetings. It's definitely building character and challenging some of my bad habits. I am learning a lot. As much as I feel like it's so time consuming, I have been grateful that it has taught me a different way of thinking, as it requires an approach that's almost completely different from regular classes and assignment. As much as I complain about the work the simulation requires of me, I do feel like it's actually equipping me with the skills I will need to thrive in the real world, so I don't mind it too much.

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Encountering a simulation environment

I think the meeting is going to make some people disliked, why did you have to make us enemies or shall we turn out as frenemies!

The experiences of operating in a simulation environment can be challenging and demanding as the quote above demonstrates. For students as well as facilitators it inevitably takes place in parallel with other demands – academic and personal - in the natural / physical environment. Frequently, the virtual and natural worlds collide, sometimes in a positive way, other times less beneficially. Differing level 'non simulation' commitments and how students organise to meet their commitments can be a source of 'in simulation' tension:

I do really understand that everyone has stuff going on in their lives and other schoolwork, etc. I do too. I'm just really struggling with a lack of direction and a lack of teamwork from a few of my colleagues. As well as dealing with lots of stuff happening in my own life

On occasion, students can begin to lose themselves in the world of the simulation, sometimes requiring the facilitators to remind them that the simulation is a fabricated learning experience, in which some student / characters may as part of their roles be deliberately setting out to frustrate others:

I am not sure if I have gone too far in the simulation where it's difficult to separate between [my character] and myself; communication with my peers have totally shifted to formal, even sometimes in our friendly and socializing catch-ups. Hence, I believe, at this stage, everyone is engaged fully in their role, which might explain the rise of challenges and the disagreements. Further, these disagreements often cause a frustration that my role and/or (myself) encounter. The fact that I engage fully in the simulation to an extent personalize the frustration without noticing that it is [my character's] frustration, not mine. Once again, I have to remind myself that what happens in the simulation stays in the simulation and will not be taken personally!

Managing the simulation environment is normally the task of an academic facilitator. In the Bemori case, having two facilitators was beneficial, one a current development practitioner, the second an academic and former development practitioner. In particular, though, having a less frequently seen development practitioner as the simulation moderator adds greatly to the believability of the simulation exercise.

The skype-conference element was very interesting. Just the fact that Eoghan [development practitioner] is in a different country makes it more real to think of him as "Mr. Dos Santos" and of the project as actually taking place.

Embracing confusion and uncertainty

One of the recurring early stage responses from students in this and indeed in any problem based learning type scenario is confusion, confusion, confusion and a sense that they don't understand the simulation and never will!

So here I am after one 'month' and I am still pretty clueless. To be honest I feel pretty stupid as I have read over the project brief numerous times yet I'm still

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stuck. I'm hoping that I'm not the only one. Monday's class cannot come soon enough so I can get together with everyone and talk this over.

However, confusion eventually clears and in most cases, where students engage with the simulation gives ways to clarity and even enjoyment. The temptation for the facilitators may be to jump in to end the confusion, perhaps in the hope that confusion doesn't undermine confidence in the simulation process. However, this is best resisted and underscores the importance of cultivating bravery as well as facilitation skills amongst academic staff. This is captured in the comments of two students:

At the beginning of the simulation I felt that more guidance should have been provided on how it was expected to unfold. After 5 weeks of it I now feel that the fact that very little guidance was provided is what has allowed us to learn. As would be the case in a real life situation, we have all become more comfortable in our roles as time has gone on

Can't believe I have finally come to associate with "Water for Life" project. I used to think its not real nor East Timor, my bad! Guess what, I am now seeing things clear and a full picture of everything, of course its imaginary but I can see the images coming to life, before it was totally not possible, I was in panic, worried and beyond lost. Now, I see the picture, have a clue, sure I still worry but not freeze!

One aid to easing confusion has been the recording of the video formal simulation sessions, the project steering committee meetings. This allows students to reflect on how they engaged in particular situation and on how they might improve their contribution:

Being able to observe the video afterwards is very helpful. It really shows what one should work on (In my case posture, language, assertiveness, and proper preparation). During a two-minute short brief of what the "state of play" is in Bemori, I managed to say "aam" 28 times. If it was a mantra meditation – I would have probably reached nirvana by the end of it!

Final reflections

From our experiences of working in the world of international development practice we are in little doubt that they type of challenges to the traditional way of teaching international development studies introduced earlier in this paper are necessary and valid. To prepare students to fully understand and deal with the complexities of the world of international development, concept and theory, information and data based classroom learning is not enough. From a narrow educational perspective alone it is important to bridge the gap between academic and practice learning. However, to cultivate attributes and competencies that students can potentially take into the world of work it is important to introduce students to the professional world into which they may be entering. This is no less true for students of international development than it is for architects or doctors, lawyers or engineers.

Beyond the relatively modest ambition of introducing students to the world of work, there is a challenge to go further, to help form professionals who are mindful of their potential to do harm as well as good, especially in parts of the world where much harm has often already been visited. This is all the more true for professionals coming from the global north, envisaging careers in

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international development, for altruistic or possibly more mercenary reasons. As educators, we subscribe to the view that are obligated to confront the continuing omission of the personal in development, to increase focus on the human dynamics of aid and to challenge students to engage with values and learning about self. Of course distance from the 'field' complicates this objective, convincing us of the importance of simulations in education for development.

From the evidence presented in this paper, captured over a three-year period we are in little doubt that simulation based education can be an essential complement to more traditional pedagogical approaches. Moreover, it can help to connect theory and practice, in the process supporting the development of more analytically capable and practice aware graduates. We believe that his endeavour is altogether richer when it benefits a high level of real world knowledge and, ideally, from the synergy of academic and practitioner facilitation, something that may well necessitate the building partnerships between HEIs and national aid programmes and / or NGOs.

The simulation presented in the is paper is a role play based, hybrid model using a mix of face-to-face and technology aided elements. It aimed to achieve a distinct outcome, bringing masters level students as close to the details and dilemma of a project management exercise as can be done without actually being present in the field. We confirmed that such an objective could not be delivered using traditional approaches to teaching and so set about designing a bespoke simulation exercise that married real with the fictionalised locations and virtual with natural, physical realities but which didn't demand excessive, additional tangible resources. However, it certainly made demand on intangible resources, especially facilitator and student time. Time was particularly demanded to frequently adjust and rebalance the simulation in light of student feedback and engagement, leading us to redesign role play characters and their individual objectives (both public and private) and to adjust the scaffolding, dynamics, opportunities for disruption and the overall tension of the exercise.

In choosing to undertake the simulation and particularly after its first deployment, we became acutely aware of the risks involved and were frequently confronted with the difficulties of overcoming established learning styles and learning preferences. We also encountered the challenge of virtual simulation tension spilling out into physical non simulation reality but feel that together we had sufficient facilitation experience to address any issues that might arise. The presence of two facilitators also allowed issues arising to be discussed and directions to be adjusted accordingly. The importance of such facilitation skills and of a supporting co-facilitator cannot be underestimated and may, in some cases, necessitate upskilling to ensure that student interests are protected.

There is no doubt that the simulation could be improved but we also have to be conscious that every potential improvement runs the risk of diminishing some other element of the simulation. Roles could be more or less clearly defined but that runs the risk of replacing student imagination with instructor led structure or perhaps, pure chaos. The simulation could be longer or short, but that runs the risk of creating unrealistic pressure or extended simulation fatigue. The ongoing facilitation could be more hands on or hands off, potentially stifling or releasing student creativity. The main message though is to try, tweak it and if it doesn't work try something different. How bad can it be?

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