

Participating in simulations –good, middling and irrelevant

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Abstract

This paper describes simulations in which the first author participated as a learner or observer, and evaluates them from a participant's viewpoint. The best training situations were simulations of Spacelab Missions run by NASA and ESA for the benefit of the experimenters, astronauts and managers involved. Parabolic flights were also useful both as simulations of zero gravity in orbital flight, and in providing experimental data. A poorer training was the simulated emergency evacuation of a passenger ferry, since much behaviour was unlike a real emergency; but some useful lessons were learned. A simulated evacuation of an aircraft was also useful for experimental purposes but had little training value. A corporate training weekend for a large organisation involved participation in irrelevant simulated tasks and games: it seemed bizarre and pointless.

Introduction

Simulations and training sessions are run for a variety of reasons, and their success may be evaluated differently by managers and participants. Landy (1989) describes the purpose of simulations as "to gain the control that may be absent in a field experiment but at the same time to approximate a realistic operating situation so that one can generalise from the research findings to the operational task. The key word here is realistic .." (p.30) In terms of training, simulations aim to bridge the gap between efficient knowledge acquisition and transfer to the situation on the job. "A simulation seems to be an ideal compromise that combines the best of both techniques" (Dipboye et al. 1994). In practice, many implementations are what Goldstein (1991) calls "part-simulations, which replicate a critical or difficult portion of the task without attempting to provide a complete environment".

The best events are carefully prepared and their purpose is transparent to all parties. The following events are ones in which the first author (HER) participated as a learner or observer, so her evaluations probably differ from those of the management or experimenters.