

Exploring the Limits of Participatory Simulations

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I commend Kristopher Holland and David Phelps for their innovative approach to a pedagogically important and engaging topic. Their essay provides a stimulus for philosophers of education who are interested in the development of conceptual understanding or those who are acquainted with the potential of participatory simulations to serve as catalysts for insights that may otherwise, remain dormant.

The authors frame their essay with the claim that, understanding of “opaque philosophical concepts” is limited by language. They draw on work by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas who “point at” the limits of language in expressing such concepts as “meaning,” “truth,” and “experience.” To address the limitations, Holland and Phelps argue for the cultivation of the philosophical imagination, which involves “connecting the enactment of the concept” while “simultaneously learning” it. The authors argue further that Participatory Simulations, supplemented by a curriculum of philosophical imagination, can provide “unique experiential encounters” and clarify opaque perspectives for students.

The essay references the literature to begin an argument for participatory simulations. Jerome Bruner’s claim that, “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development”¹ is supported by examples from researchers in the “learning sciences” who teach complex systems principles in math and science classes. Although the discourse is connected to a Vygotskian framework, Holland and Phelps point out the limitations of this approach for philosophical purposes and propose that the *philosophical-aesthetic perspective*, that is, analyzing human interactions and experience with literary forms, artistic objects, and media is better suited for working with philosophical concepts.

The authors note some historical precedents for using the *philosophical imagination* as a response to the problem of the limits of language and conceptual understanding. They remind us of the *experiential aesthetic attitude* in philosophy that is found in the work of Plato, Lewis Carroll, Soren Kierkegaard, and Jean-Paul Sartre and that simply *reading* philosophical work misses opportunities for enriching the philosophical imagination.

Finally, the authors point out some pedagogical implications of the philosophical imagination, again drawing on literature to note the importance of moving away from philosophy as simply a “body of knowledge” or as a kind of “thought policing.” They discuss the notion of transforming knowledge into “imaginatively engaging pedagogical activities” and propose that Participatory Simulations redesign subject matter into “concrete embodied experiences” that can “serve as pathways for abstract understanding later on.” The authors reveal three examples of participatory simulations that are designed to “provoke and demonstrate the cultivation of the

philosophical imagination within the milieu of an aesthetically-minded, experience-based performance of philosophy.” The examples are in the form of games that include difficult conceptual distinctions arising from the work of Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Habermas. In conclusion, Holland and Phelps propose that Participatory Simulations illustrate a “general paradigm of research and pedagogy” that is worthy of further investigation.

I find it interesting that my response to this essay seems to reflect the development of understanding that the authors see as central to the idea of the philosophical imagination. That is, my first response was to become “engaged with” the topic, excitedly noting connections to my own experience and interests and recognizing the richness of the topic’s scope and complexity. My second response was “inquiry oriented,” in respect to some limitations that I have observed in my own reading and research. My third response was to consider the “deeper implications” of the ideas in the essay and examine the argument itself.

My personal experience working with students in philosophy of education courses supports the authors’ premise — with some limitations. My students have participated in various sorts of simulations involving metaphors and performances that do in fact “seem to” clarify their experience and deepen their understanding of some difficult concepts. For example, we have used three dimensional metaphors to illuminate (clarify) the experience of changing beliefs about a concept, engaged in role playing performances to gain insights on the perspectives of philosophers, and have designed visual representations of some connections among the concepts of “knowledge,” “understanding,” and “reason.”

My experience has also led to the realization that Holland and Phelps are addressing three very difficult issues in the essay. The first is (ironically) the issue of *clearly articulating the limits of language*. The second is the difficulty of framing “what counts as” *gaining an understanding of abstract concepts* such as “meaning” and “truth” *through experience*. The final issue is to clarify such complex relationships as the relation between *participatory simulations*, the *philosophical imagination*, and what they call the “*experiential aesthetic attitude*.” I applaud the authors for tackling such an agenda, which, while daunting, has the potential to lead to some rewarding insights for the field of philosophy of education.

Holland and Phelps note that their examples of participatory simulations serve as illustrations of a “general paradigm of research and pedagogy.” The paradigm to which they refer is based on some fundamental assumptions that, in my view, require closer examination in order to ensure that the research does in fact move forward smoothly. First, what might arguably be called the authors’ “inspiration” from the learning sciences, comes with some assumptions about what counts as “recognizing complex systems concepts and physics concepts such as velocity,” on the part of 6-8 year olds. It might be worthwhile to investigate those assumptions in search of some distinctions between what is going on in the case of young children who “recognize pattern differences” and the case of one who is deepening her “understanding of a concept.”

Second, although the authors are not “co-opting” a scientific approach to learning and applying it to philosophical investigation of concepts such as “free will,” “consciousness,” or the issue of the “limits of language,” it is not clear that the move from the scientific perspective to the philosophical aesthetic perspective is not without assumptions that “beg to be examined.”

Ironically, in the absence an experiential performance of this essay, the reader must rely on “textual analysis” for understanding. In this sense, I yield to the authors’ point that such understanding may be lacking. Given that limitation, I recommend that the authors extend their work to address some key areas that currently elude my understanding of the project.

The first area concerns the basic premise of the essay. In their introduction, Holland and Phelps talk about “linking concepts with experience” and “connecting the enactment of the concept while simultaneously *learning* it.” It would be helpful to consider whether “learning” a concept is the same as “understanding” it. If not, a discussion of the potential relation between “experiencing,” “learning,” and “understanding” an abstract concept would provide an edifying dialogue.

I also recommend some clarification of the essay’s argument. While I may be relying on my own perspective and interests here, the initial use of the term “understanding” in conjunction with the use of the term “concept” throughout the essay could lead the reader to take the argument to be that:

1. Participatory simulations lead to the development of the philosophical imagination.
2. Development of the philosophical imagination leads to conceptual understanding.
3. Therefore, Participatory Simulations lead to conceptual understanding.

To push my point about understanding further, different paradigms (science, psychology) have different accounts of what counts as “understanding.” This suggests the possibility of a “paradigm shift” when we move into Holland and Phelps’s “paradigm of research and pedagogy” that is related to philosophical understanding. Clarification on this point would be helpful.

I think it is important to consider *what are we talking about* when we refer to students (or others) who have an experience that “seems to” increase their understanding. Is this simply a belief that they hold? What would count as “evidence” that their understanding has actually increased? Can we talk about evidence without falling back on the psycho–scientific paradigms or the educational problems of “measuring”?

If an essay can be judged by its ability to raise philosophical questions and “put the question marks down deeper,” then this is a highly successful essay. The topic and approach illuminate some significant questions that are worthy of further investigation. The work is extremely important in the field of education where on one hand, researchers deplore the lack of understanding, while on the other hand,

curricular theorists largely view philosophy as irrelevant. I agree that the pedagogical approach offered by the authors is a valuable means of increasing one's understanding of a concept or issue. I further agree that students are engaged by the activities and "believe" that the activities have assisted them to deepen their understanding of the concepts and issues. However, I wonder if this is as far as we can go? Are there ways in which we can be sure that the students have in fact, deepened their understanding or *do the limits of our language prevent us from "knowing" that this is in fact the case?* Are participatory simulations subject to the same limitations as language? Or by addressing one set of problems related to conceptual "opacity" are we simply opening the door to a different set of problems?

1. Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 33.