**Intercultural Zoomery in a Time of COVID-19**

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TEASER:

The challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic: when academic study goes online, so too must academic acculturation support.

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**Intercultural Zoomery in a Time of COVID**

This article outlines our support for the changing academic acculturation needs of MA TESOL students as their programme moved online in response to the pandemic. In particular, we look at the development of an intercultural experience in Zoom, equivalent to the onsite intercultural simulation we had previously provided for them.

**Context**

The Manchester Institute of Education (at The University of Manchester, UK) welcomes several hundred new Masters-level students each year. The MA programmes they join are unfamiliar academic cultures which they need to become acclimated to if their studies are to prosper. Recognising this imperative, for the last 20 or so years, we have repurposed the intercultural simulation *Barnga* (Thiagarajan, 1990) to prepare students for: the process of academic acculturation; the unexpected and expected differences in ‘the rules of the academic game’; and their role as ethnographers of their own developing academic practices. In brief, the simulation involves a simple card game, played by groups who do not realise that the rules for the game vary slightly between groups. Having learned the rules, students play a tournament which increasingly involves intergroup movement. The tournament takes place without any verbal communication so that a) the rule variation remains hidden, and b) the experience of coping with rule differences is not mediated through language.

The current global pandemic has forced us to rethink. With academic participation now being mostly, if not exclusively, online, we needed to create an equivalent experience which: a) was itself online; and b) prepared students for the unfamiliar culture of online academic study with us. Further, whereas previously the students tended to be away from their home context when they experienced the unfamiliar academic culture, now most of them remain in their familiar home context. This geographical and psychological location also has a shaping influence on their experience of the unfamiliar.

**The project**

At the outset, we had many questions: Could we build on the experiences of other educators who had developed an online version of *Barnga*? How could we recreate its unmarked use of different sets of rules? Should we retain its use of playing cards? Could we retain *Barnga*’s prohibition on verbal communication (written or spoken) once the tournament had begun? Would we be able to sustain a lengthy period of non-verbal communication necessary for the tournament online? Could we choreograph the online movement of students to mirror the changing of groups that occurs on-site? Was it possible to find an online environment with embedded affordances enabling these simulation activities? If so, could we assume that students were sufficiently familiar with working within this online environment? And finally, would we be able to recreate the simulation without creating an exhaustingly long online experience? We had many, many questions.

Although we did find some clues to work by earlier pioneers who have taken *Barnga* online, we failed to locate a road map, or ready-made resources. As educators exploring online possibilities rather than as digital game designers, we realised that simply moving *Barnga* online was beyond us in the time we had available. We explored other possibilities by which an equivalent experience of academic acculturation might be simulated. For example, the simulation could be built on the affordances of different online conference environments (e.g. Zoom, GoToMeetings, and Blackboard Collaborate). Thus, as students move between the environments, they could encounter different academic cultures developed within each of them. However, the communicational, logistical, and technological aspects of moving students around different environments in one session seemed insuperable.

We considered developing alternative rule-based activities, ones that reduced the complexities of the card game tournament. Here, we realised that we could tie the rules into the actual eLearning environment itself. We immediately glimpsed some useful simulation-enabled possibilities of Zoom: the ability to see everyone involved in the session, with their names displayed and with opportunities for renaming; the chat, share screen, and whiteboard functions; the breakout rooms with centralised announcement mechanisms; the gesture and emoji possibilities; and the mute and non-video potential. As a result, we developed distinctive academic cultures using these Zoom affordances. For example:

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| **Rules ‘Group 1’**   * **Naming:** Appoint a ‘leader’ named ‘Professor’ // Others keep their own names * **Chat**: ‘Professor’ can speak and use chat // Others communicate by chat only UNLESS ‘Professor’ invites them to speak. It is also the responsibility of the Professor to bring ideas communicated in chat into conversation. * **Mute:** All muted apart from Professor * **Response**: Every time the Professor speaks, people ‘clap’ however, no responses can be used for anyone else. * **Sanction**: Facilitator turns off the video (for 30 secs) for anyone breaking the rules |

The next step was to decide what activity the students would perform whilst enacting these different rules. There were two aspects to this. First, mindful of the frequency with which students on the MA TESOL programme form small discussion groups to explore critical incidents, we explored the option of getting them to discuss an interculturally-oriented critical incident (Wight, 1995) related to an MA-like academic context. We considered creating critical incident comic books using a storyboard creator but in the end opted for a university-focused incident from the collection by Cushner & Brislin (1996). The participants undertook this whilst enacting the (Zoom-based) rules. Second, having looked at other existing intercultural simulations – primarily, but not only, *Ecotonos* (Nipporica Associates, 1993) and *Bafa’ Bafa*’ (Shirts, 1973) – we became excited by the idea of students being ethnographers of another other Zoom-based culture, a role mirroring them (as MA participants) being ethnographers of the unfamiliar academic culture and of their own developing academic practices within this new culture. To this end, we incorporated into the simulation a focus on hypothesis-forming/-testing/-modifying as informed by participant-observation experiences from visiting the other Zoom-based culture.

**Operationalising the Design**

Our design was modified considerably through trials with experienced MA students in advance of running the simulation with the new students. Thus, for example, we learned that:

* Zoom training should be a prerequisite rather than embedded in the simulation;
* the number of Zoom-related rules we could realistically use in the different groups (in Breakout Rooms) mattered - for example, changing the virtual background so as to reflect a group identity was rejected, because not all computers, browsers or mobile devices work well with these backgrounds and the time spent on this process distracted from the main objective;
* the movement of students between groups needed to be both managed (and not random) and simplified (so as to minimise the burden on the Host for the session);
* discussion prompts needed to provide enough substance for the discussions whilst the participants were familiarising themselves with their rules;
* discussion of the critical incident and switching to hypothesis-forming/ -modifying required careful stage-managing; and
* simulation depends on the involvement of quite a number of well-briefed facilitators.

As involving the following stages, the simulation takes just under two hours:

1. **Arrival / Introduction** (Main Room)
2. **Forming Groups** (Breakout Rooms)
3. **In-group familiarisation with rules** (Breakout Rooms)
4. **Explain discussion task** **and ethnographic process** (Breakout Rooms)
5. **Critical incident discussion**s as accompanied by movements of participant-observers between the groups, and as interspersed with hypothesis-forming/-modifying (Breakout Rooms)
6. **Split group hypothesis-sharing** (Breakout Rooms)
7. **Debriefing** as linked to the ongoing ethnographic task as MA TESOL participants (Main Room).

**Reflections and hypotheses**

After the simulation, students asynchronously posted their reflections in the discussion board. This was intentionally framed as reflection in (Zoom-based) action. These reflections then function as a resource supporting the subsequent class discussion (reflection-on-action) leading to hypothesis-forming for the MA TESOL programme (reflection-for-study-action). Here is an example of such a reflection:

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| [The CI character] was a very good example of a non-UK student who studies in our TESOL program, and personally speaking, very like a Chinese student [like me] ... During the whole session yesterday ... I gradually got more familiar with the rules, study on zoom, group work, ‘hypothesis’ and felt more comfortable with discussing with other students and I appreciated that the session got me to rethink … my attitude towards this program ... |

In the next class, students were asked to apply the hypothesis-forming methodology to their MA studies. Their initial hypothesis are illustrated by the following examples:

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| ***What types of activities typically take place in Zoom sessions?***  Based on what I have seen so far in zoom, I think there are activities like breakout rooms discussions, presentations, lectures, games, taking notes with white blackboard in discussions or other activities, etc. |

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| ***Are they any differences between tutors’ ways of working?***  Based on earlier observations, some of the tutors on the course encourage and appreciate organizing reading materials effectively from the very beginning. |

**Concluding remarks**

Faced by COVID-19, we were determined to maintain our tradition of experiential intercultural learning supporting the academic acculturation needs of our MA students. The current, primarily online, study modality has certainly made things more challenging. That said, the pandemic stimulated inter-practitioner creativity. As developers, we greatly enjoyed working together on this project, and have learned as much from being involved in it as we believe our participants did through participating in it. There are wrinkles to be finessed in future outings, but we now have an online intercultural simulation for our particular context.

**References**

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