

# Practising Elsewhere: AI Simulation, Ethical Containment, and the Pedagogy of Listening in South African Community Psychology

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## Abstract

Community Psychology students require authentic practice in community listening. Yet sending novice practitioners into vulnerable South African communities risks harm and exploits populations already over-researched. Traditional placement models cannot scale. This ethical contradiction—acute in post-apartheid contexts but recognisable globally—demands pedagogical innovation. This research offers a globally relevant model for social sciences educators facing placement capacity constraints. The KwaNomoya Project is a two-phase, AI-assisted simulation designed to address this gap. In early 2026, an anticipated cohort of 90 third-year students will conduct needs assessments with seven algorithmically-generated personas representing a fictional KwaZulu-Natal township. They will collectively analyse data via real-time Mentimeter visualisation and iteratively design NGO interventions in response to critical AI feedback. This presentation outlines a planned qualitative study employing reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of the projected data corpus: anonymised student-AI dialogue transcripts and whole-class Mentimeter outputs. Research questions examine how students navigate conflicting community priorities, how pedagogical responsiveness emerges from student-generated data, how iterative AI feedback shapes participatory design, and what strategies support critical distance. By the September 2026 conference, initial implementation data will be available; this presentation will offer early insights alongside reflexive analysis of the design process. Crucially, this project advances an original ethical argument: simulation is not a compromise of community psychology values but their instantiation. Withholding unprepared students from communities and investing in high-fidelity simulated alternatives honours non-maleficence while satisfying South African work-integrated learning mandates (CHE, DHET, HPCSA). Deliberate framing and debriefing strategies will be embedded to prevent over-identification. The project is explicitly framed as a permanent work in progress, continuously revised.

**Significance:** This research will offer a transferable, critically reflexive model for simulation-based humanitarian education that is ethically grounded, scalable, and responsive to global calls for equitable placement alternatives.

**Keywords:** Community psychology; AI simulation; pedagogical listening; work-integrated learning; South Africa; reflexive thematic analysis