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Aspects of Virtual Learning

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Aspects of Virtual Learning

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I. Introduction

Educational processes furnish the involved subjects with desirable behavior patterns. The main purpose is to prepare the individual for finding solutions to problems to be encountered in real life in future times. Thus, it is important that the provided education and / or training be realistic. To render such a realism less costly; is usually achieved through virtual methods containing simulations or metaphors.

The range of the methods is fairly large. The educator may resort to onomatopoeia (imitation sounds), similitudes, metaphors, drama techniques, mimics and gesticulations of all sorts; in order to make the learner grasp the concepts properly. Pictures, sketches, plans may be employed. All of these efforts facilitate and reinforce the teaching of the related material.

II. Benefits of Imaginativeness

Within this context; above all and first of all, it is appropriate to emphasize the significance of tales and fables in early steps of education. Those literary works make much of the child-fantasy, which is tremendously larger than that of an adult person. In this manner, a lot of knowledge as well as values may be transmitted without causing boredom.

Tales are works which make children love their native tongues unconsciously, in tender ages (Kantarcıoğlu 1991:20). The giant of the tales is, in actuality, nothing but a representation of the dangers awaiting them in real life and the way to cope with them is indicated by the vulnerable points of the giant (Kantarcıoğlu 1991:37 with reference to Engünün).

Along with the level and the content the of education in question, one may talk about more intricate and complicated metaphors and representative models. Riddles, puzzles, tongue-twisters, intelligence games, impromptu speech trials, psychological counselling and even comforting / healing attempts via drama / theater staging all fall into the category of imaginary / virtual techniques. Finally, today's modelling and simulation achievements in sheer digital environment constitute the pinnacle of the mentioned activities.

A Model is a sort of acting of a real system. Simulation defines the working or the functioning of the involved model (abridged from *The Army Model and Simulation Master Plan*).

a) The Special Place of Metaphors in Military Training

It would be interesting to note that all over the world, military bodies are the foremost inventors, developers and users of virtual teaching ways.

As Yarman & Tünay (1998:504) put it; *the level of a given society in research and development is an essential aspect as well as the guarantee of its economical advantage and security. In all countries, the motor force of research and development derives from defense necessities. Civilian technology has often emerged as the reflection of war technology onto the peace times.*

In that respect the weighted interest of military sectors in ModSim studies is just natural and expected. As Çayırcı (1997) explains; *great benefits of such studies are in question. Much smaller application costs, less risk of casualties, enabling maneuvers at operative and strategic scales, experimenting with critical material not intended to deplete and flexibility can be counted as specific examples.*

In our day virtual military maneuvers / games are resorted to more and more. In such virtual military games, ammunition is saved. In face of new events coming up in accordance with a scenario measures resembling real ones are devised seriously. Messages are sent; phone calls or talks through wireless sets are exchanged. Meetings are held. In the evening of the work-day, all activities are evaluated and criticized and accounts are asked. Blue (friendly) and red (hostile) forces confront each other and defend their arguments. Results are checked. Taken lessons are debated.

Of course, the imaginary techniques of the military do not pertain to modern technologies supported by computers. Armies have been relying on similar preparations associated with battles for ages. Members of land force troops learning swimming movements on tops of sand hills, infantry privates shadow-fighting by using of their bayonets, hunter-

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troops engaged in a representative attack towards the imaginary troops are all scenes full of good old-fashioned examples.

In case of need; even the seemingly-least-related or simplest objects may serve as virtual training objects, for the soldier. In an autobiographical novel (1981 *passim*) of *Salman Rushdie*, an author with Indian-origin, we encounter such a passage. There, the author talks about General Ayub Khan's *coup d'etat* preparation against the legal cabinet in a mocking style, which this cruel and awful project definitely deserves:

In late 1950s, eleven-year-old Salman is at his maternal aunt's house in the neighboring country Pakistan, during school vacation. His aunt's husband General Zulfiqar is giving a reception for very important persons, one evening. A strange ambiance prevails after the dinner and the live-in servants are all sent away.

Just at the moment when his aunt is about to send Salman and his peer-cousin Zafar to their bedroom; the Great General (Ayub Khan) intervenes.

— "Let the youths stay! This meeting involves their own future days!"

Men with medals on their chests and cordons around their shoulders all turn to Ayub Khan. The Great General provides a summary of the disorder into which the country had succumbed. He asserts that the deadline granted to the politicians is now over.

Meanwhile, cousin Zafar cannot simply bear the serious atmosphere. He loses the control of one of his organs, as he occasionally does so. The fly of his pants get wet and a yellowish liquid starts dripping onto the Persian carpet. Laughter break out in the room. Now very much embarrassed, General Zulfiqar drives his son out. He stares at his young relative and Salman immediately reads the message full in his eyes:

— "It is your responsibility to save the honor of our household, for the moment!"

Salman shifts to a place nearer to the Great General at the table and spontaneously assumes a very important duty. As Ayub Khan recites the details of the rebellion plan, one by one; under the surveillance of his uncle Zulfiqar; the child begins to move the symbols on the table, skillfully: The little mustard bottle leaves its position as the A-platoon which is to occupy the central post-office building. Two plates with remnants of ragout (B-battalion split into two) squeeze a ladle (Rawalpindi Airport) etc.

Following the briefing, Ayub Khan thanks General Zulfiqar. In the mean time, a silver bowl full of crème is left where it was: President Iskandar Mirza will go on with his office for three weeks in the aftermath of the coup.

III. Both Empathic and Hedonist

Several aspects of applied leadership training also involve virtual techniques of some sort. For instance; in West Point Military Academy; *cadets are divided into small groups for sessions against discrimination based on race, gender, religion and denominations. They indulge in long discussions in accordance with role-playing scenes. Thanks to this method; one gets a feel of staying in another's shoes (empathy) and enjoys the learning process without boredom (hedonism), unlike tedious all-theoretical or bookish ways. Anything learned in this manner has a longer and more effective retention in young minds. Knowledge-gaining is quicker and more concentrated, as well.*

Since virtual learning is associated with play, they give entertainment and pleasure and this aspect is very significant. As a matter of fact; one might claim that military Mod Sim studies is in cooperation with the entertainment sector, in this respect.

As *Zyda* (1998: 81-85) puts it; *formation of artificial environments, modelling human behavior, producing virtual images are fields where overlapping does occur and in the U.S. various committees are in charge of managing such activities.*

a) The Cultural Context Cannot be Ignored

It is an unfortunate fact that in some cultures, certain traditional elements may stand in the way of virtual training studies. For instance, in the Turkish culture, being serious is sometimes overemphasized in education. In folklore, humor does have its place as reflected in anecdotes of Hodja Nasreddin, true. But all serious issues have a different location. The role of educative games is being appreciated only in recent times.

Up to three decades ago; teachers and parents used to consider even advanced interest of children in sports, with suspicion. They were apt to associate it with being lazy. Many grown-ups would express this negative attitude behind other excuses like wearing out the shoes too soon, losing time for academic studies, injuring oneself on the field etc. (which is merely a rationalization mechanism, to name it properly).

Years ago, I had participated in a language course abroad. One of our educators was dedicating Friday afternoons to educative games and plays. Initially, I was finding this strange. A suspicion and a feeling of guilt was gnawing at my mind: Weren't we wasting our time as adult scholars in such frivolous sessions? Of course, I had long been conditioned to the merits of solemnity in education. Only later, I was to discover the true value and usefulness of these Friday hours in classroom.

It is interesting to mention an episode from a famous Turkish novel, *Çalıkuşu* [The Wren, 1922 *passim*], at this point as a demonstrative example: French-school-educated Istanbul girl Feride becomes a teacher following a bitter romance affair and goes to a village school in Anatolia. While observing her students,

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she comes to note that the game played most often by the children is about funeral rites. One child rolls his eyes and imitates a dead person; while others tie up his chins. They then simulate washing and coffining him and put him on a *musalla* stone (bier) for the final prayers and feign the burial operation to complete the rituals; all dead-serious along the course of the play.

This episode from a novel is quite a realistic depiction of the peasant mentality *vis-à-vis* child games and it reflects the fact that this is one of the games which the parents approved. This game was indeed held in favor by the adults, with respect to wild runs and fights and horse plays.

Peasantry is submerged in deprivation and misery. The prevailing mentality of thee typical parent is "I let them loose on the meadow / and let God-Almighty grant their protection!" (The two stanzas are rhymed in Turkish: "*saldım çayıra / Mevlâ'm kayıra*!"). The village-child is thus very different from the city-child, who is much more "costly", much more protected and even —at times— easily spoiled. The peasant's offspring is untimely matured and solemn. This attitude is revealed in photographs openly.

American writer Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) provides the American version of the serious mentality of the rural child in Ohio, in one of his unforgettable autobiographical short stories. The plot evolves in early twentieth century.

The mother, a former school-teacher, urges the father, a farm hand, to accomplish a better life. First they set up a chicken farm but they become unsuccessful. Later, they go down town and open a small eatery shop. In a flashback sentence the author says: "Now that I am older I know that she had another motive in going. She was ambitious for me. She wanted me to rise in the world, to get into a town school and become a man of the towns".

While the couple run the small restaurant, their son goes to school. He is mighty glad to be away from the countryside chicken farm, where a disease would suddenly break out and wipe off many lives in the chicken farm.

Mother scrubbed the floor and the walls of the room. I went to school in the town and was glad to be away from the farm and from the presence of the discouraged, sad-looking chickens. Still I was not very joyous. In the evening, I walked home from school along Turner's Pike and remembered the children I had seen playing in the town school yard. A troop of little girls had gone hopping about and singing. I tried that. Down along the frozen road I went hopping solemnly on one leg. "Hippity hop to the barber shop," I sang shrilly. Then I stopped and looked doubtfully about. I was afraid of being seen in my happy mood. It must have seemed to me that I was doing a thing that should not be done by one who, like myself, had been raised on a chicken farm where death was a daily visitor.

In Ottoman society (that is, the former face of Turkey before the republican era), a cemetery was established near a mosque within the bosom of the typical town-center, for the Muslims to take a lesson in death and to remember the ephemeral nature of the world.

On the other hand; nowadays; as *Hannay* (1988:110) specifies; *the theme of death is becoming a topic of taboo. Within this context; deaths more and more occur in hospitals and health institutions instead of in houses. Individuals' chances of witnessing deaths are accordingly getting less and less.*

IV. Conclusion

Imaginary techniques, which furnish educative efforts with numerous benefits, prove to be especially affective for children. Young persons are liable to imitate or emulate. They accept the notable adults around as role-models.

Indeed, some middle class working mothers confine their children to grandparents, day nurseries being rare or too expensive. An outcome of this exigency is a drift of the child towards cultural deprivation. The education level of the former, often-oppressed-generation is naturally inferior than that of the present one. The manners, behavior patterns, speech habitudes of the care taker elder generation are thus transmitted onto the children (along with some desirable old-fashioned values, which should also be mentioned). Virtual education methods reply to the child's strong imitation impulses and thereby compel further creativity and imagination. The cultural infrastructure established in this manner pays the way to future high-technology propensity and possibilities to command computerized processes of the future.

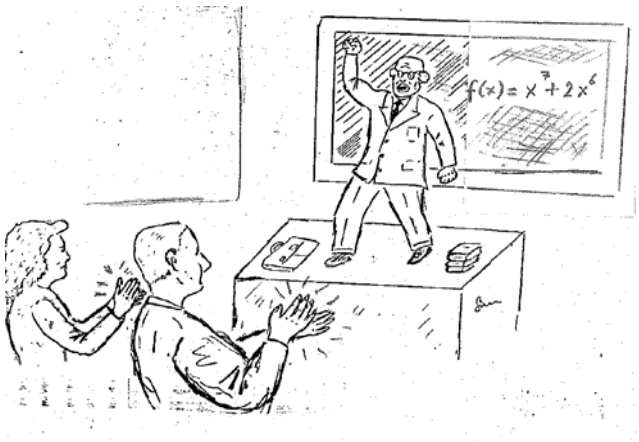


Fig.1: An Enthusiastic, Exuberant Teacher; Who had Simply Lost himself on the Chair, in a perfect *mise en scène* (illustration by the author)

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Fig. 2: Serious and Mature-looking Anatolian Village children in 1924
(from the published Archive of National Geographic)

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