The Adaptation of an American-Based Business Simulation: A Hong Kong Environment

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Abstract

This paper reports on an Action Learning Project, funded by the University Grant Committee (UGC/CPHK 8), to introduce a widely used American simulation to Hong Kong (Looking Glass Inc., Greensboro, NC, Center for Creative Leadership). This study aims to improve the teaching and learning of organisational communication by (a) administering the Looking Glass simulation and (b) developing new methods of debriefing and performance analysis. The simulation allows students to directly experience managerial activities at different organisational levels and the interaction between organisational hierarchies and communication strategies. Performance analysis techniques include (a) self-evaluation through an 11-page questionnaire and (b) discourse analysis of oral and written communication generated through the debriefing sessions and focus group discussions.

Consisting of 21 runs over a two year period, this simulation was judged by participants' questionnaires, follow-up focus groups and selected video-taping, and was found to have been generally successful. However, culturally related problems did occur. These difficulties related to participants' unfamiliarity with certain topics and issues, e.g., EEOC, affirmative action, racial discrimination and the geography of American markets. These issues were addressed through pre-training sessions and by having on-site individuals available for answering questions during the simulation runs. Although the overall results were satisfactory, the earlier runs disclosed that lower level participants (Plant Managers) were relatively inactive and uninvolved in the simulation (communication and decision making).

By recruiting outside business professionals to act as the CEOs in the respective simulations, the communication and decision making dynamics were significantly altered, resulting in more active involvement from the lower level participants. The overall implication is that American or Western simulations (Looking Glass in this instance) can be successfully used without change in Asia; but with selected adaptation to better fit Asian environments, training results can be improved. Modifying simulations to reflect cultural realities improves the realism of the simulation experience for the participants.

Introduction

The Looking Glass project aims at improving the teaching and learning of organisational communication in two degree courses at the City University of Hong Kong by introducing an American-based simulation entitled Looking Glass Inc. and developing new methods of debriefing and performance analysis. Looking Glass is a large-scale behavioral and management simulation which allows participants to experience a day in the life of top-level managers, meeting the challenges of communicating effectively within an organisation, delegating authority, thinking and acting strategically, making complex decisions and managing subordinates. The project has two phases, each involving two runs of the simulation, with around

127 and 89 participants involved in 1994 and 1995 respectively. This paper reports the results of the simulation derived from multiple evaluation method and performance analysis. These analyses are based on participants' questionnaires, external consultants' reports, focus group discussions and selected videotapes.

Background to the Looking Glass (LG) Simulation

Looking Glass is a management communication simulation produced by the Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, N.C. The simulation recreates a day in the working life of top level managers. Based on intensive interviews with practicing managers, it features realistic management problems and tasks, management activity patterns and external environments.

The simulation has 20 roles, which include one President, three Vice- Presidents, nine Directors and seven Plant Managers. It runs for four to six hours and involves two distinct activities: (1) managerial activities to carry out the assigned roles and (2) a quarterly company meeting. Information is provided to participants through extensive corporate files and supporting materials. Debriefing activities and selected focus group discussions (conducted in the second year) follow the simulation.

There are three divisions in a Looking Glass organisation, namely the Advanced Products Division (APD), the Commercial Glass Division (CGD) and the Industrial Glass Division (IGD). Each of these divisions has a unique external environment, ranging from reasonably stable and predictable to unstable and highly volatile. Like any company, Looking Glass has its share of problems, ranging from the trivial to the titanic. Issues involved cover many areas, including finance, personnel, legal matters, production, sales, research and development and safety. Examples, to name a few, include: an opportunity to acquire a new plant, a decision about what to do with a plant that has lost money for the last few years, pollution and discrimination problems, supply shortages, production capacity limits, competition with foreign manufacturers and the need to fill a vacant plant manager position.

Hong Kong Use of LG Simulation

The Looking Glass simulation was first introduced to Hong Kong tertiary institutions in 1994 with generous funding from the Action Learning Project, UGC. Over a two-year period, 336 student participants, including 120 observers, took part in the Looking Glass simulation in 1994 and 1995, which consisted of 21 runs. In the second year, experienced managers (called business associates) were invited to participate, occupying the roles of President, Vice President or Director in the simulation.

The following section describes the project participants and activities conducted in Hong Kong. In the first year, the participants consisted of two contrasting groups of undergraduate seniors. One group comprised third (final) year students pursuing a BA in English for Professional Communication (BAEPC). This degree course enables students to develop an advanced command of English for the international workplace, combining language and communication skills development, intercultural discourse and communication theory, media technology and business studies. The second group consisted of final year students pursuing the BSc Finance degree. These students were training for management positions in industrial, commercial, financial and government sectors. For Bsc Finance students, the simulation formed part of the coursework for *Business Communication*. Both groups of students were native speakers of Cantonese, using English as a second language.

In the second year, five business associates were invited to participate in the simulation in order to foster an authentic business working environment. These business associates occupied the mid- to upper-level management positions in their respective organisations. One business associate was a senior product manager of Talbot International Retailing Ltd., another was the Assistant Human Resources Manager of the Hospital Authority and the others were managers of medium-size enterprises.

The project activities can be divided into three stages: the pre-simulation stage, actual running stage and post-simulation stage. The activities involved before the simulation include: recruitment and training of the management committee, role assignment, assignment of English-only speakers, design of props, office room arrangement and orientation.

Recruitment and Training of the Management Committee

To ensure the smooth running of the simulation and to enhance its authenticity, a Management Committee was formed. The role of the Management Committee members was much like a human resources department. Seven and nine members were recruited in 1994 and 1995 respectively. Their job was to recreate a realistic and well-organised working environment for the participants. The task of the committee was to run the simulation under the direction of the simulation organiser and to plan the administration of the simulation. Their task force can be divided into three stages. The first stage was designing rules and regulations and preparing various props before the simulation. The second stage was to provide various services such as the Controller's Offices and mail delivery service during the simulation. The last stage was to prepare for and manage the debriefing sessions.

Role Assignment

The basic simulation is designed for twenty participants. For the first simulation, participants were required to apply for the posts of President, Vice President and the Management Committee members. Shortlisted candidates were invited for interviews. Those who received the highest interviewed marks were chosen to be the Presidents and Vice Presidents. Based on their scores on the Myers and Briggs Personality Indicator results, the roles of Directors and Plant Managers were randomly assigned.

For the second simulation, the selection of the top management posts were based on nominations from participants. To allow for experience in taking part in different organisational levels, participants were assigned to different divisions and different organisational levels. For example, individuals who were in the top management positions in the first simulation would be assigned as Directors or Plant Managers for the second simulation, or vise versa.

Assignment of English-Only Speakers

In each simulation, half of the participants were randomly assigned as English-only speakers with the remainder using their native language. This practice allowed participants to compare their experience of communicating in their native language and in their second language (English).

Observers

In addition to the simulation participants and Management Committee members, BAEPC second year students were assigned as observers and recorded conversations (using video and audio recorders) during the simulation. They also reminded, if necessary, the English-only speakers not

to use Cantonese. The observers, however, were strictly prohibited from interfering with the simulation.

Props

To encourage a professional atmosphere for the simulation, the Management Committee developed a series of props, such as incoming-mail folders, out-going mail containers and large-typed name plates and name-tags. Memos were a major communication channel due to the lack of telephones connecting the classrooms.

Room Arrangement

In total, 70 rooms were reserved for six concurrent Looking Glass organisations in the first year, while 45 rooms were reserved in the second year. For each Looking Glass organisation, ten rooms were reserved. The President and Vice Presidents had their own offices, and Directors and Plant Managers shared their offices with Division members. In addition, three large rooms were reserved for the Controller's Offices where additional information was provided. Executive lunch meeting rooms were also available to allow company associates to hold executive lunch meetings before they conducted the quarterly meetings.

Orientation

For two reasons, an orientation was conducted prior to the actual simulation. First, it provided students with information about the concerned logistics in running a simulation, such as the overview of the simulation, procedures and regulations. Second, the Looking Glass Inc. company information and history was also provided. At the orientation, the students received in-basket materials according to their designated roles. Since the participants were all native Chinese, more time was allocated for reading and preparing materials than the time recommended for native English speaking students. Students were also required to return their information the same day. To enhance the authenticity, students were reminded not to meet or communicate about the Looking Glass until the actual running started.

Actual Running of the Simulation

The simulation was held on two alternate Saturdays. All the participants were required to report to the Management Committee members in their designated rooms to pick up simulation materials a half an hour before the simulation started. The simulation lasted between six to seven hours. In the second simulation, one hour was allocated for a quarterly meeting, which was held in the President's office and included all the members. The President had the responsibility of preparing the agenda for discussions.

Post Simulation Activities

The post simulation activities included debriefing and a selected focus group discussion (introduced in the second year). Following the simulation, participants were taken through a substantial debriefing process comprising three phases, each with defined aims, methodologies and appropriate interaction modes. These activities were (1) Phase 1: free-for-all venting and frustration discussions; (2) Phase 2: horizontal and vertical focus group discussions; and (3) Phase 3: individual questionnaires. Table 1 lists the functions and methodologies of each phase.

Table 1: Looking Glass Post Simulation Activities

Phase	Functions and Methodologies
Phase 1: **Free-for-all venting and frustration discussion**	• Was informally conducted and lasted for about an hour after the first simulation • Allowed the participants to express and release their frustrations and tensions resulting from the challenges presented by the simulation • Focused on the communication processes in the simulation and on logistic problems rather than discussions of problems and content of the simulation • Fostered a relaxed and supportive atmosphere
Phase 2: **Horizontal and vertical focus group discussion**	• Was formally conducted and lasted for about two and a half hours after the second simulation • Supported participants' cognitive development by focusing attention on key aspects of horizontal and vertical communication within the simulated organisations • Centered on comparing the leadership style and communication climate of the divisions in specific and the corporations in general • Allowed self-reflection
Phase 3: **Questionnaire**	• Provided an opportunity for private reflection through writing on the Looking Glass experience • Critically evaluated the language use and communication effectiveness in using English and Cantonese • Drew out participants' impressions of the value of the simulation

Selected Focus Group Discussion

In the second run of the second year, ten of the selected participants including business associates and external consultants were formed to have a two-hour focus group discussion. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to create an environment in which selected group members could comment on and give examples on their experience with the Looking Glass simulation. To promote the communication effectiveness, separate formal and informal discussion formats were adopted. From the formal structure perspective, a series of issues and questions were prepared to stimulate discussion. Additional time was allocated for free-flowing discussion with concerned areas.

Three major topic areas were identified for discussion, the first of which related to power, status and communication. Its focus was to (a) understand the nature and source of power and status within the organisation, (b) understand how the use and perception of power varies among hierarchical levels, and (c) compare the power and status relations portrayed in the simulation with those found in the Hong Kong workplace.

The second topic area related to leadership and decision-making. In this area, the discussants were asked to identify a problem or critical issue common to all members. These issues served as case studies. After identifying the issue, the focus group discussed it in relation to the the following aspects:

1. Steps in identifying, working on and resolving the problem or issue
2. Organisational positions involved in the communication process
3. Obstacles encountered while working on the problem
4. Successful and unsuccessful decision-making strategies

The third topic concerned the use of first and second languages and the comparative impact on oral communication effectiveness. The focus of this area centered on: (1) whether the use of a second language (English in this case) is an inhibiting, facilitating or neutral factor, (b) areas and examples with little, no and significant differences in using a second language and (c) areas where there were communication breakdowns, reasons for communication breakdowns and ways of making communication more effective.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

Multiple methods were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the simulation (see Table 2). The outcomes of each evaluation method will be discussed in the following section. In total, the data from all sources provide positive results of simulation effectiveness. Figures 1 to 6 summarise student evaluation on a 7-point Likert scale (1 is the lowest and 7 the highest). Selected student comments and the overall observations of the consultants are included in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 2: Simulation Evaluation Methods

Evaluation Method	Variables Measured
• Participant ratings	• Evaluation on the value of simulation experience toward their degree course
• Focus group discussions of selected students and business associates	• Ability to deal with real and significant issues • Impact of the power and status on organisational communication, leadership styles and use of languages
• Videotapes of participant behavior	• Communication among participants at different organisational levels and in different divisions, specifically dialogs of communication patterns

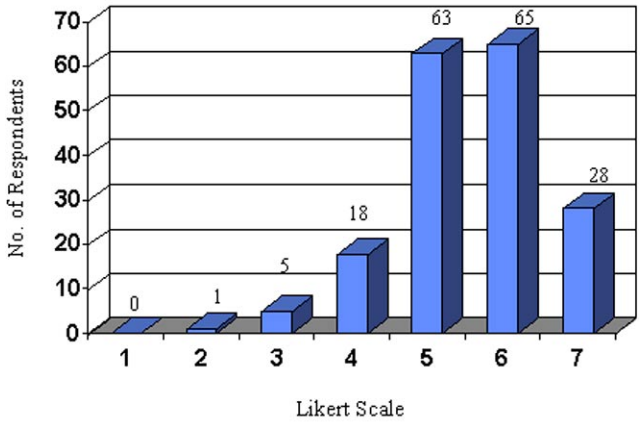
• Participant reports	• Participant understanding of issues and their management styles and approaches • Number of issues solved in Simulation 1 and Simulation 2; then compared with 1994
• External consultant / assessors observation	• Managerial behavior of participants compared to effective real world managerial behavior
• Selected participant comments	• See Tables 3 and 4 for details.

Questionnaire and Participants' Ratings

The third section of the questionnaire provided participants with an opportunity to assess the value of the simulation experience toward their degree courses. The focus was on: (a) how well the simulation provided a learning experience, (2) to what extent the simulation improved managerial skills, (3) how well the simulation helped them communicate better in the organisation, (4) how well the simulation taught participants to work as a team, (5) how realistic the simulation was and (6) to what extent the simulation prepared them for their future careers.

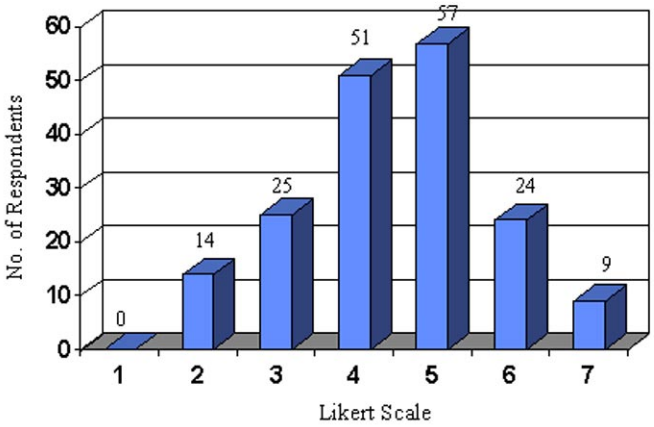
In regards to question 1 (see Figure 1), read as 'Has simulation provided a valuable learning experience?', 87 per cent (156 out of 180) of participants' ratings fell between 5 and 7. Consequently, a sizable majority reported that the simulation provided a valuable experience towards overall learning. Only 3 per cent rated the simulation between 2 and 3.

Figure 1: The simulation has provided me with a valuable experience



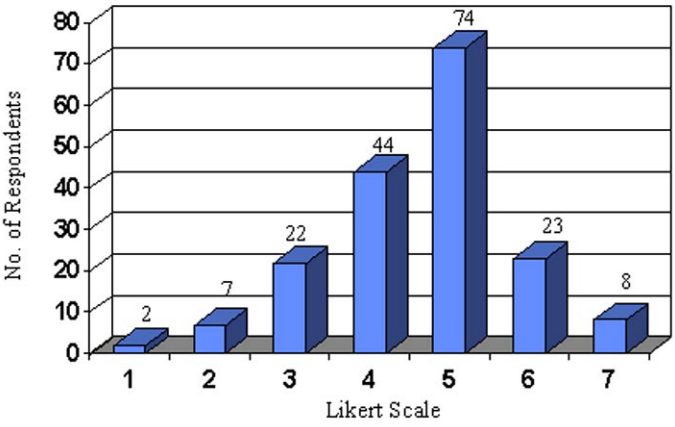
When asked whether the simulations improved their managerial skills (see Figure 2), 50 per cent of the participants reported it helped improve their managerial skills. About 42 per cent (76 out of 180) rated the simulation at 3 or 4, indicating that the simulation somewhat provided opportunities for practicing managerial skills.

Figure 2: The simulation has improved my managerial skills



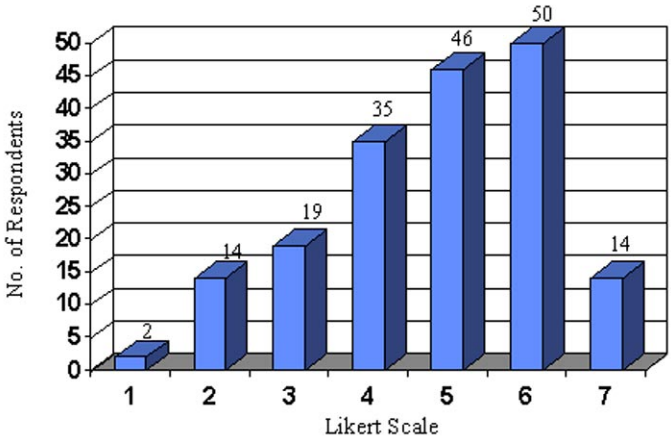
The participants were asked to assess whether the simulation helped them communicate better in an organisational setting (see Figure 3). Fifty-eight per cent felt that the simulation helped them communicate better. Only five per cent (9 out of 180) thought that the simulation did not help them improve their organisational communication skills. Individuals who rated this question between 1 and 2 were assigned Plant Manager posts (lowest in the rank) and felt that their voices were not heard by their superiors.

Figure 3: The simulation has helped me communicate better in organizations



In the questionnaire, participants were also asked to assess whether the simulation helped them work better as a team (see Figure 4). Sixty-one per cent (110 out of 180) reported that the simulation helped them to work better as a team. About 30 per cent rated this question at either 3 or 4, indicating that the simulation somewhat taught teamwork.

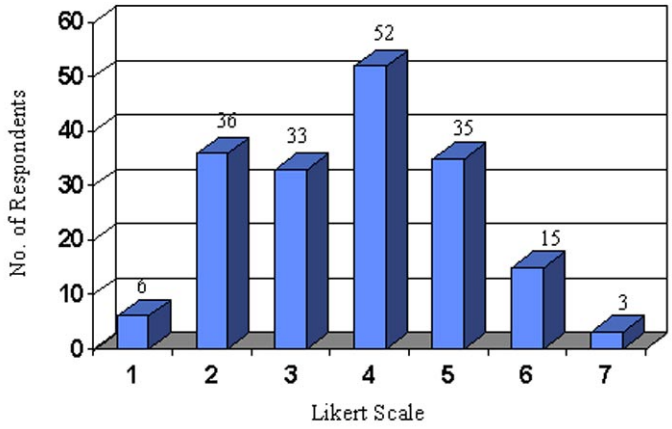
Figure 4: The simulation has taught me a lot about working in a team



The simulation caused participants to be aware of the importance of building team efforts; that is, three heads are always better than one head, as stated in the classical Chinese proverb. Because of the complexity of the problems in the simulation, the completion of tasks required coordination within the division upward or downward, and coordination between the divisions, especially for the higher levels in the organisation.

When asked about the realism of the simulation (see Figure 5), less than one third (53 out of 180) felt that the simulation was realistic. Comparatively, 23 per cent rated this question at 1 or 2, thus feeling that the simulation was not realistic. The reasons for such responses can be attributed to (1) unprepared highly concentrated problem solving activities for six to seven hours and (2) unfamiliarity with the country specific topics and prejudice towards the use of Western materials.

Figure 5: The simulation is realistic

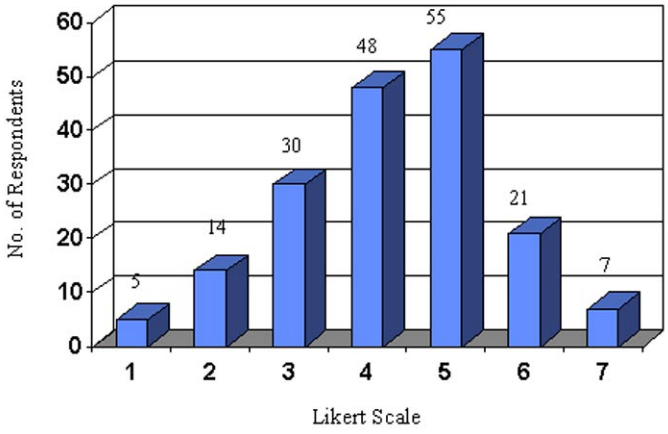


Comparatively speaking, the use of business associates in the second year improved the ratings. In the first year, only a 26 per cent rating fell between 5 and 7 as compared to 34 per cent in the second year, which indicates that the simulation was viewed as being more realistic. Generally speaking, the rating improved very significantly when comparing the two years. Thirty-eight

per cent in the second year, in comparison with 22 per cent in the first year, rated the question at 4, indicating that simulation was moderately realistic. It is obvious that the degree of the simulation's realism improved when involving business associates in the simulation.

In assessing how the participants felt the simulation would help their future career (see Figure 6), 46 per cent (83 out of 180) reported that the experience acquired through the simulation would be beneficial. Involving the business associates not only increased the rating of the simulation's realism but also increased the participants' evaluation of its impact on their careers.

Figure 6: The simulation has helped me for future career



When comparing the EPC with the BScEF course, the results show that 90 per cent of EPC participants rated this question between 4 and 7, and thereby indicated that the simulation experience would be beneficial to their future career, while 61 per cent of BScEF students thought that simulation could be useful to their future careers.

Table 3: Selected Comments from Simulation Participants

The simulation has provided me with a valuable learning experience.
• The simulation has provided me with a valuable learning experience as I have taken up the completely different posts of a President in the first simulation and a Plant Manager in the second. I have learned the roles at the top level as well as the middle ranking management. I have experienced how to plan work priorities issues, to associate with people of different ranks and to function effectively on an authentic business situation / context. • The Looking Glass simulation provided me with a precious opportunity to work in a more or less authentic business environment. I learned much about the operation of realistic managerial work and can apply what I have learnt from the commercial modules in year 2 to the simulation. • It provides a valuable learning opportunity that cannot be provided by education and summer job experience, in which I may just be responsible for a small part of a particular job and in which I may be ignorant of those other areas, especially those of the managerial levels.

The simulation has improved my managerial skills.
• Being a Plant Manager is different from being a Director. More managerial skills are required to be a Director since coordination and communication are essential. • To carefully allocate the resources. To think of the consequences of my decisions. To practice the things I intend to do. To deal with the human problems (manpower, morale). All these experiences improve my management skills. • Being a successful president is not an easy task. A combination of an autocratic and participative management style is needed. Participative style is effective only when there is strong coordination with subordinates. Otherwise, it will only lead to confusion. Should that be the case, I would have to exercise my autocratic power to restore order and make final decisions.
The simulation has helped me communicate better in organisations.
• Though it was just a simulation, it helped me learn how to start a conversation with my fellow workmates when I had some questions. In the first simulation, I was assigned as a Vice-President but did not know how to communicate with my subordinates, so misunderstanding always occurred. But, I think there was an improvement in communication in the second run. • There is no doubt that the simulation has helped me communicate better in organisations because I met people in different departments and gained experience in communicating with different people in an organisation.
The simulation has taught me a lot about working in a team.
• From the simulation, I knew that team work is very important in a company. One's ability is very limited, as everyone has his/her own strengths and weaknesses. By working as a team, one's weaknesses can be complemented by others' strengths. Also, more people working together means more ideas, opinions and arguments which are essential to a healthy team. Better decisions are likely to be reached through team work. • More sensitive in recognizing others' personalities, styles and attitudes; reminds me of the importance of achieving common goals with the least conflict and time loss; to respect others' knowledge and expertise and the information they have.
The simulation is realistic.
• The personnel problem, the competition in the market, the problems arising in the manufacturing plant are quite realistic. The simulation also provided me with an opportunity to work in a large corporation with a departmental structure. • I find it different from activities or role-play in tutorials. The created atmosphere or relationship did make me feel stressful. • The simulation is realistic as each student is assigned a post with a file holding detailed company history, information concerning pay, situations, problems and memos which all reflect the real business world where the problems cited may really/actually occur. The simulation also gives me a glimpse of what people do in real business organisations.

The simulation has helped me for my future career.
• Actually, some large companies assess the applicants by using a similar activity. The applicant is required to sit in an office and tackle different problems that are stated in the memos. • The simulation has given me a precious opportunity to experience authentic business organisations. This experience has decreased my 'fear of the unknown' concerning my future career and lessened my feelings of ignorance concerning working in an organisation. • The experience in simulations has well-equipped me for my future career by strengthening my communication, leadership, decision-making and problem-solving skills. Having played the role of Vice-President and Plant Manager, I have also experienced the pressure and problems faced at different levels of management.

Table 4: Selected Comments from External Consultants

• We were impressed by the students' general skills and knowledge. Compared with our past experience with newly graduated students in the working environment, the students we met in the Looking Glass Project were more natural and mentally tuned for the challenges of the business world. • Simulation shortened students adjustment period in which they must go through when they begin working. • Simulation allows participants to grasp correct and effective approaches towards people and situations thus enabling them to be accepted and prove their capability more easily. • What they (students) learnt in two days' simulation exercises may probably be worth more than three months of working experience. Employers generally expect the people they hire to possess adequate communication and interpersonal skills. Newly graduated students often have to go through a 'bumpy' period before they grasp a fair amount of such skills. The simulation exercises helped the participants to mature much faster in this regard. • The project brought out some very realistic and useful issues in a working environment, which are often overlooked by fresh graduates. The skill to master such issues could determine their success rate in their job more than technical or academic achievements.

Necessity for Adaptation

Western simulations need to be adapted to more accurately reflect and build on the experience and knowledge of the Hong Kong participants. Adaptation builds realism into the simulation experience and allows the participants to relate more closely to their simulation experience and to transfer their learning experience to 'on-the-job' behaviour.

The process of adaptation can be centered on two areas: (a) taking cultural differences into account and (b) explaining country specific (USA) details of the simulation to the participants. The Looking Glass simulation was developed in an individualistic and low-context society, whereas Hong Kong Chinese culture has been categorised as a collectivistic and high context society (Hofstede, 1991). Specific cultural features, especially face behavior (Bond and Hwang, 1986; Bond and Lee, 1981; Hsu, 1971, 1981) also differ between American and Hong Kong culture.

The second concern of the adaptation was that Hong Kong simulation participants were not familiar with country specific (USA) background details of the simulation. Areas and topics that were unfamiliar to Hong Kong participants are described as follows:

EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission)

The EEOC was created by the Civil Rights Act in 1964 to ensure equal employment opportunity. An EEOC officer within the organisation is charged with monitoring EEO programmes and assuring that the policies are implemented appropriately. The concept was totally unfamiliar to the Hong Kong students.

Affirmative Action Programmes

This concept was also unfamiliar to the participants. In Western countries, particularly in the US, affirmative action is the requirement that necessitates an organisation to take specific steps to remedy discrimination in hiring, promotion and supervision by recruiting more minorities and women. This programme was a new concept to most participants.

Racism and Minority

Hong Kong is a very homogeneous society, consisting of a population that is 95 per cent Chinese, with a small percentage of expatriates. These foreign expatriates usually take up high posts in government-run institutions or in the private sectors, usually in business. Thus, the issue of the racism and minorities is different than in the US.

Unionisation

Unions may not be a new concept to Hong Kong people, but the practice is very different from that in the US. The majority of Hong Kong residents still do not have clear view of the unions' role. In the US, a union refers to an organisation of workers formed to negotiate with employers on wages, working conditions and related areas.

Anti-Trust Law (Acts)

In the US, anti-trust laws refer to the federal laws designed to protect trade from monopoly control, price-fixing and other restraints of trade. As a British colony, the practice of the Anti-trust Law in Hong Kong in theory follows the British Common Law. However, there is not a clear view on the actual practice.

Layoffs

In the West, when the economy is in a recession or a company merges with other company, junior employees in a company may be laid off in order to maintain the company's market competitiveness. However, possibilities still exist of being hired back when the economy revives. In contrast, the practice in Hong Kong is that the employees would be released for no compensation and are not likely to be re-employed once discharged by a company.

Adaptation of the Simulation

Table 5 concentrates on the adaptations made to better fit the Looking Glass simulation to the Hong Kong environment. Six areas were identified: modifications related to providing background material, raising the realism of the simulation, increasing the simulation running time, tailoring debriefing to better fit the Hong Kong environment, stimulating higher participant involvement and facilitating retention and integration. Table 5 lists the areas requiring adaptation and the related changes.

Table 5: Adaptation of Simulation to Hong Kong Environment

Variable Requiring Adaptation	Reason for Adaptation	Description of Adaptation
Background Knowledge	• Participant unfamiliarity with the USA: terminology, culture, business practices, government regulations • Alter participants to importance of potential problems, improve robustness of simulation	• Pre-simulation briefings on simulation related environmental areas
Realism	• Non-acceptance of peers as upper level managers • Lower level managers refusal to make decisions	• Use of business associates as presidents (CEOs) or vice presidents
Time requirement	• Language deficiencies and cultural unfamiliarity	• Lengthen simulation running time
Debriefing	• Cultural reluctance to disclose sensitive information and disclose weakness	• Structured debriefing materials
Involvement	• Reluctance to participate in unfamiliar areas	• Run simulation twice
Retention	• Potential non-integration and non-internalisation of experience	• Reflective paper and immediate and follow-up debriefing

Overall Implications

The overall implication is that American or Western simulations (Looking Glass in this instance) can be successfully used without change in Asia. However, with selected adaptation to better fit Asian environments, training results can be improved. Modifying simulations to reflect cultural realities improves the realism of the simulation experience for the participants.

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