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***Interactive Performance and Simulation Learning***

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## **Introduction**

In 2018 our company, (ix)plore Lab, designed three programs to teach client-centered practices to attendees of the Travis County Reentry Employment Specialist (RES) training in Austin, Texas—a week-long seminar for specialists who work with the formerly incarcerated to support them as they transition back into the community. (ix)plore Lab’s programs were centered around simulation-based learning, a teaching tool that replicates scenarios learners may encounter in the real world. While simulation training can be used to teach a wide array of skills, its aim has almost exclusively been on the acquisition of “hard skills,” quantifiable technical knowledge and practices. The client-centered practices that our training targeted are classified as “soft skills,” more subjective behaviors, attitudes, and interpersonal techniques. Soft skills are not often the focus of simulation-based learning, despite growing awareness of their importance in the workplace. For example, in medical schools, standardized patient simulations acknowledge and encourage proper usage of soft skills in doctor-patient relationships. However, these are often overshadowed by the importance of learning the hard skills necessary for gathering and sharing information, performing maneuvers correctly, and making accurate diagnoses.

The existing methods of simulation training used for soft skill development, known as “situational simulations,” use either live actors or digital recreations to act out specific interpersonal interactions for learners to practice.<sup>1</sup> Our simulation was based on this format, opting for live performers over digital, with modifications made to meet our learners’ needs. Our team incorporated design elements and performance techniques from interactive theater, with actors stepping into the roles of performer and facilitator. This approach allowed the simulated scenario to provide immediate feedback, adapt to adjust to individual learners, all while maintaining a high degree of emotional fidelity. This article documents three simulation-based learning programs held over the course of 2018 – 2019 and provides an overview of the methods involved, adjustments made over time, and the impact interactive performance had on simulation training.

## **Background**

The simulation-learning program was designed and implemented by Kevin Percival and Olivia Jimenez of (ix)plore Lab, an interactive experience design company founded in 2018 that aims to design training programs customized to fit learners' needs. The company uses various training methods ranging from performance and simulation to customized workshops and individualized coaching. Percival and Jimenez have both worked as producers and performers of interactive theater. Their clients and collaborators include Seton Health, UT Austin School of Law, and the ACLU of Texas. For this project, the client, Mary Moran of the Travis County Reentry Workforce Development Specialist Team, met with (ix)plore Lab hoping to design an interactive element for upcoming RES training programs.

Moran and her associates regularly organize professional development programs based on the National Institute of Corrections' (NIC) RES curriculum.<sup>2</sup> The Travis County RES training team has certified over 2,100 people in the last ten years, free of charge. Guest lecturers and facilitators volunteer their time to better prepare employment specialists from multiple nonprofits, state-run agencies, and private organizations. The training provides learners, all who have different working conditions, roles, and responsibilities, an opportunity to learn and organize. Moran's training incorporates several interactive sessions in addition to the standard NIC curriculum, and (ix)plore Lab was contracted to design a session on client-centered assessment.

## **Assessments and the Reentry Process**

RES training covers a variety of subjects over three days, including how to perform an effective job search and engage with employers, strategies for job retention, and training in conducting effective assessments. During the reentry process an assessment— usually a structured interview with accompanying paperwork— can provide employment specialists with crucial information about their clients' work readiness, skills, interests, and barriers to employment. Moran and her training facilitators observed that learners were preoccupied with completing paperwork and tended to under-value the in-person interview. They

concluded that learners could benefit from training in conducting interviews using client-centered practices.

A client-centered practice requires the use of several soft skills to encourage clients to take on an active role. In previous RES sessions, Moran noticed a trend when she would speak with attendees about their views on these practices. Many stated that they understood these practices to be important in theory but found them inapplicable due to certain job conditions. Furthermore, Moran reported that making personal connections with clients did not seem like a worthwhile investment to many previous attendees. While this information was anecdotal, the attitude made sense given the challenges of the reentry process. The chances of formerly incarcerated clients being hired in the current market can be dishearteningly low. The unemployment rate among recently released individuals averages 50% for nine to twelve months after release.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there is the chance that a client will return to jail or prison. A 2005 study of 6,561 individuals released from the Indiana prison system showed a recidivism rate of 48%.<sup>4</sup> When faced with this low probability of success, high workload, and extensive paperwork requirements, it is unsurprising that many attendees favored more prescriptive, impersonal interactions.

Moran and her team believe this attitude contributes to ineffective communication with clients, greatly hindering the reentry and employment processes. This belief has backing from the medical field. In a 2007 article, Lawrence Dyché proposed that two abilities are essential to the relationship between medical professionals and their patients: communication and interpersonal skill. Communication is the ability to exchange information, to break down complex information so it can be better understood, and to facilitate the patient's sharing of information. Interpersonal skill refers to the ability to cultivate an "optimal emotional field," a feeling of rapport and understanding with the patient so that effective communication is possible.<sup>5</sup> Without these skills, the doctor-patient relationship breaks down. According to a 2015 article in the *Primary Care Companion For CNS Disorders*, a poor doctor-patient relationship can adversely affect health outcomes. Stress levels may increase, while frequency of visits and survival rates with certain conditions can decrease.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, in reentry, a breakdown in the client-RES relationship may increase the risk of recidivating. A client placed in an unfit job situation may soon be out of work. A lack of trust with their RES may mean clients do not seek the help they need or do not share important information. Issues like these complicate the RES's duties and further impede a client's ability to transition out of incarceration. Moran and the (ix)plore Lab team hoped to prevent these relationship breakdowns and provide an experience that could address learners' attitudes toward assessment. A live simulation-based model was developed, highlighting the efficacy of client-centered practices by targeting specific communication and interpersonal skills.

### **Current State of Simulation Training**

Simulation, defined as an “imitative representation of a system or process,”<sup>7</sup> is an effective tool for experiential learning: a repeating cycle of abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, concrete experience, and reflective observation.<sup>8</sup> Put simply, it is learning by doing, followed by reflection. This type of learning often occurs in “on the job” training models. By its nature, on the job training can be unpredictable. Simulation-based learning provides a more controlled environment, allowing facilitators to guide learners through specific experiences while minimizing risk.

### The Ten Conditions

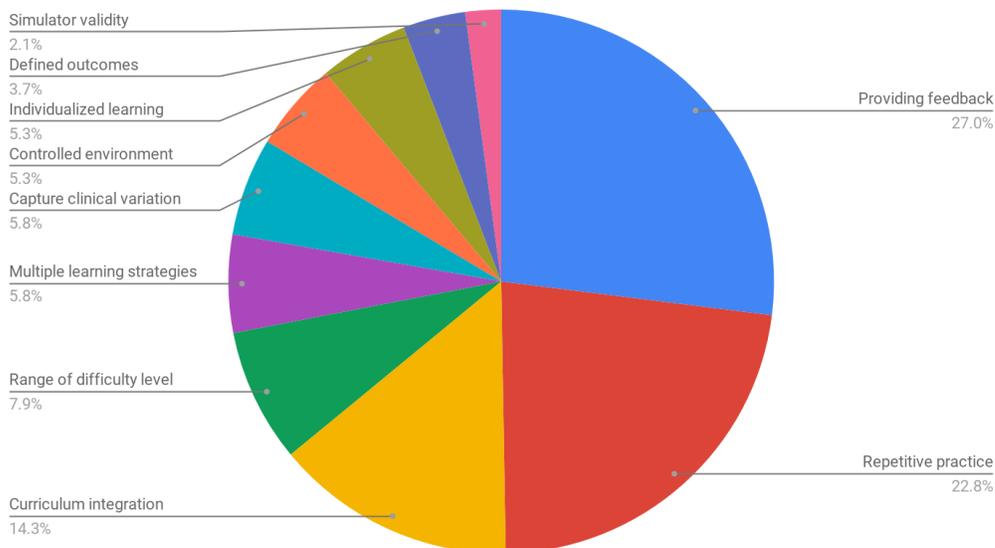


Figure 1: Ten Conditions for Effective Learning

A review of high-fidelity medical simulations in Medical Teacher identified ten conditions that facilitated effective learning (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> We had too many learners and too little time to provide the preferred amount of repeated practice or clinical variation. However, considerations were made so that the simulation would be able to meet the other criteria. Our highest priority was providing live feedback for learners participating in the simulation. Research shows that effective academic feedback is “more strongly and consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behavior.”<sup>10</sup> Immediate constructive feedback helps guide learners to desired strategies and behaviors during the simulation. The second priority was curriculum integration. Collaboration with RES facilitators allowed us to set learning targets that complemented their overall week of training. Next was providing a high degree of interactivity, which gave us the ability to provide live feedback and adapt the simulation to a learner’s skill level. To provide multiple learning strategies, each course was broken into direct instruction, activities for breakout groups, and the simulation itself. Finally, the simulation delivered a high degree of emotional fidelity or a sense of “real presence.” Dieker et al (2014) state the importance of

providing “a personalized experience that each teacher believes is real. (i.e., the teacher ‘suspends his/her disbelief’).” This leads to increased learner engagement, self-reflection, and better preparation for interactions in the field.<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis on interactivity and individualized instruction was necessary to properly address a major variable, the learner. While a hard skill simulation can be “one size fits all,” soft skill simulations require more plasticity. Learning to listen actively or communicate effectively requires one to develop new skills while also retraining attitudes and behaviors. New skills can be developed with standard simulation practices, but retraining learners’ unique habits and behaviors often requires a more individualized approach. Research shows that social skills can be more effectively developed by identifying and replacing unhelpful behaviors.<sup>12</sup> To accomplish this, we used the frameworks of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to guide our approach, and utilized techniques from interactive performance to provide an overall shape to the program and develop the tools actors used to facilitate the simulation.

### **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, and Flow State**

(ix)plore Lab’s design incorporated the framework of CBT, a therapeutic practice that assists clients in identifying, addressing, and retraining specific unhelpful thought patterns and behaviors.<sup>13</sup> While CBT is used to address a wide array of issues, our team drew primarily from its methods for retraining habits. The first step, and possibly the most vital, is developing awareness of a habit or behavior and its trigger(s). From there, CBT provides tools to replace habitual responses to triggering conditions so clients can begin to solidify new habits and behaviors. This process, the “habit replacement loop,” gave us a format with which to address the habitual behaviors of our learners.<sup>14</sup>

To begin developing awareness of habitual behaviors, the (ix)plore Lab team relied on MBSR tools. Although more research needs to be done on MBSR, performers have long known the value of mindfulness, of being “in the moment.” Actors and musicians often credit their ability to perform with high emotional fidelity to this sense of immersion,

known in positive psychology as “flow state.” Flow state and effective simulation involve many similar elements. Both require immediate feedback, clear goals, a challenge designed to stretch the participant’s skills, and an awareness of the present moment.<sup>15</sup> Flow state has been linked to increased learning, growth, and “feelings of competence and efficacy.” This improved sense of efficacy, in turn, helps sustain the flow state, keeping the learner engaged.<sup>16</sup>

MBSR practices served our learners at the RES training in several ways. Even in high-stress learning scenarios, these practices have been shown to increase empathy and decrease psychological distress, including anxiety and depression.<sup>17</sup> Anxiety, in particular, can deter a learner’s ability to store and process new information.<sup>18</sup> By practicing MBSR techniques like grounding and simple breath ratios, our learners were able to better manage their own stress and anxiety. This allowed them to experience the constructive and situationally appropriate stress of the simulation, leading to better learning.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, MBSR techniques were useful in building awareness, which is critical both to entering flow state and retraining habits and behaviors.

After cultivating self-awareness, the training sought to continue the habit replacement loop by giving live feedback and guidance to learners. The simulation required a high degree of responsiveness to learner input to offer this type of feedback while maintaining the emotional fidelity of the scenario. In order to provide that, we borrowed techniques from the world of interactive theater.

### **Boal and Interactive Performance**

Interactive performance theory was present in almost every element of our design. This allowed for a highly flexible simulation structure that was emotionally authentic to participants. “Interactive performance” refers to any theatrical methodology that aims to remove the division between rehearsed actors and unrehearsed audience participants. The (ix)plore Lab team drew specifically from Augusto Boal’s forum theater, along with later performance techniques partly based on his work.

Forum theater, from Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, is best known as a tool for exploring topics of social justice, but its techniques are applicable in many fields and are often used within educational models.<sup>20</sup> Under the guidance of a facilitator (a "Joker" in Boal's parlance), actors—usually members of the community—act out a scenario. Audience members may stop, alter the performance, or step in as a "spect-actor" (a spectator-turned-actor) and play out the scenario in different ways. The goal is not to find one correct solution, but rather to explore possibilities and create conversation. The forum theatre structure, albeit slightly modified for our purposes, provided our team with an emotionally immersive vehicle to engage with both Kolb's experiential learning cycle and cognitive behavior therapy's habit replacement loop.

In the first stage of forum theater, the audience observes a scenario played out by the actors. This correlates with reflective observation in experiential learning. (ix)plore Lab designed a scenario between a client (played by the simulation actor) and a RES training subject matter expert (SME) for the learners to observe. Learners watched the scenario unfold, noting techniques the SME used and the reactions they elicited from the client.

Next in the experiential learning cycle is the abstract conceptualization of new ideas and new approaches. In forum theater, the audience responds to the scenario they observed and begins a conversation. The observers can now introduce new methods to address the problems presented in the scenario. In our model, this was handled through facilitated discussions both before and after simulations.

Finally comes active experimentation and direct experience. In forum theater, the audience may pause the action and either direct the performance or step into the scene as a "spect-actor" to test out a new approach. This structure, while useful for stoking conversation, is difficult to use effectively in a short timeframe and naturally creates a less controlled learning environment. Instead of this pause-and-replay structure, we chose to employ two different learning strategies: First, structured breakout groups allowed learners to experiment with new ideas and behaviors in a low stake environment. Then, the simulation allowed individual participants to apply the knowledge they had gained.

This loop provided by forum theater created a solid foundation for the learning process. In order to develop the simulation script and acting methods, the team was

informed by the work of Jeff Wirth and the Interactive PlayLab, a think tank that develops interactive performance in its various forms and trains “inter-actors,” performers who specialize in the medium.<sup>21</sup> Both Percival and Jimenez had previously trained with Wirth as inter-actors and experience designers and collaborated with the PlayLab on several early prototypes combining interactive performance and simulation techniques. For the RES simulation, the inter-actor was tasked with creating an emotionally authentic scenario that reacted to specific cues from the learner in order to reinforce certain behaviors and discourage others.

To do this, the inter-actor used a branching script, providing structure to the scenario while intentionally leaving space for improvisation. When the learner correctly practiced the behaviors and skills being taught, the interactor would respond with positive reinforcement. This could, as the scenario allowed, be done verbally through the sharing of pertinent information or the building of rapport sought by the learner, or nonverbally through specific physical cues (e.g. smiling, relaxed eye contact, or the matching of learner’s own relaxed posture). If the learner used tactics or behaviors contrary to what was being taught, they would be given a series of redirection cues. For example, learners were taught to avoid interrupting a client. If the learner interrupted the actor during the simulation, the actor would close off physically and disconnect from the conversation. If the learner did not observe the nonverbal cue or redirect their behavior, the actor gave verbal cues; for example, “Could you let me finish, please?” If the learner still did not redirect, the actor gave direct instruction; for example, “Stop interrupting me. I don’t want to talk to you if you don’t care about what I have to say.” If at any point the learner received the redirection and adjusts their behavior accordingly, the interactor would shift to provide positive reinforcement. With a sufficiently trained interactor, learners can receive instant feedback to both their conscious decisions and any unconscious behaviors that appear during a simulation.

Interactive performance practices were instrumental in the creation of our program. Forum theater helped shape the structure of the learning process, while interactive performance techniques were used both in crafting the simulation script and training the interactors. In addition, providing feedback through interactor cues encouraged learners’

ability to read and respond to non-verbal communication. This more closely resembled conditions learners would encounter on the job and taught a foundational skill for use in client-centered practices. On that note, while recreating the exact conditions learners would encounter in the field was not our primary goal, having learners interact with trained interactors greatly increased the simulation's level of emotional fidelity. As prior stated, having that sense of "real presence" more effectively connected learners to the material and its application in their own work.

### **Preparation and First Test Run**

Based on initial conversations with Moran in January 2018, the primary goals of the training were set: to demonstrate the efficacy of structured interviews and provide tools and strategies to conduct them using client-centered practices. The (ix)plore Lab team drafted an outline of the program, then consulted with Dr. Kathleen Ingraham, Director of Educational/Training programs for TLE TeachLive, a company that creates mixed-reality training simulations in which educators can practice new teaching techniques and classroom management skills. Dr. Ingraham, who also trained with Wirth and the Interactive PlayLab and currently acts as an Associate Producer for the company, heads scenario development and inter-actor training for TeachLive. After reviewing the early draft, Dr. Ingraham assisted the team in breaking down specific, measurable learning targets and suggested that the branching script be written in a flowchart format (Fig. 2), allowing the inter-actor to more easily track their reactions to the learners' cues.

The team also requested her advice on the issue of observation. Due to a limited time allotment and the number of planned attendees, only one learner would be able to participate at a time while the remainder observed. The design needed to account for the changes in behavior and stress levels that naturally accompany observation. Dr. Ingraham introduced the idea of letting learners observe their RES trainer purposely use the targeted skills ineffectively in the simulation to demonstrate how quickly a relationship breakdown can happen. Not only did this end up being uproariously funny, which may have a positive effect on learning and retention,<sup>22</sup> it also meant that the habits and behaviors being retrained

were clearly demonstrated and the learners were relieved of some stress since the “bad example” had already happened. This allowed them to step into the simulation with greater confidence in their ability, one of the elements of flow state and a factor for increased learning and growth. Learners confident in their ability can better stretch themselves to meet appropriately challenging situations.

The development of the simulation script began in February of 2018. Because RES learners all have different roles within different organizations, (ix)plore Lab created a generic interview scenario in which learners could ask any questions that would be pertinent to their specific clientele. This scenario was based on a case study included in the RES curriculum. The inter-actor was provided with a live-feedback script as well as a template for the fictional client they would embody. The template included relevant personal information such as their living situation, work history, and behavioral history. It also listed certain behavioral “defaults,” conversation topics and character traits the inter-actor should revert to when not responding to the learner with live-feedback.

It was here that our team ran into a roadblock that would need to be addressed in future iterations. The original plan was to include multiple scenarios with different interactors whose race, cultural background, and gender identity were varied. While addressing bias was not the primary goal of our program, it is an unavoidable aspect of client centered practices in the context of the American prison system. Black American men are nearly 6 times more likely than white Americans to be incarcerated. The disparity between racial and ethnic groups in women, while less severe, is also disproportionately high. In the case of women, the incarceration rate has risen rapidly in recent years, with over incarceration of those with mental health issues being an ever-increasing problem. Due to the time required to rehearse interactors and the short amount of time allotted for each RES training session, the use of multiple scenarios had to regrettably be set aside. It was decided that it would be a priority in future sessions, along with scenarios that were more specific to the roles of the individuals attending the training. While it was disappointing to leave that aspect behind, the team moved forward to workshop the simulation and prepare it for its first official test run.

In April 2018, (ix)plore Lab demonstrated the simulation for Moran, with her team emulating behavior demonstrated by their previous students. Afterward, two adjustments were made: lessening the inter-actor's display of non-verbal communication and adjusting the script to redirect learners without the fictional client appearing overly aggressive. With those adjustments in place, the team prepared for the first RES training.

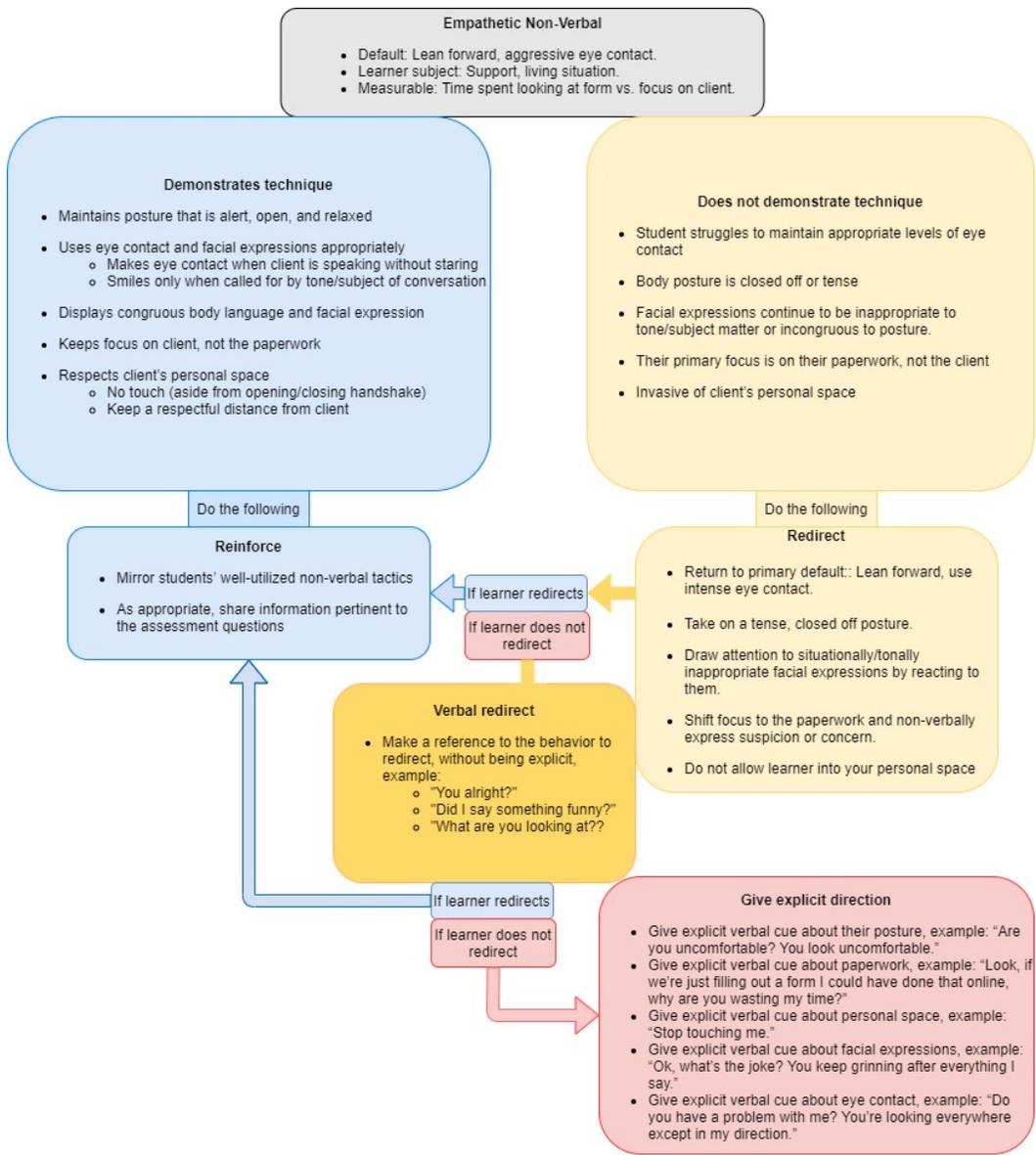


Figure 2: First Training Inter-actor Flowchart

## **First Training**

The first program, delivered in May 2018, accompanied the Assessment portion of the RES curriculum. It began with direct instruction from the (ix)plore Lab trainer, in which they framed the exercise, modeled the skills being taught, and facilitated a class discussion on the efficacy of client-centered practices. Next, as Dr. Ingraham had suggested, the learners observed one of their RES trainers fail to use those skills effectively in a simulation. This was followed by a discussion with the learners, in which they provided their RES trainer with constructive feedback. Lastly, the learners put their skills into practice. Participants volunteered to step into the simulation while the remainder of the class observed and took notes. There were three simulations, each focusing on a different measurable skill related to client-centered practice:

- **Empathetic non-verbal communication:** Encompassing everything communicated without words, including gestures, personal appearance, and even room layout. In the simulated interview, learners were expected to demonstrate appropriate body language (eye contact, facial expressions, posture) and non-verbal reactions (tone, affect, expressions). Used well, non-verbal communication demonstrates interest and attention, which help clients feel safe, supported, and more inclined to contribute.
- **Open-ended questions:** Learners were expected to ask questions that encouraged clients to share information and avoid unnecessary usage of questions with simple factual answers or yes/no responses. For example, questions beginning with “how” and “what” are often open, while questions with “did,” “do,” and “have you” are often closed. “What is your living situation like?” will elicit a more detailed response than, “Do you have a place to live?”
- **Reflective language:** Active listening strategies that reflect the client's thoughts back to them, including repeating a client’s words, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Learners were expected to utilize repetition, paraphrase, and summarization while avoiding leading questions or judgmental language. Used well, these techniques give clients confidence that they are being heard which can help build trust and rapport while also giving the client opportunities to clarify or elaborate on their responses.

A fourth simulation was planned, but unfortunately could not be completed due to time restraints. This scenario would have introduced a stressor from the client’s personal

life for the learner to respond to. The goal was to give learners the opportunity to practice their learned skills while attempting to manage their own stress and the stress response of their client.

During feedback, the learners showed a strong appreciation for the non-verbal communication skills they had learned and indicated a strong desire for more stress management training. It became clear that future iterations would need some restructuring. It was difficult to get learners to focus on just one skill set at a time (i.e. verbal vs. non-verbal) and more time was spent on discussion than anticipated. Despite those issues, Moran and her team reported that this was the most engagement they had ever seen while teaching this topic, and planning began for the next training session.

## **Second Training**

The second iteration of our simulation training program also accompanied the Assessment portion of RES training. The lesson was reformatted to focus more on non-verbal communication and dealing with outside stress. This required multiple skills to be combined under a larger target behavior, with the simulation script rewritten to account for these changes. With that, the second version of the simulation-based Assessment training was held in August 2018. As before, the (ix)plore Lab trainer began the session with direct instruction, modeling the relevant skills, and leading a discussion of their utility in the workplace. Again, this was followed by the RES trainer "failing" the simulation so that learners could observe and provide feedback. The class concluded with three simulations, rewritten to focus on:

- Empathetic non-verbal communication: These formed the foundation for the other soft skills being taught. More time was allotted to focus on non-verbal communication and highlight its importance.
- Inviting verbal elaboration: Open-ended questions and reflective language were combined into a single simulation focused on using active listening techniques to invite clients to elaborate. Learners were expected to demonstrate the use of open-ended questions, reflection, summarizing, and verbal and non-verbal affirmation, while avoiding yes/no, factual, or leading questions and judgmental language. Used well, these tactics encourage the client to be forthcoming with information that can

be used in supporting their employment search.

- Dealing with outside stress: Extenuating circumstances can produce stress, regardless of whether the RES or client is correctly using communication and interpersonal skills. This scenario introduced an outside stressor from the client's life. Learners were expected to use the target skills to observe and address the client's and their own responses to stress.

During feedback, Moran and her team reiterated that classroom engagement had increased, and the majority of learners reported that they had learned useful skills. Again, the area most appreciated by learners was non-verbal communication. The new format appeared to facilitate putting learned skills into practice, as learners no longer had to focus on just one at a time. There was still a strong desire for further training in stress management, de-escalation, and conflict resolution. With the second training complete, preparation began for the February 2019 training. In addition to teaching Assessment, (ix)plore Lab was asked to create supplemental training material for the Motivational Interviewing section.<sup>23</sup> The (ix)plore Lab team began a review of the relevant curriculum materials and started research on current motivational interviewing techniques.

### **Third Training**

For the third iteration, because of the additional focus on motivational interviewing, (ix)plore Lab was allotted two hours of training, one during the Assessment section and one later in the week during the Motivational Interviewing section. To best utilize the time allotted the training was reorganized into a two-part curriculum. This allowed more time for the development of individual skills but required major changes both to instruction and the simulation. The Assessment and Motivational Interviewing sections each included a facilitated group discussion about the relevant skills, an opportunity for participants to practice in small breakout groups, and a single simulation encompassing all skills practiced. For this training, we also created a handout for participants to refer to and refined the simulation scripts (Fig. 3 & 4). This script rewrite was made to account for the combination of skills within single simulations. While combining skills was effective for

instruction, it further complicated the role of the inter-actor. Simplifying the script made it easier to track and react appropriately to learner input.

The first session on Assessment focused on establishing the fundamental skills necessary for in-person structured interviews. Direct instruction from the (ix)plore Lab trainer was followed by an example simulation in which skills were used ineffectively. Unlike previous iterations, a participant volunteered to participate as the ineffective example, and was encouraged by the RES trainers. We agreed to experiment with this format, and it provided a series of interesting challenges for the inter-actor. However, as the participant did not have the SME's level of understanding of the goals of the exercise, it was less effective at relating the lesson to the learners. Following this simulation was a discussion on active listening. This included techniques for inviting elaboration, such as open-ended questions and verbal/non-verbal affirmation, as well as the verbal/nonverbal reflection and summarizing used in reflective language. This discussion was followed by breakout groups consisting of multiple experiential elements.

- **Stress management:** While it is not possible to remove all stress from a client's life, it is possible to regulate your own. Participants were introduced to a series of MBSR techniques to help manage their stress. Learners were encouraged to model and share these with clients experiencing heightened stress who may not have adequate coping strategies.
- **Effective non-verbal communication:** Participants were split into groups of three and given the roles of speaker, listener, and observer. They were asked to perform two exercises.
  - **Listening without words:** One learner listened actively to the speaker while maintaining self-awareness and using only non-verbal affirmation. The third learner took notes on what they observed.
  - **Reflecting without words:** One learner actively listened while finding ways to nonverbally reflect the speaker's positions and attitudes with posture and facial expression.

After breakout groups, the class transitioned into the simulation section, in which participants would use all their learned skills in a single simulated interview. The goal of the interview was to encourage the client to share and elaborate. Once the simulation

participant had an opportunity to interact with the fictional-client, practice the relevant skills, and receive live-feedback from the inter-actor, the stressor was introduced. The client received a text from his ex-wife and became agitated. At this point, the script branched into a new format. Live feedback was still provided to the learner, but emotions were heightened. If the interviewer were able to continue using their learned skills well, the client would begin to divulge more information about his current situation, resulting in a more effective assessment. At the end of this scenario, if the interviewer were successful, the client would agree to take a constructive action step. This concluded the Assessment portion of training.

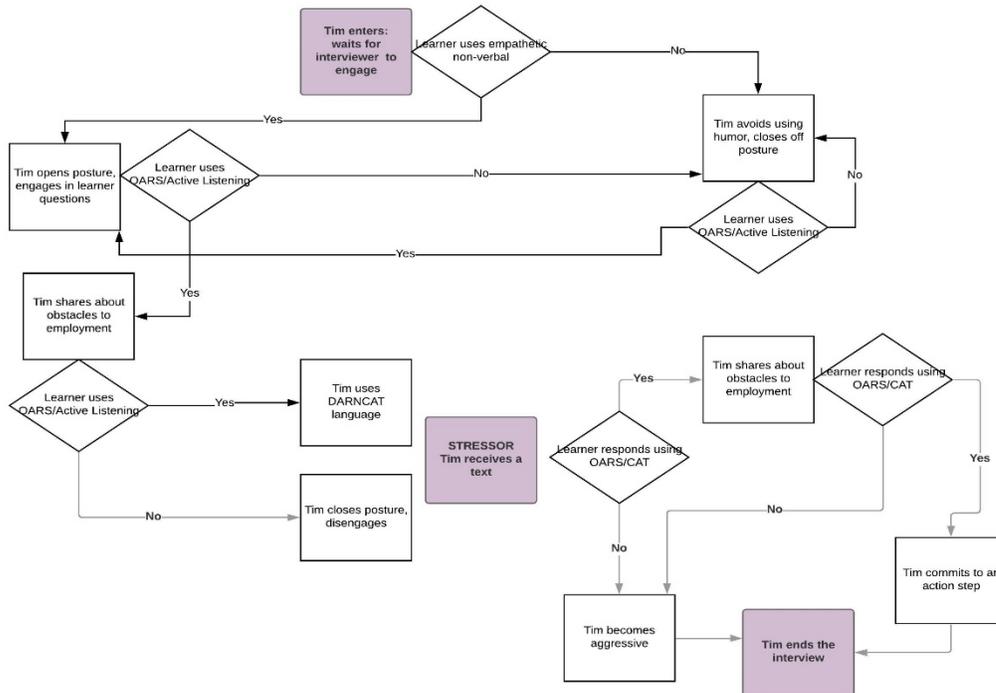


Figure 3: Third Training Assessment Inter-Actor Flowchart

The second session focused on motivational interviewing techniques, which require interviewers to listen for and encourage “change talk,” language that indicates the desire, ability, or necessity to make a change. It further asks interviewers to work with a client to address their resistance or ambivalence towards change. Direct instruction by the (ix)plore

Lab trainer was followed by a facilitated discussion about motivational interviewing. Then the class was divided into breakout groups to practice.

- Eliciting change talk: Learners were asked to split into groups of three and each take on the role of an interviewer, client, or an observer. The learner representing the client would behave as if they were ambivalent towards change while the interviewer used active listening techniques and motivational interviewing tactics to elicit change talk.
- Responding to change talk: Learners once again took on the role of client, interviewer, and observer. The client answered the following question, “What is the next step to enact the change you want to make?” The interviewer would respond with either a request for elaboration, an affirmation, a reflection or reframing statement, or a summary to move the client towards further commitment, action, or planning.

After breakout groups were completed, the class moved into the simulation on motivational interviewing. In this scenario, learners met with the same fictional client they had interviewed during the Assessment scenario. This would be a “follow-up visit.” During the meeting, it became apparent that the client was feeling ambivalent about making changes. While he wanted to be employed, he was facing several obstacles and felt discouraged. The learner was tasked with eliciting change talk from the client using the techniques they practiced in class. After the simulations, the class discussed what they observed and the potential applications for motivational interviewing in their roles as RES.

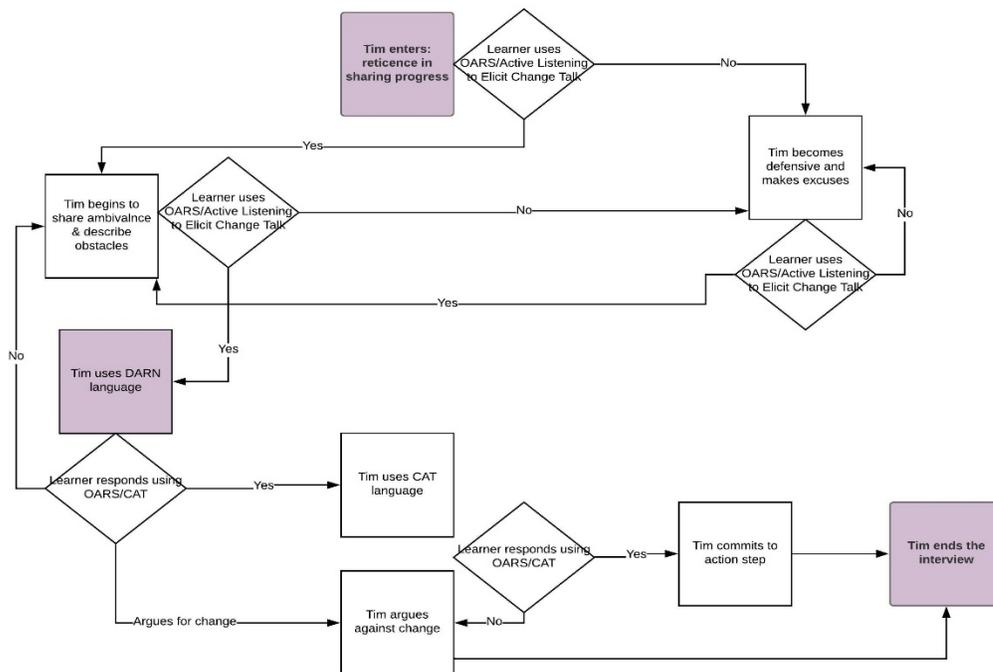


Figure 4: Third Training Motivational Interviewing Inter-Actor Flowchart

The Motivational Interviewing section introduced several components that presented new challenges for the (ix)plore Lab team. Breakout groups provided more opportunities for hands-on practice, but allowances needed to be made to account for each group’s differences in pacing and engagement. This meant instruction was less individualized than when practicing the skill through simulation alone. Even so, the response to this two-part session was overall positive. Moran and her associates appreciated the breadth of material covered while the attendees responded well to the additional opportunities for hands-on practice. Regarding the simulation itself, the latest iteration was deemed an overall success. The simplified branching script and flexible system of feedback loops helped the inter-actor transition from one skill set to another with more ease. The training was overall effective in increasing learner confidence in their abilities and imparting new skills. 75% of learners who had listed themselves as uncomfortable conducting a client-centered interview before the training rated themselves as comfortable afterward, while 80% reported that they had learned skills relevant to their work.

## **Reflection**

The stated goal of (ix)plore Lab's RES programming was to improve learner attitudes toward assessment and provide them with the tools and strategies needed for client-centered practice. After three separate programs, the client and learners' responses showed that in this regard it was a success. Each feedback session reported a majority of attendees had learned skills useful to their profession, and trainers reported increased student engagement compared to past programs.

The training sessions also highlighted aspects that could be adjusted to produce better outcomes in the future. The most pressing factor was lack of time. This limited the number of learners who could participate in the simulation and drastically cut down on opportunities for reflection and repetition. A longer training period, during which learners could complete multiple simulations supported by classroom instruction, would provide more opportunities to practice learned skills and provide more extensive data, allowing trainers to better assess growth. We received feedback forms from only 51 learners over all three sessions, which provided a relatively small data set. To improve this data, further trainings with surveys before and after each simulation and follow-up surveys after training are recommended. Finally, there is a lack of data regarding the reentry population in Texas as a whole. More information regarding the efficacy of reentry programs could help tailor programs like RES training to better address the needs of the community.

Even without long-term data, the immediate reaction of our learners provided some interesting takeaways and possibilities for future improvements, specifically in the area of immersion. One of the biggest challenges we faced was the classroom format. Staging a simulation scenario in a room full of observers naturally lessens immersion and increases anxiety levels for many learners. It would be ideal to have the simulation staged and recorded in a separate room, and either live-streamed or replayed for discussion, assessment, and data collection. This would give the participant the privacy to act out the scenario as they would in real life, without an audience. Another immersion-breaking element was learners' familiarity with the inter-actor. In our program, Kevin Percival served as both an inter-actor and a facilitator. As such, participants developed a certain

level of comfort with him they might not feel otherwise. We hoped to include simulations featuring a different inter-actor to provide better variation, but effectively training actors in interactive performance techniques, especially as applied to simulation-based training, can be time-intensive. Training inter-actors from a wide variety of demographic groups will be vital to sustaining this work in the long-term. We also see great potential in technology such as digital puppetry, which allows a single interactor to embody multiple characters or represent characters of different demographic groups.

Outside of its current application, we believe this interview format for simulation-based learning could be effectively adapted to suit a variety of needs. It could be further used to support incarcerated or recently released individuals, with programs designed to teach valuable interview skills. It could also be modified to train parole and probation officers, adapted for medical practices as a soft skill focused standardized patient exercise, or even used to train performers and actors, for whom auditions and interviews are a regular occurrence. More broadly, this type of training could be useful for anyone who conducts frequent interviews, or whose work relies heavily on forming interpersonal relationships.

We recommend that more research be done on the effectiveness of this form of training on the development of more qualitative interpersonal skills—specifically, its effectiveness in changing learner attitudes and aiding in soft skills acquisition. As well, we recommend more research be done on the effects of stress on learning, attitude change, and soft skills acquisition. Further research on race, gender, and cultural competence in client-centered practices is also necessary. We believe that a continued effort to better understand and develop the behaviors that dictate our day to day interactions could be of immense benefit to any field which requires interpersonal interaction.

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<sup>20</sup> Originally coming from Boal’s work in Brazil in the 1970s, Theater of the Oppressed is currently utilized worldwide as a tool for education, activism, community building, and therapy. The techniques and terminology of Boal would go on to have a lasting impact on modern interactive performance theory.

<sup>21</sup> The Interactive PlayLab and its director, Jeff Wirth, currently hold workshops and think tanks nationwide to further the field of interactive performance and design. The designers of this project, Olivia Jimenez and Kevin Percival were both participants of a nine-month PlayLab think tank in 2018.

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<sup>23</sup> Motivational Interviewing is an approach to counseling designed to address feelings of ambivalence and elicit behavioral change. It departs from the Rogerian model in that it is directive, in that the interviewer or therapist is attempting to influence the client. The techniques referred to in the diagram are open-ended questions, affirmation, reflective language, and summarization (OARS). Participants would look to elicit and respond to signs of commitment, activation, or taking steps (CAT).