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# 'Cognitive realism' in online authentic learning environments

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**Abstract:** The development of virtual reality and advanced computer applications have meant that realistic creations of simulated environments are now possible. Such simulations have been used with to great effect in training in the military, air force, and in medical training. But how realistic do problems need to be in education for effective learning to occur? Some authors and researchers argue that problems should be real, or that simulations should have ultra-realistic physical similarity to an actual context. This paper proposes that physical verisimilitude to real situations is of less importance in learning than 'cognitive realism', provided by immersing students in engaging and complex tasks. The paper presents a description of the theory and research that provide the foundations for this approach. Examples of courses employing cognitive, rather than physical, realism will be presented together with the views of teachers, authors and instructional designers.

## Introduction

Throughout history, people have attempted to escape the real world by surrounding themselves with more appealing representations of reality. The artistic representation of realistic landscapes has existed at least since the Hellenistic Greeks with the development of perspective in art, which allowed the placement of objects in 'believable space' (Greenhalgh, 2002, p.2). Affluent citizens of Greece surrounded themselves with panoramic landscapes on the walls of their rooms, representing idyllic scenes. The artists worked to make these panoramas as realistic as possible to allow the occupants of the rooms to experience an alternative reality. Trompe l'oeil ('the art of deception') paintings have also been a popular art form providing viewers with a more appealing visual aspect than reality would permit within available time and space.

In education, many critics would argue that reality and real-world practice are rarely used to convey meaning or alternative views in learning settings. For example, the physicist Murray Gell-Mann proposed that 'education in the 20th century is like being taken to the world's greatest restaurant and being fed the menu' (cited in Kay, 1991). According to Kay 'representations of ideas have replaced the ideas themselves' (Kay, 1991). Nevertheless, in the last decade or more, under the influence of constructivist philosophy and approaches such as situated learning, anchored instruction and problem-based learning, many teachers have tried to make learning more relevant to students by creating opportunities for them to apply their learning in realistic, if simulated, situations. Many educators and trainers have attempted to recreate the essence of real situations in order to design authentic learning experiences for students.

For many years, the US space program, the airline industry, the military and medicine have used simulations to provide learning situations with high degrees of verisimilitude to real life problems. The US space program uses highly realistic, computer generated simulations to train astronauts to respond in highly critical situations. Murray and Cox (1989) described the total realism of the simulations used to train astronauts on the Apollo missions, and how mission controllers were able to relate fully to situations simulated in training, with perhaps

the exception proving the rule. The following passage describes a mission controller's response to the presence of dust on a real mission on the moon (something that was not included in the simulations):

It was then he heard Aldrin in Eagle say 'Forty feet down, two and a half, picking up some dust'. Garman was startled out of his trance. Everything had felt just like the simulations until then. But Aldrin had never said 'Picking up some dust'. The image of the dust blowing up ... made it real, and the enormity of it began to sink in. (Murray & Cox, 1989)

Virtual reality technology is enabling simulations so realistic in aircraft training that people react spontaneously and automatically to the environment as if they were really experiencing it. For example, McLellan (1991) related a trainee pilot's experience in an aircraft simulator: 'Part of the drill is that we lose an engine at a critical period in the take-off. And I made the rotation and I did everything I possibly could and the thing rolled to the right and crashed ... I yelled and everybody else yelled ... It is so realistic that it's almost frightening' (p.33). Macedonia and Rosenbloom (2001) have described collaboration among the military, academia and Hollywood to create realistic and immersive simulations for military training. Maximum verisimilitude to genuine combat and other situations is required. The simulation described by Macedonia and Rosenbloom would be used for training of soldiers about to engage in combat or peace-keeping missions in foreign countries. The simulation would include a full briefing on the mission, weapons, political factions, strategies and immersion in the culture of the city: 'The sights, sounds and smells of the city immediately bombard him ... the scene is a rich and confusing tapestry of life' (p. 90). The elements of real life situations are included to ensure that soldiers can account for peripheral events sometimes not accounted for in training situations.

In medicine, patient simulators that allow students to practice procedures under realistic conditions on simulated patients have created many opportunities for early skill development prior to practice on real patients. For example, at Harvard Medical School, a simulator for practising bronchoscopy is used whereby a flexible fiberoptic bronchoscope is 'snaked' down the trachea to inspect the airways leading to the lungs. The director of the program stated that: 'The tissues look real, even seem to move when touched. The simulator patient breathes and has a heartbeat; he coughs if the user hits an airway wall' (Rabkin, 2002).

What are the characteristics of such simulations that enable realistic fidelity to the genuine situation and provide valuable training and preparation for the real situation? Macedonia and Rosenbloom (2001) proposed that there are 'six thrusts crucial to verisimilitude' that are worthy of further investigation and research:

1. Immersion: providing compellingly realistic experiences
2. Networking and databases: organizing, storing, and distributing content
3. Story: providing compelling interactive narratives that propel experiences
4. Characters: replacing human participants with automated ones
5. Setup: authoring and initializing environments, models, and experiences
6. Direction: monitoring, directing, and understanding experiences (Macedonia & Rosenbloom, 2001, p. 86).

Simulations based on design criteria such as these, with full plot development and character representation may be effective in certain learning situations. They are, however, extremely resource intensive and expensive to develop. They also have certain limitations implicit in their development, such as predetermined outcomes that need to be predicted and created within the parameters of the scenario itself. How real does a learning environment need to be to ensure quality learning outcomes? Some would argue that only a real problem situation should be presented, with no simulation at all. For example, Savery and Duffy (1996) nominated two guiding forces in developing problem-based scenarios: firstly, that the problems must raise the concepts and principles relevant to the content domain, and secondly that the problems must be *real*. They stated:

There are three reasons why the problems must address real issues. First, because the students are open to explore all dimension of the problem there is real difficulty of creating a rich problem with a consistent set of information. Second, real problems tend to engage learners more—there is a larger context of familiarity with the problem. Finally, students want to know the outcome of the problem—what is being done about the flood, did AT&T buy NCR, what was the problem with the patient? These outcomes are not possible with artificial problems. (Savery & Duffy, 1996)

Is it necessary then, when incorporating authentic learning experiences into learning environments, to design totally real or highly realistic simulations? Is the physical or simulated reality of a learning situation a critical

component of effectiveness? Research into the realism of learning environments indicates that maximum fidelity does not necessarily lead to maximum effectiveness in learning, particularly for novice learners (Alessi, 1988). Smith (1987) in his review of research related to simulations in the classroom concluded that the 'physical fidelity' of the simulation materials is less important than the extent to which the simulation promotes 'realistic problem-solving processes' (p. 409), a process Smith describes as the 'cognitive realism' of the task (Smith, 1986). Our own research proposes that the physical reality of the learning situation is of less importance than the characteristics of the task design, and the engagement of students in the learning environment.

Our current research has sought to investigate examples of courses or units that use authentic tasks as a framework for the completion of entire semester courses, or large sections of them. Instead of using a delivery system where courses are divided into weekly segments of content, and students complete readings and assignments as course requirements, we have investigated courses where the completion of sustained and complex tasks comprise the course requirements and provide an effective framework and rationale for learning. Ten characteristics of authentic activities have been distilled from a review of papers on authentic learning environments from the literature on situated learning, anchored instruction and problem-based learning (c.f. authors, 2002a; authors 2002b), and the characteristics are used to select cases for investigation:

1. *Authentic activities have real-world relevance:* Activities match as nearly as possible the real-world tasks of professionals in practice rather than decontextualised or classroom-based tasks (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990a; Cronin, 1993; Jonassen, 1991; Lebow & Wager, 1994; Oliver & Omari, 1999)
2. *Authentic activities are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity:* Problems inherent in the activities are ill-defined and open to multiple interpretations rather than easily solved by the application of existing algorithms. Learners must identify their own unique tasks and sub-tasks in order to complete the major task (Sternberg, Wagner, & Okagaki, 1993) (Bransford, Vye, Kinzer, & Risko, 1990b; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990a; Lebow & Wager, 1994)
3. *Authentic activities comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time:* Activities are completed in days, weeks and months rather than minutes or hours, requiring significant investment of time and intellectual resources (e.g., Bransford et al., 1990b; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990b; Jonassen, 1991; Lebow & Wager, 1994)
4. *Authentic activities provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources:* The task affords learners the opportunity to examine the problem from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives, rather than a single perspective that learners must imitate to be successful. The use of a variety of resources rather than a limited number of preselected references requires students to detect relevant from irrelevant information (e.g., Bransford et al., 1990b; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990b; Sternberg, Wagner, & Okagaki, 1993)
5. *Authentic activities provide the opportunity to collaborate:* Collaboration is integral to the task, both within the course and the real world, rather than achievable by an individual learner (e.g., Gordon, 1998; Lebow & Wager, 1994; Young, 1993)
6. *Authentic activities provide the opportunity to reflect:* Activities need to enable learners to make choices and reflect on their learning both individually and socially (e.g., Gordon, 1998; Myers, 1993; Young, 1993)
7. *Authentic activities can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain-specific outcomes:* Activities encourage interdisciplinary perspectives and enable diverse roles and expertise rather than a single well-defined field or domain (e.g., Bransford, Sherwood, Hasselbring, Kinzer, & Williams, 1990a; Bransford et al., 1990b; Jonassen, 1991)
8. *Authentic activities are seamlessly integrated with assessment:* Assessment of activities is seamlessly integrated with the major task in a manner that reflects real world assessment, rather than separate artificial assessment removed from the nature of the task (e.g., Herrington & Herrington, 1998; Reeves & Okey, 1996; Young, 1995)
9. *Authentic activities create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else:* Activities culminate in the creation of a whole product rather than an exercise or sub-step in preparation for something else (e.g., Barab, Squire, & Dueber, 2000; Duchastel, 1997; Gordon, 1998)
10. *Authentic activities allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome:* Activities allow a range and diversity of outcomes open to multiple solutions of an original nature, rather than a single correct response obtained by the application of rules and procedures (e.g., Bottge & Hasselbring, 1993; Bransford et al., 1990a; Bransford et al., 1990b; Duchastel, 1997; Young & McNeese, 1993).

Using these criteria for the selection of appropriate courses to study, our research has sought to investigate the characteristics of authentic activity that facilitate a whole course unit of study being encapsulated within complex tasks, and to determine the factors that contribute to the successful adoption and implementation of activity-based online course units. We have used the criteria listed to identify web-based courses of study that use authentic activities as a central core of their presentation.

In our findings to date, it has become apparent that because the central task or activity is the vehicle for study of the entire course, its design must incorporate a range of complex facets and options to enable and motivate students to learn from its completion. Many of the authors and teachers have chosen a scenario in which to anchor the task. However, none of the cases are real (as proposed by Savery & Duffy, 1996), nor do they comprise complicated plots and well-defined characters, or anticipate selected outcomes (as proposed by Macedonia & Rosenbloom, 2001). Some use navigation between spaces or 'rooms', some have characters to assist or to be used in vicarious roles, and some use video and graphics. But none of the environments have a verisimilitude approaching virtual reality. Instead they aim to provide a 'cognitive realism' rather than reality itself. Some of the courses investigated in the study of authentic tasks are described below:

- In a semester course on *North American fiction*, students study novels written by writers such as Melville, Hemingway, DeLillo, Vonnegut, Atwood, and Esquivel. In the course, they are given the role of Editorial Board Members of an online scholarly journal, to which they submit book reviews and articles based on their study of the literature. The teacher of the course is the journal editor, and an edition of the journal is published online at the end of the semester.
- In a course on *coastal and marine systems* it is proposed that a marina has been developed, and as part of the approval, annual monitoring of water quality is required. The students are provided with a set of real data collected by the course teachers from inside and outside the marina, and they are required to understand, analyse and interpret the data and draw conclusions as to whether the water quality within the marina is different to that outside, and if so explain the possible causes.
- In a course on *business writing*, students learn business communication skills by accepting temporary employment in a virtual recording company. They are given a complex task to complete, where they need to prepare a report on whether the company would benefit from the introduction of an internal newsletter. In order to complete this activity, they make appointments, keep a diary, 'interview' the director and other employees, and write letters and memos as required.
- In an *introductory biology* course for online delivery, students investigate a simulation of the discovery of new life forms, where they are given a role as biologist on an expedition to a remote lake in Siberia where several microorganisms are found that cannot be classified. They 'collect' the specimens and return to the university to analyse them. Students are assigned to groups where they analyse the specimens and prepare a report.
- In a course on *qualitative and quantitative research methodologies*, students work virtually in a graduate research centre where they are given the task of investigating the closure of a rural school. They do this using both qualitative and quantitative methods, and they are assisted by two virtual researchers who have collected data from the community and assembled it in a raw form in the centre. The students can examine school records, population data, interviews with teachers, parents and community members, newspaper reports and other documents. Students produce a report that analyses the impact of the closure of the school on the rural community.

All the learning environments described have varying degrees of fidelity to reality, but all have strong linkage to real-world professional practice, and to the 'cognitive realism' described by Smith (1986). The scenarios are not drawn in elaborate, resource intensive ways, but are built up through the creation and development of engaging ideas. Teachers, authors, instructional designers, tutors and other associated with the design and delivery of the courses are being interviewed, and the websites analysed. The analysis is focusing on the identification of conceptual themes and issues emerging from the data, using techniques such as clustering, and making contrasts and comparisons (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In terms of the physical reality of the learning environments, few respondents considered this to be an important factor. From the simple consideration of logistics and cost effectiveness, one teacher (pseudonyms used) pointed out the benefits of not using a real situation:

I've come to the conclusion that a simulated town [in the scenario] is just as good as being there ... to take students to [a real town] would be horrifically hard to organise and I think providing something like this [web and CD-ROM package] is just as good, and a lot more manageable. (Interview with Tracey)

An instructional designer commented that fidelity was not a paramount factor in the design of the learning problem, and that neither reality nor simulated reality was necessary for effective engagement:

[We] very deliberately didn't try, to make total ... simulation out of it. There is so much suspension of disbelief required, but there just had to be enough to get them engaged.' (Interview with Carlo)

The ability to engage students appeared to be of far greater importance in creating a sense of a realistic and worthy task than the recreation of a faithfully realistic simulation:

Things can be real world without being engaging. Working in an industrial riveting shop is real world but is not very engaging. I think engagement of students is critical. (Interview with Camille)

One teacher was amused by students' responses to the country town that had been created for the simulation. While consisting only of graphics, demographic and interview data, video interviews and newspaper articles—all invented—the students believed that they could recognise a real town that had been given a pseudonym:

The students amuse me ... because they come in and they know country towns! They know the answers, they know the people, and I just keep saying 'Well that just shows that [the authors] actually did our homework.' So this town has got to be such and such! (Interview with Violet)

The same teacher noted that it did not matter to the students' involvement in the scenario that the data was not from a real town:

The data was real enough so that you would think it was real, and it becomes real. So within a couple of weeks they've shifted past the virtual and its real! (Interview with Violet)

Another teacher noticed that some of the students were so engaged in a scenario (based largely on text and cartoon sketched characters) that they were able to talk about one of the characters as if he was a real person:

One day I walked in and the students were there in the lab ... chatting to each other, and they were going on and on about this person they were having trouble with. I inquired about it and it turned out it was [one of the characters on the website]. I said as gently as I could 'That's not a real person, it's a character' and they said 'We know that'. Then they just ignored me and kept conversing with each other about what an awful person he was, and how difficult they were finding him—as if he was real! (Interview with Brooke)

Engagement with the task, appears to be of greater import to both teachers and learners than an exact replica of a real life learning situation, particularly for learning in higher education. Professional graphics and website design do not rate highly with any respondent in the study to date. One teacher pointed out that the original design for the website planned to include realistic graphics and photographs as a faithful reproduction of a real-world work environment. Instead, the website was tested with simple sketches:

Our concern was that the sketches wouldn't seem as real to the students. When we piloted it, it worked sensationally. I suppose the students these days are so used to the blending of artificial and the real it didn't bother them at all. (Interview with Brooke)

The view expressed by one instructional designer about the quality of graphics, was one shared by many:

If it were a commercial product, I'd be disappointed in some of the technology and the graphics that I think are low end. If we spent a bit more money on it we could have something that looked a lot more professional ... but I think that is a relatively trivial point at the moment. Yes, I think it's been engaging; I think the students have learnt at a higher level ... There is quite clear evidence that very large numbers of the students become deeply engaged. The evidence is overwhelming that the students mostly become very seriously committed to this scenario and they do find it deeply engaging. (Interview with Camille)

Just as the impact of a cognitive tool cannot be judged in isolation of its use and implementation (Steketee, 2002), the impact of realism in learning environments cannot be judged as a premium requirement for engagement in isolation of the task performed by students and the context of its use. In judging the impact of realism in online

learning environments, we propose that the ‘cognitive realism’ of the task is of greater importance than the real-life likeness of the learning design. The implications of this for practitioners is that less attention could be paid to expensive high fidelity graphics and interface designs, and more to the design of the tasks that students complete, that less time could be devoted to anticipating the kinds of responses students might make to pre-determined events, and more to the design of complex tasks and scenarios with multiple outcomes. To return to the metaphor of art with which this paper began, as artists no longer consider it necessary for their paintings to look exactly like reality or to be an exact photographic replica of the subject, learning environments may not need to be real, or ‘virtually real’, in order for effective learning to occur.

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