

STUDENT REFLECTION IN AN ONLINE CHARACTER-PLAYING SIMULATION

Jeff Kupperman, with Beverly Schumer and Gary Weisserman

University of Michigan – Flint

This paper is a story. It is a story about a few students talking about the Arab-Israeli conflict, after they had completed an 8-week web-based simulation game focusing on the region's politics, diplomacy and use of force. The story is just one in a series, culled from a larger study of a group of eight high school students who participated in AIC in the spring of the year 2000. The students, who attended a small, public "alternative" high school distinguished by policies that allowed a relatively high degree of curricular flexibility and student autonomy, were participating in AIC as part of a special elective course taught by the first author as a guest teacher. Among the data collected for the larger study were an audiotape of a post-simulation debriefing session, and field notes taken from later individual and group interviews with some of the students. Additional data consisted of student's writings posted within the simulation and audiotapes and field notes of classroom discussions.

We wished to explore the specific, contingent ways that these students made sense of their experiences, and we believe that the best way to convey the

ideas that arose is in a way that parallels their experiences – through narrative and dialog. Our analytical methods are based on models of "narrative creation" or "narrative analysis" developed by Polkinghorne, Barone, and others (Barone, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995). The rest of the paper is told in a first-person voice (Kupperman's), though the other authors have contributed to the article's writing and conceptual framework.

The Debriefing

It is April 20, 2000, and I have arranged to borrow a math teacher's room for the period. The room is on the opposite side of the building from the computer lab where we usually meet, though, and the students straggle in. They look a bit tired, which is not surprising considering that they have spent the last eight weeks as the leaders, variously, of Israel, Iran, and Jordan.

Remi has brought Allison a flower. As Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, he had hatched a plan to assassinate the Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran, Allison's alter ego, a few days before. He gives her the flower. No hard feelings.

The students in my class – teenagers at a high school in Michigan – are participants in a web-mediated project called the Arab Israeli Conflict simulation, or "AIC." Begun in 1975 by a political science graduate student instructor and now run by the University of Michigan's Interactive Communications & Simulations group, AIC involves 200-300 high school and college students each fall and winter semester. Most students participate as part of a class on Middle East issues or global studies at their own school. Each class is assigned a number of teams, and over eight weeks, the teams plan, strategize, and communicate with other teams over the web. At the University of Michigan, a

group of undergraduate "mentors" meets as a seminar to manage the project and assist the participating teams. At the end of the simulation, students "debrief" about their experiences, both on-line and in their classrooms.

AIC has been called a simulation, a game, a strange form of improvisational theater, even interactive fiction. Although there is a web-based software package that frames AIC's virtual world of international diplomacy, the outcome is neither predetermined nor algorithmic. Rather, it is negotiated (using this term broadly) among the players and mentors, who act as the caretakers of the game's reality. Because of this, we never know exactly what will happen, and we never know exactly what the students will learn.

For eight weeks I have asked the students to take someone else's perspective. Now, I am asking them to step back into their own skin. In an updated version of Dewey's cycle of experience and reflection¹, this is where

¹ The idea of experience-reflection cycle is worth a few words. Dewey's formulation of progressive education is known for its emphasis on direct experience:

To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal... (Dewey, 1938, p. 19)

Of course, experience does not necessarily lead to desirable learning outcomes, a point Dewey acknowledged fully (Dewey, 1938). In order for experience to be beneficial, there must be some sort of reflection and abstraction (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 232). Lampert and Ball (Lampert & Ball, 1998) have framed a central challenge of teaching as getting students to abstract from concrete experience, or, in their words, "the challenge of aiming for big ideas through the study of particulars" (p. 161). Kurt Lewin, and later Kolb (1984) have extended this idea into a "cycle" of experiential learning, where direct experience is followed by observation and reflection, then abstraction, then testing those abstractions, and back to direct experience again (Kolb, 1984). More recently Duffy and Jonassen and their colleagues (1992) have followed in the footsteps of Dewey, Lewin, and Kolb, arguing that learning is rooted in experience and emphasizing strategies that allow students to have meaningful or "authentic" experiences and then make sense of those experiences. In a sense, AIC is an elaborate instantiation of this idea.

they make sense of what they have been through. It is a difficult process, sometimes painful, occasionally hysterically funny, always enlightening.

Back in the classroom, we talk for a while about the events of the simulation. Then I ask everyone what they think the real solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might be. Allan starts off with a classic bit of idealism:

Allan: Well I think, the best -- I mean, I know this is not very realistic at this point in time, but it's probably going to happen sometime -- is just a, like a world government. I mean, like, that way people won't be worrying so much about like territorial lines. It's like, hey, if you own a farm in Israel, then it's your farm, you don't need to worry about whose country it is. I mean, that's the obvious solution, but as for right now, I think we just have to tough it out until something happens.

Brett [coming into the room]: I refuse to sit with members of another country.

Jim: I mean, I sort of have a problem with --- I sort of see something wrong with when countries start wars, lose land, and then demand the land back under their terms, you know? I mean, Israel didn't go in and take the Golan Heights. Israel got attacked; in the counter attack, took back the Golan Heights. I don't think Syria really has any right, to just try to dictate, you know, all the terms of it. I think they should be understanding, say, yeah, we started a war, you knocked the crap out of us and took some of our land; we've changed, we want this land back, we're willing to give stuff to you to get this land back. Whereas they're sort of just demanding it back.

Allan: But --

Jim: I don't think they're in any position to demand that sort of thing.

Jim's position is one that I've heard often from students: Look, Israel won the war fair and square, so why doesn't everyone else just get over it? Part of my job is to play devil's advocate, but I don't need to; Allan does it for me:

Allan: Well what about, like, the fact that Israel just took all the land that's in the Middle East and made it their own. Like, when Israel was established. I mean, that's the problem, there's just been so many rights and wrongs -- I mean, there's so many wrongdoings it's just so screwed up.

Jim: But the world had already, like, judged on your first -- what you call the first wrongdoing, the world had judged Israel, recognized Israel as a state, that issue was settled.

Allan: That's the *world*, that's not Syria. I mean, you can't just go in and take somebody's land. Like, all right, that's like saying, oh, ok, we're the US, here Texas, all of your land gets to go to Louisiana -- I don't even know if they border, but, anyways [laughter]. Land decisions are not made by majority rule, I'm sorry! It's if, if you've been there, that's not fair --

Brett: Yeah, if Texas tried to invade Louisiana and the Louisianans beat the crap out of them and took the panhandle back, that would be a different story.

Jim: No, I mean, Palestine was a British colony. It went from British Colony to Jewish state. I don't see where you could say that they just came in and took the land.

Allan: They did!

Jim: It was a British colony.

Allan: So the British took the land in the first place!

Jim and Allan have come to what is, in some sense, the heart of the conflict. Several groups have legitimate claims to the same piece of land; how can anyone decide between them? Remi says:

Remi: You guys, I think you can argue about it, like whoever took the land, or like whatever, but I think that the whole point of this thing is that like, the PLO, you know Israel, all want to claim the same land. No matter who owns it now, they all have like the same claims to the land; it's like central to their religion. And because of that there's such conflict. It doesn't matter like who had it and then got transferred, who won it from some war. It's like, whoever controls like what areas of land doesn't matter because they all want the same land, no matter what actual area they own.

Allan: Yeah, so there should be a secular government.

Remi: But the thing is that yeah, there should be a secular government, but that's not going to actually happen, because ultimately no one is going to compromise *that much*.

Allan: It will happen.

Brett (sarcastically): Right after the U.S. disarms their nuclear weapons.

Me: So given that, ok --is there a solution, or is this, the status quo, is this the best we can do?

Jim: I think the problem is, we're talking too much about historical stuff. I mean like, you go back 300 years, and the Arabs controlled the holy land. You go back like 70 years, and the British did. You go back like 4000, and the Israelites did. So I mean, when do you stop going back in history to decide who gets the land? I mean, when can you? How can you say, like 300 years is accepted, but 4000 isn't? You know? I don't know if I got all the years right in this, but different people have had that land at different times. I think now, since like basically everyone has had that land at one point, you got possession is nine tenths of the law. Who's there now.

Allan: Whoah.

Jim: They can do the nice thing and give land back as, you know, as a peaceful gesture, and give some of that land back, but I don't think the PLO or the Syrians have a right to just storm in there and try and get everything their way and say, we want all of it back or we're going to blow stuff up. You know?

Jim "solves" the problem pragmatically and ahistorically: whoever has the land now has legitimate authority, and everyone else should just accept that. I missed an opportunity here to talk about *politics* as the method of allocating resources and resolving conflicts -- that's why AIC is about politics, not about normative solutions to the problems of the Middle East. (And that's why a district curriculum standard -- discussed later in this chapter -- that asks students to find solutions to the conflict(s) misses the point: in the real world, the conflicts will be resolved through politics, not through the kind of normative thinking Jim is representing.)

I was disturbed by Jim's position, and I pressed him on it:

Me: Are you saying might is right, or might is nine tenths of right?

Allan: That's what Jim always says.

Jim: Well, I mean, if you don't have any other good way of deciding what is right, I think you go to might.

Brett: That's why the U.S. is the most powerful country in the world, not because we are--

Me: Are we right?

Brett: Not always.

Jim and Allan digress into an argument about global economics, but I intervene and ask again what they think the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might be. Remi responds:

Remi: You can like, drop all these plans of transferring land and all this stuff. But ... they all want the exact same thing. And their ideas on both sides are so different... compromising those beliefs is going to be too radical a change....

Brett: Don't you think also the fact that compromising your beliefs is like, a serious taboo in the culture of all of them, they all share that fact, and like, BACKING DOWN IS NOT A PLAN.

Remi: I don't want to call them ... "radicals"... but there are people on the extremes of the situation, who will not want to do anything. And if they control part of the government, they have a say in that. Or they make their [point] by blowing up some place. That's what we'll see, we'll see there's people totally unwilling to compromise. Because those people hold parts of the government or whatever, there won't be enough compromise --

Brett: Yeah, look at my character [Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy].

Me: So what has to change? What about your character?

Brett: So I was just saying, in my character, the way I saw it, I was not compromising about anything. I didn't want the PLO to have their land back. Like, when the Hamas did that bombing, we basically let it totally destroy the peace talks, because we weren't

really in favor of the peace talks anyway, and it was like, here's a reason to diffuse the peace talks. That's all I wanted. I didn't want the PLO to get their land back. I could have cared less.

Remi: there will always be radicals on every side who won't compromise.

Jim: But if the governments are cooperating....

Remi: But the radicals can make other people not want to compromise.

Jim: Someone has to step up and take control, like in Kosovo... someone has got to get bombed and just take it.

Remi: So who is going to get bombed and not retaliate?

Allan: So you are just pessimistic...

Brett: This is a world problem, we're not going to solve it in a high school class.

"Someone has got to get bombed and just take it." Jim's remark stuck in my mind for a long time. Is this what my students learned from AIC? That the situation is hopeless, and there isn't any humane way to resolve the conflict?

It was getting close to the end of the period. I opened my folder and took out a one-page document. It was a copy of the school district's content standards for high school courses on non-Western Civilization. None of the students had seen it before. I read the items that seemed most relevant to this AIC class:

- *Describe and explain current domestic and international social, economic and political issues.

- *Develop informed and reasoned positions on current and historical issues and be able to present them in oral and written form.

- *Through study of causes and effects of a variety of world conflicts (Arab-Israeli, apartheid, Latin American and Indian Independence movements, Chinese Communist Revolution) students will develop an informed and reasoned commitment to human rights and equal dignity of all people and to fair procedures for peaceful resolution of conflict.

I learned this idea -- getting students to reflect on the standards that they are supposed to achieve -- from Gary Weisserman (Weisserman, 1999). His students were involved in another character-playing simulation called Conflux, in which students played legislators in a slightly twisted version of the U.S. Congress. His students found the standards to be somewhat naive in comparison to the “realpolitik” that they had been experiencing in the simulation. My students expressed a similar view, focusing on the end of the third standard. Jim and Brett expressed it succinctly:

Jim: It's dangerous to assume there will always be a peaceful resolution to conflict....

Brett: The thing [in the standards] doesn't even happen in America.

Jim: When I was a kid, I thought why don't the Israelis and Arabs just live in the same country.... it's hard for Americans to understand....

On the face of it, it is hard to argue with a standard that calls for students to be committed to peaceful resolution of conflict. And yet, as a benchmark for what my students had learned, it didn't seem right at all.

Conflict Non-resolution

When I tell teachers and other people about AIC, they often say something like, “That’s very interesting – I know some people who are trying to teach conflict resolution.” I tell them, “Well, AIC isn’t really about conflict resolution. In fact, it’s about conflict *non*-resolution.” Any high school student can solve the Arab-Israeli Conflict. It's a simple matter, really – if one ignores the interests and demands of Palestinians and Israelis. AIC aims to show, if nothing else, that the conflict isn't simply a matter of stupid leaders or evil people, but a

fight over limited resources, deeply held values, and historic grievances. Jim summed up this idea during our debriefing session:

Jim: A teacher could tell you that there is a solution, but it's not until you try to make a solution and implement that solution that you realize it's not that easy.

Edgar Taylor, the graduate student who invented AIC, once said as much, claiming that the region is remarkably stable, if one doesn't mind the violence.

Remi was also pessimistic about the prospects for an end to the conflict:

Unfortunately, I do not believe that peace will ever come to the middle east. Although I would very much like to see peace in the middle east, I do not believe it is a reality. (Debriefing forum, 5/2/2000)

Pete, in an online debriefing later, echoed Remi's in-class comment about extremists:

I don't think that peace can come very quickly in the middle east as long as there are so many terrorists causing trouble. Israel cannot withdraw its troops from anywhere as long as there are terrorist groups that would take advantage of this. I think that if the terrorists were gone there would be a better chance for peace. (Debriefing forum, 5/4/2000)

The students seemed to have accepted the point that is at the center of AIC: that the conflict in the Middle East is complicated and very difficult to resolve. Isn't this what I wanted them to learn?

And yet, I felt oddly guilty, as if I had showed them something nasty about the world. Of course, high school students don't need me or AIC to become cynical, but was I simply adding to a fatalistic view of the world's problems, where we can do nothing but throw up our hands? Was AIC just a compelling can of gasoline to add to the fire?

Much later, in December, 2000, Remi and I looked at transcripts from the in-class debriefing. (Remi had joined the mentor staff, and he and I began meeting regularly to discuss AIC.) I asked, "Do you think as a class you got

more cynical?" Remi struggled with the question. "I think more critical, I don't know about cynical ... Let me think about that. I think we definitely learned that we *could* be cynical ... I think the simulation made me more cynical because I was like, I tried to solve it, and I knew so much more about it, thought I saw only a small part, I saw, there's no way around it."

"Maybe pessimistic is a better term, " I offered.

Remi thought for a while, then said, "My own personal view is that I want peace in the Middle East, and that hasn't changed. But now that I've gone through the course, I've realized how incredibly complex and hard it is, and I'm like, it's never going to change. I still have hope, but I've realized..." Remi was quiet for a moment. "I have to wish for so much more. We're going to have to work so much harder."

Crossing the Line

One of the most gratifying parts of running a character-playing simulation - - and to me, an important measure of success -- is seeing students arguing passionately about things normally considered obscure for a teenager: Israeli foreign policy, for example. When this happens, it is difficult to tell where the student ends and the character begins. Brett, for example, played David Levy accurately as a tough, acerbic, uncompromising character, but there was a substantial part of himself in the character as well:

Me: I'm going to ask your personal relationship to your David Levy character. How much of that was you?

Brett: A decent portion of it, especially when there were conflicts of interest with my country and other countries, was me. But a lot of it was, like the mentality you explained, people in that area don't just generally go, "yeah ok, sure, we'll give it over without, you know." I tried to keep a little, like, when it came to regards like the Palestinians, I decided generally I probably didn't want to give the

Palestinians anything. But I was going to, just for the sake of governmental relations. It was kind of a trade-off, like, all right, I'll back you on Palestine, you'll have to back me on hating Britain (laughs). (Interview, May 4, 2000)

Remi and I eventually started calling this phenomenon "crossing the line." It is almost necessary for students to refine the ability to get into their character--to engage in method acting, in a manner of speaking--in order to give a sincere performance. The experience of speaking, writing, and thinking as a character is what gives AIC educational value beyond learning facts and concepts related to the conflict. It is also what makes AIC a particularly motivating way to learn about the Middle East. However, there seems to have been, at least for some of the players, an additional effect: the feeling of "insider knowledge," or more plainly said, "sympathy" for the character and nation one has played.

Me: When you hear the news --in the class, I realize you get into character and everything and you're like "let's bomb Lebanon." How do you feel when you hear the news and actually Barak or David Levy is saying, "yeah, let's bomb Lebanon."

Remi: It's sort of confusing. Because I understand where they're coming from. I mean, you've got this group that is just attacking citizens, and destroying homes and property and everything, and it's a reasonable counter action, I understand that....Yeah, when I hear the news, it's like, I think a lot more about it, cause I know the sides, so I can say well, is this a logical response to what's going on. (Interview, May 5, 2000)

Nearly a year later, Allan, who played the president of Iran, said he still had increased sympathy for "his" country:

Allan: I'm more sympathetic to Iran now. In movies they're always portrayed as people who want to buy nuclear weapons and stuff. I recently heard that they were allowed to export pistachios or something, and that's progress. The only thing that will help is to talk with other people.

If it's important to cross the line, though, it's also important to be able to cross back. In other words, it's important for students to be able to view the situation from a broader perspective. Again, from February, 2001:

Richard: My view on the UN sanctions has changed.

Remi: Doesn't it seem like they're punishing Iraq, when Israel is doing bad things and they're not putting sanctions on them?

Pete: It's because Israel is our friend.... I got more sympathetic to the Palestinians.

Me: Why?

Pete: I found out what the Israelis were doing.

It has never been an explicit goal of mine or any of the AIC developers to promote a specific political viewpoint. However, it is not surprising, given the emotional involvement that comes with character playing, that players would sympathize with the country they had played. Particularly heartening, to me, are remarks such as Pete's, where he indicates sympathy toward the Palestinians, despite having played Israel in the simulation. Remi also came to feel increased sympathy toward the Palestinian side, but not until after he had spent a semester on the mentor staff as a National Security Advisor. In an interview a few weeks after playing the prime minister of Israel, he had this to say:

Remi: I think my attitude toward Israel before was just like, the Jewish homeland. I didn't know that much about it but I always respected it. And I knew there was a problem, I just didn't know what the problem was. I guess now... my view hasn't changed as much. And I think I've gained some respect for the country, in the sense that it's gone through a lot more than I'd realized it's gone through. I've also gained maybe some respect for the leadership of the country, and the fact that they're dealing with so many issues. And they're trying to solve the issues that they can solve, by whatever means that they can solve it by. I think that my respect though for the other countries has improved as well, just because, you know, I always heard about these wars with Syria and Jordan and Lebanon and whatever, and I was like "the bad guys," you know? But in reality everybody's going for basically the same thing, it's just like, which side are you going to choose? Because, whether or not one side has a better military or more resources or whatever, they're all basically like, the same thing, they all have the same basic ideals. (Interview, May 5, 2000)

However, on November 30, 2000, after most of a semester as a mentor, he said this:

My own views of Israel changed. Reading the coursepack, and starting the class in the middle of [the Intifada], and I was talking to Palestinians and the Palestinian side... and I started thinking, the Israeli government aren't very nice, and it's really like apartheid...and I started thinking, I don't like the US government and I don't like Israel... if I had been Syria or Saudi Arabia last spring, I might have thought about this before, but we were Israel... I like the idea of Israel, but it's right in Palestine, and maybe Israel in Palestine isn't such a good idea... Which doesn't mean that the Palestinians are right, sending children to be killed, and everything, but they are second class citizens.... And the thing that gets me mad is that everyone was very upset when 2 Israeli's were killed by that Palestinian mob, but no one cared that over a hundred Palestinians were being killed at the same time. I think the US media is biased...

Among the members of that AIC class, Remi was exceptional in that he continued to be involved with the project as a mentor, and over the course of a year, he and I had many conversations as I struggled to make sense of the kinds of experiences and the kinds of learning that surrounded AIC. In the end, AIC helped shaped Remi's view not only of international conflict but of the way education should be. His experience could in no way be called "typical," even within the atypical context of AIC. Yet he cannot be dismissed as an outlier, either. Rather, his experience lends weight to a kind of learning that is self-directed, active, and reflective: a Deweyan vision for the modern age. The fact that it is unlikely to occur within ordinary school environments should be taken as a challenge, not grounds for dismissal.

Some conclusions

This has been a story about learning through reflection on experience – specifically about reflection structured through group debriefing. Some reflection

would certainly have happened even without the debriefing -- it was clear that the students had begun to reflect and make connections even before the debriefing session. But the debriefing was a structured opportunity to consolidate and test their conclusions: the students came to the debriefing with a variety of ideas about the causes of the Arab-Israeli conflict and views about how it might be resolved, and these views were expressed and challenged in a sometimes heated discussion.

In the debriefing, many of the students focused on the basic incompatibility of the stakeholders' aims and methods. Each expressed varying degrees of pessimism that the conflict could be solved through negotiation or compromise. If this had been the end to the students' reflection, we would have been satisfied with some growth in their understanding of the conflict, though with a somewhat guilty feeling that we had erased any hope they might have had. However, for at least some of the students, the debriefing was not the end of the experience but the beginning of a reflective process that continued over months or even years.

In experiential learning, it is clearly not enough simply to pile on experiences, no matter how rich. In fact, one could say that the richness of an experience is not something intrinsic to the experience, but (at least in part) a product of reflection on that experience. It would be a mistake, then, to speak of a simulation such as AIC as a learning experience in itself. It would be more accurate to speak of it as an activity with potential for rich reflection. This reflection can occur in a variety of ways: formally and informally, during the simulation, in debriefing sessions, and long after the simulation has ended.

Too often, the value of an educational activity is judged solely by the students' behavior during the activity and outcome measures immediately afterward. We have few descriptions of how learning can happen through an

extended experience supported by both short-term and long-term reflection. This story illustrates some of the possibilities of learning through immersive experiences and reflection over an extended period of time. Since we have focused on a small number of students and the authors were deeply involved in the design and enactment of the core activities, we do not attempt to make specific recommendations applicable to all settings. Rather, our aim has been to lay out a vision of educational activity that is unusual, meaningful, and in the spirit of Dewey and his followers.

References

- Barone, T. (2001). *Narrative and educational research: What's next?* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research* (1st ed.). San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.
- Dewey, J. (1916/1966). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Collier Macmillan.
- Duffy, T. M., & Jonassen, D. H. (1992). Constructivism: New implications for instructional technology. In T. M. Duffy & D. H. Jonassen (Eds.), *Constructivism and the technology of instruction: A conversation* (pp. 1-16). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lampert, M., & Ball, D. L. (1998). *Teaching, multimedia, and mathematics: Investigations of real practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5-23.
- Weisserman, G. (1999). *That democracy thing: Citizenship, design and the reluctant activist*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.