


# The Power of Role Play and Imagination in Online Learning: Exploring Low-Tech Simulation in an HR Capstone

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## Abstract

Asynchronous capstone courses often lack clear opportunities for students to gain confidence in applying skills they've learned throughout their program of study. To counteract this, I developed an HR capstone simulation course. Through the experience, I learned the power of low-tech role play to reinvigorate the online capstone experience. To accomplish this, the course author and I created Jade Stone, a fictional home décor and accessories company and the site of an eight-week simulation. Students entered the simulation as Jade Stone's new HR manager and were required to solve increasingly complex issues. I leveraged my design background to make branding assets and emails, further immersing students. The course author and I developed engaging avatar videos, discussions, and assignments to prepare students for HR careers by integrating academic knowledge with real-world applications. Student feedback showed the continuity of story arc and practical application made this coursework highly engaging. Developing the simulation was intensely collaborative, requiring meticulous planning to seamlessly embed content without disrupting the fictional world. Though the course took much creative planning, it resulted in a delightful capstone experience that allowed students to gain confidence as they imagined themselves as HR managers.

**Keywords:** capstone experience, online learning, roleplay, HR capstone



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## **Introduction**

Online education offers exceptional flexibility but can fall short of helping students become confident practitioners. Asynchronous courses especially can feel isolating as students lack social context for their learning. These feelings can compound, leading to disengagement or even burnout in the capstone experience. In this proceeding, I'll share how I collaborated with a course author and video department to create an HR capstone course simulation, re-energizing the online capstone experience for all.

## **The Capstone Experience**

Most programs in our university culminate in a capstone experience. A capstone course should be a dynamic experience where students integrate and apply all they have learned. Students should feel empowered to think like someone in their discipline, becoming confident with tools, language, and skills before launching into their future.

Though capstones can potentially be high-impact courses, the experience often needs to improve in practice. Zinn et al. (2010) posited that capstone courses can be a less-than-ideal experience for students and faculty. If a capstone is too easy, it becomes a mindless, busy-work course. If a capstone is too hard, students become frustrated, and a course designed to get them excited about their future has the opposite effect. Finding the ideal balance is challenging. Zinn et al. advised that anyone who enters the capstone design experience does so with a "heavy dose of reality" and considerable flexibility.

## **Kicking Off the Course**

In the Spring of 2022, I was assigned a capstone course in Workforce Management and Strategic Leadership as part of my course development load for the third quarter. This capstone is the final course in the bachelor's degree in human resource management track at Maryville University. The eight-week course would ideally also provide students with opportunities to integrate academic knowledge and real-world experience as they strategize potential solutions to HR challenges. Like all courses in this degree program, this capstone would be delivered online and asynchronously to students across the United States.

The first step in our design process is having a kick-off meeting with the course author where I, as the learning designer, meet the course author, learn more about the course objectives and overall program, and hear any ideas or concerns the course author might have. Though all course authors are teaching in some capacity, many have never worked with a learning designer; thus, this meeting is where I highlight what we can do as a department, define my role, and generally do my best to establish a collaborative, collegial atmosphere to set the tone for the next four to six months of development.

My course author for this course was an adjunct professor with over 23 years of experience in business, organization management, human resources management, and leadership. In our kick-off meeting, it was apparent to me that she not only had some fantastic credentials in the field of HR but also would be one of those people who made sure every class she taught was dynamic, engaging, and anything but a snooze fest. That said, she had never developed an

online course with the university, and, as all our courses are entirely asynchronous, she was concerned about how she might blend her own dynamism with the somewhat static nature inherent in asynchronous online learning.

As we discussed her vision for the course, she mentioned her idea for a cumulative workforce planning project and that students could work on parts of the project each week, leading up to a comprehensive final document. As a learning designer with a graphic design and education background, I love a good cumulative project with steps, checkpoints, and all the cumulative assessments so students can learn as they go.

As she talked, I began thinking back to a meeting with our video development team a few days prior. The video team had started subscribing to a new AI platform where an uploaded script could be transformed into a realistic-ish talking avatar video. When the video team presented the platform, the learning design team was impressed, but, as with many shiny tools, we all felt at a loss as to how we'd use it. Her ideas about the course sparked some ideas in my thinking. What if we were to take her vision of a cumulative project and have it not simply live inside a traditional eight-week course but instead turn it into a real-life inspired experience where students had the chance to test drive (in a highly safe environment) the skills they'd been amassing as they progressed through the degree program?

The idea was captivating. For me, designing online learning experiences is about more than progressively stepping video and text content to learning and course objectives. Though these things are necessary for academic rigor, what excites me most is finding ways to welcome students into learning experiences that surprise and challenge them, ignite curiosity, and build a diverse community with their classmates in ways they never imagined were possible. Creating a simulation would be a great exercise in world-building and a fantastic way to explore how we might, in a very low-tech way, help each student imagine themselves as an HR professional, a role they hopefully would be incarnating in the not-too-distant future.

At a natural pause, I began telling her about my ideas. She was interested but also had a healthy dose of skepticism. She hadn't been in the video team meeting and confessed to having no experience building fictitious learning worlds. That said, the more I spoke, the more my enthusiasm grew on her, and she agreed to try it.

### **Creating the Simulation World**

Over the next few days, we began working out, via email, the details of what this whole endeavor might entail. We agreed that students would be "hired" as HR Manager of the Jade Stone Company, a luxury home décor and accessories brand whose name and backstory the course author created. We worked with the video team to "cast" animated avatars representing various Jade Stone employees. Once we had our characters, the course author and I crafted detailed backstories for each avatar, including nuanced dynamics between different characters to help make the simulation feel more natural.

I leveraged my background in graphic design to create Jade Stone branding assets and email layouts that would serve as an introduction to various discussion assignments and other narrative touchpoints.

With characters established, we focused on developing challenges students would tackle each week based on overall course objectives. We worked together to write scripts for our characters and find creative ways to make assignments and discussions feel like logical workday tasks for an HR manager. When new avatar videos arrived, we'd watch enthralled as the characters came to life, dreaming up more scenarios to challenge our unwitting new employees.

We quickly discovered that maintaining a coherent simulation required meticulous narrative thinking. I assumed the role of "keeper of the world." My mission was to find creative ways to embed content seamlessly, never rupturing the simulation. Though time-consuming, the payoff was worth it. Student feedback showed they appreciated the practical feel. The continuity of characters and story arcs transformed a traditionally dry capstone into an engaging, cumulative experience, allowing students to inhabit the role of an HR professional truly.

As a learning designer, I was thrilled that our vision had seamlessly translated into a positive student learning experience. The course was a collaborative experience between myself, the course author, the video department, and, eventually, the students who became unwitting employees in a fictitious company with a lot of heart but more than a few complex issues regarding HR management.

Developing this capstone simulation showed firsthand how powerful role play and imagination can be in online learning. Introducing narrative elements brought our course to life, creating an experience that delighted and challenged students while preparing them for HR careers. I had previously dismissed simulations as cost-prohibitive. This course showed that with creativity and intention, immersive learning is possible even on a budget.

With intention, imagination, and a little willing suspension of disbelief, our courses can become sandboxes where students safely explore professional roles, ready to hit the ground running in the real world.

### **Takeaways**

If this has now made you curious to try a low-tech simulation of your own, here are a few recommendations:

- **Collaborate.** Brainstorm characters, scenarios, and story arcs to ensure you capture real life.
- **Emphasize Continuity.** Maintain narrative flow across all elements so students stay immersed.
- **Start Small.** If building a simulation feels intimidating, start small with a fictitious case study assignment, allowing students to develop their imaginations.

### **Author's Contributions**

LH was the sole author of this paper.

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### **Ethics Statement**

This study was determined to be acceptable for publication by Maryville University's Institutional Review Board. The author of the course described in this paper provided approval for its content and analysis, and their identity was adequately obscured.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

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