Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT)

Simulating with Care: Some Thoughts on Mitigating the Potential for Harm in Social Studies Simulations

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Published June 29, 2025

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DOI

https://doi.org/10.29173/assert92

Pages: 1-10

ABSTRACT

This editorial commentary and introduction addresses the ethical concerns with simulations for social studies education. While simulations can be a powerful pedagogy for engaging students in perspective taking and decision-making, the harmful and inappropriate use of simulations is well documented. Simulations have the potential to harm students by enacting curricular violence, stereotyping, appropriation, and the reproduction and normalization of oppressive systems. However, with careful pedagogical mediation, these potential harms can be mitigated. This article discusses how simulations may harm students and provides guidance for navigating ethical concerns when using simulations for social studies education.

Keywords: simulations; social studies education; curricular violence; teaching methods; teaching strategies

How to cite this article (APA): Wright-Maley, C., & Evers, S. (2025). Simulating with care: Some thoughts on mitigating the potential for harm in social studies simulations. *Annals of Social Studies Research for Teachers, 7*(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.29173/assert92

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Julliard's school of drama faced backlash following a classroom simulation intended to educate students about Black history and musical culture. The simulation included an immersive soundscape projecting the noises of slave auctions, racial slurs, and cracking whips. Former student Marion Gray described how she felt as a Black student during the experience: "It's maddening to have your humanity so disrespected, to have something done to you that is so wrong" (Kabbany, 2021). Another student questioned the pedagogical merit of the simulation: "I don't know a single Black person who needs to go through the experience of enslavement to understand what racism feels like today" (Winert-Kendt, 2021). The incident at Julliard highlights the dangers of ill-conceived simulations and underscores the need for careful pedagogical mediation and sound instructional rationale for their use. Research and media reports indicate that the inappropriate and harmful use of simulations to teach sensitive topics is a problem in K-12 classrooms (Brown et al., 2022; Schweber, 2003). In editing this issue, we felt that any compilation that did not address the potential for harm posed by simulations would be incomplete. We have taken it upon ourselves to offer commentary on the ethical concerns about social studies simulations and how harm to students can be mitigated.

THE RESEARCH

Simulations for social studies education are designed to represent real-world processes and environments to help students better understand their underlying features and dynamics. In the classroom, simulations might involve activities where students assume the roles of historical or civic figures to deliberate on key issues. Digital technologies like Virtual, Extended Reality, and Generative AI are emerging as new mediums through which educational simulations are being enacted in museums and classrooms. Simulations for social studies education have the following characteristics:

- Simulations reflect reality in a structured and limited way.
- Simulations illustrate significant dynamic events, processes, or phenomena.
- Simulations incorporate learners in active roles through which the phenomena are revealed.
- Simulations are pedagogically mediated (Wright-Maley, 2015, p. 67).

These characteristics encompass both the dangers and safeguards of using simulations for social studies education. This article explores the ethical issues surrounding the **reflection of reality** and the **incorporation of learners in active roles** during classroom simulations. We offer guidance on how teachers can **structure and limit** the *verisimilitude*, or perceived "realness," of simulations and **pedagogically mediate** the appropriate and safe use of simulations for student learning. We will first detail the types of dangers posed by classroom simulations before offering guidance for implementing simulations as a powerful pedagogy for social studies instruction.

The Hidden Potential for Harm in Social Studies Simulations

Simulations are a dynamic teaching method that boosts student engagement and increases their agency during classroom activity. When used properly, simulations have the potential to engage students in perspective taking and decision-making, offering them unique opportunities to develop knowledge about complex systems and processes. However, lacking structure and pedagogical mediation, simulations can lead to undesirable, even harmful, outcomes. In the sections below, we will discuss several such outcomes, including curricular violence, stereotyping and appropriation, and reproduction and normalization of oppressive systems.

Curricular Violence

Curricular violence occurs when educational experiences harm students (Haynes & Caines, 2024; Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2010; Young, 2024). Simulations that recreate violent or oppressive realities and/or ask students to take on the role of perpetrators or victims can cause harm to students. For example, intergenerational trauma is evoked when students who are part of groups affected by violent historical events are asked to imagine themselves in the role of someone involved in these past events. Ill-conceived simulations that fail to acknowledge the trauma associated with sensitive topics enact curricular violence that may be emotionally damaging to students.

Classroom example: Students in a fifth-grade history classroom participated in a mock slave auction during a history lesson. Two students of color were instructed to stand at the front of the room while the class discussed their physical features as part of the simulation before bidding on them as enslavers (Masih, 2024).

A simulation like this may have verisimilitude, but it is dehumanizing and demeaning for all of the students involved, especially to the students subjected to racialized bigotry sanctioned within the

confines of a classroom.

Stereotyping and Appropriation

Although simulations are sometimes billed as “empathy machines” (Rouse, 2021), it is important to note the limitations of empathy. During simulations, students do not experience the processes/events in a literal way, so the evocation of emotional responses through simulation can limit learners’ awareness of the temporal and spatial context of real-life events, not to mention that it fails to consider their emotional readiness to grapple with the underlying issues of violent topics (Mann & Cohen, 2011). Simulations that ask students to roleplay can be a valuable tool for perspective taking; however, when simulating otherized groups, these activities can lead to appropriation or stereotyping. These acts exploit the culture, heritage, and history of others for the purposes and pleasure of dominant groups (hooks, 1992).

Classroom example: Cory developed an income inequality simulation, which he has used for many years, and which continues to be part of his teaching regimen (Wright-Maley, 2013). Typically, the simulation’s participants begin the game of Monopoly with different incomes and rules of play, in which high-income and low-income players have different (dis)advantages. During one iteration, he added a layer of verisimilitude to the simulation by providing teams with a brief and sympathetic description of each family based on composites of families he had known while he was a high school teacher. Before teams had made one trip around the board, the discourse had devolved with a surprising speed into a volley of classist and culturally insensitive—if not outright racist—remarks. Cory had to stop the simulation immediately to debrief these comments.

The simulation was derailed in this case because students relied on stereotypical heuristics to represent their families. Not only did the addition of family identities cause the simulation to fail to meet its learning goal, but it also revealed some more sinister dimensions of students’ (un)conscious beliefs, which may have been harmful to others in the class. It is telling that this outcome has never emerged without the inclusion of these profiles.

Reproduction and Normalization of Oppressive Systems

The dynamic nature of simulations can help students understand the complexity of systemic processes. Debriefing and reflection activities are vital for helping students connect the simulation to real-world human experiences and critically examine the systems and processes simulated (Gallavan

& Webster, 2018; Sanchez, 2006). Without this reflection, simulations run the risk of teaching students that processes are not social constructions, but the natural and inevitable workings of the world. This unintentional outcome risks conflating an accurate depiction of historical circumstances with an inevitable one devoid of the choices human beings made to systematically exploit others. For example, “win conditions” in simulation games sometimes represent the historical exploitation of others accurately, but do not consider the potential impact that rewarding students who participate and excel in exploitative processes might have upon the student.

Classroom example: In lesson materials for an Indian Ocean trade simulation game (Nokes, 2018), enslaved people are included as part of the goods students will trade during the game. Enslaved people are represented as numerical cargo in the game. The simulation structure is such that students are encouraged to win the game by making the most advantageous trades–which include the enslavement of others. This structure risks normalizing the violence embedded in the economic system. Although students may opt not to engage in human trafficking, the simulations’ structures nevertheless reward it.

Teachers must weigh the verisimilitude of a simulation against its potential impact on students. Removing the trafficking of humans in this simulation also risks sanitizing history, which we want to avoid. When using simulations, teachers might make choices which foreground the ethical considerations they take when representing history. These include offering correctives to reduce harm while teaching history accurately.

In the previous sections, we have provided three illustrative examples that were published in news, research, or emerged from our curricular experiences. Unfortunately, these critical missteps are all too common. They highlight the importance of careful instructional design choices when using simulations for social studies education.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The following guidelines can help identify and mitigate the dangers of simulations.

Identifying Potential for Harm

Researchers contend that certain information constitutes “difficult knowledge” for the learner (Britzman, 1998; Epstein & Peck, 2018; Gross & Terra, 2018; Zembylas, 2014). Educational content

might be considered difficult if it challenges students' identity, evokes painful emotion, or communicates a contested narrative. Evaluating the difficulty of curricular content can help teachers decide how to approach topics within a simulation, and whether using a simulation is appropriate for the subject matter. The following questions can help identify difficult knowledge and potential dangers in a planned simulation activity:

- What themes, topics, and perspectives are students exploring during the simulation?
- Why am I using a simulation to teach this topic? How will I connect the topic to my learning goals? Are there more appropriate alternatives to simulations in this case?
- Who is in your class? How might the simulation evoke intergenerational trauma?
- What "settled" and "open" debates are present in the simulation? What forms of discussion should students engage in when roleplaying?
- Does the simulation ask students to simulate persecution (either as a victim or a perpetrator)? Are students asked to enact perspectives that go against their morals?
- How will I debrief the simulation to help students process their experiences and connect them to broader learning goals?
- How might power dynamics—such as race, gender, or social status—be reinforced, challenged, or distorted through this activity?

By answering these questions, teachers can select appropriate topics for simulation and make instructional design choices that mitigate the dangers of simulations.

Thoughtful Role Creation

Thoughtful role creation ensures that students are not being asked to roleplay perspectives that cause trauma or replicate harmful stereotypes. As shown in the articles in this issue, creating roles that align with course objectives supports student learning. For example, assigning students the role of historians or time travelers in an Extended Reality simulation helps them analyze the simulation as a historical source (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). The role of time traveler/historian creates opportunities for students to analyze perspective and representation of the past, supporting inquiry and student understanding of history as interpretation. In another example, the *PurpleState* simulation places students in the roles of a team of interns working for a political campaign. Students work together to design a media strategy for or against a policy issue (Chen & Stoddard, 2020). The roles students take in this simulation have more verisimilitude to the types of professional positions students might occupy in the real world. In both examples, the roles reinforce student development of disciplinary

concepts in history and political science.

Limiting Verisimilitude

The limited verisimilitude of simulations is not only inevitable but is also a feature of designing simulations for learning (Baudrillard, 1999; Wright-Maley, 2015). By streamlining processes, rather than overloading the simulation with features to increase fidelity to real-world processes, the meaning of the simulation is illuminated more effectively for students. Furthermore, limiting verisimilitude around sensitive topics avoids the reenactment of traumatic events. For historical simulations, prompting student reflection about verisimilitude affords people from the past respect by explicitly communicating to the students that while simulations can evoke a sense of presence in a time or place, their experience is not analogous to the experiences of people from the past (Mann & Cohen, 2011). Distancing helps students engage in metacognition about the environment, people, and processes simulated, contributing to student learning and their critical reflection around issues of justice.

Consolidating Learning Activities

Teachers can harness the capacity of simulations to support student-driven learning by designing or selecting simulations with a clear instructional purpose related to the lesson or unit objectives (Dack et al., 2018). Learning is consolidated through reflection activities which prompt students to connect their actions during the simulation with course concepts. For example, a teacher-facilitated discussion after a trading simulation can support students in analyzing perspectives and processes, comparing the simulation to real world examples, and critically examining the system simulated. A synthesis writing assignment allows students to process their experience during the simulation and discussion, while also enabling teachers to assess their understanding in relation to the lesson objectives.

CONCLUSION

This editorial article addresses the ethical concerns with simulations for social studies education. Simulations can become a form of curricular violence when they represent traumatic events, causing particular harm to students from historically marginalized groups. They can lead to stereotyping and appropriation when dominant groups are put in the position of performing others' suffering. Without intentional design and critical reflection during debriefing, simulations risk reinforcing and normalizing exploitative systems. However, teachers can identify and mitigate these dangers. Thoughtful role

creation, constrained verisimilitude, and structured debriefing can make simulations an effective tool for helping students grasp the dynamics of complex systems and examine them through multiple and critical perspectives.

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I serve as Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Ferrum College in Ferrum, Virginia, U.S.A. Teachers are community and school leaders. I am passionate about connecting teachers with research to assist them in working with others to make informed curricular decisions for their schools. I believe schools should be a place of creativity for students and teachers. My research centers on the use of innovative methods and technologies for teaching history, including digital and non-digital simulations, student-led inquiry, digital online archives, and GenAI. I am an avid outdoorswoman and enjoy life with my partner and dog in Roanoke, Virginia– home to the most photographed spot on the Appalachian Trail! Before becoming a teacher educator, I taught high school history in Virginia public schools for four years.

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I serve as the Editor of *ASSERT* and Professor of Education at St. Mary's University in Calgary, Canada, in Treaty 7 Territory on the Traditional Lands of the Blackfoot, the land of my birth. My ultimate goal is to foster in new teachers the skills and passion they need to become the finest educators the profession has to offer. A part of that goal is wanting teachers to have access to important research that is practically oriented. I am interested in socioeconomic equity, political theory, and simulations. My professional development efforts have been focused on learning from Indigenous Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers. Outside of my professional pursuits, I am a partner to an awesome midwife with whom I parent three little ones. I enjoy board and role-playing games, fantasy hockey, and have been fortunate to travel to more than 50 countries. I lived in the United States for eleven years, where I taught high school social studies for six of them.

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