Diplomat for a Day: Incorporating Simulations in Classes to Engage all Learners

Abstract

This article discusses the value of curricular simulations, particularly in the context of full-year, six credit hour courses. I argue that these simulations appeal to students with active learning styles, and provide a valuable adjunct to traditional forms of pedagogy. I discuss the importance of preparing students for and maintaining control of the simulation from the perspective of the instructor. I also note the value of altering the structure of the simulation to suit the class size and characteristics of the students.

There is increasing recognition that one of the challenges of university pedagogy is motivating all students and engaging them in the learning process. Further, educators are increasingly conscious of different learning styles, and that some students are best engaged if some aspect of the course appeals to their primary learning style. In this article I discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using simulations in senior undergraduate courses. I have conducted numerous extra-curricular, politically-oriented simulations over the years and this past year I built a major simulation into the course content. I will describe my motivations for working this into the course, including the need to provide a learning opportunity for kinesthetic learners. I will also discuss the means of preparing the students for the simulation, how I conducted the simulation, and I will assess the outcomes. The focus will be on dos and don’ts based on this first effort.

Over the last two decades I have directed a large number of simulations of political institutions, in which students play the role of states in intergovernmental organizations, such as the institutions of the United Nations Organization or other regional organizations. In 2003-04, I taught for the first time a third-year course in European politics, a full-year, six-credit-hour course. I spent four-fifths of the time teaching through a combination of lectures and group work, but in the final four weeks I conducted a simulation of the Council of Ministers of the European Union (EU). Their performance in the simulation was worth 10% of the mark in the course.

Like many of our third-year classes, enrollment was relatively high, with 44 students. From September through the end of February, I taught most of the course using group work. In this model the onus is on the students, working in small groups during class time, to answer questions on the readings and subject matter. I proceeded on a country-by-country basis, concentrating particularly on the major states (such as the UK, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain, and so on), and students could concentrate on minor countries in their research projects. I taught by complementing, elaborating, and correcting where necessary the answers that they provided on the group-work questions. This pedagogy best suits the students who thrive on reading, talking to their peers, and some public presentation. What about everyone else, those who learn by
doing, for example? As interesting as this group work is for the students, by the second term in a full-year class they welcome a change of pace, especially those whose learning styles don’t match well with group work and seminar approaches. By the end of February, the senior students in this class, who are looking forward to graduation, also benefit from something to keep them interested in the course. After studying political science for three years, and European politics for six months, this allowed them to apply their knowledge, develop their public speaking skills, and learn a little more about how real-world politics works. It is also possible to cross disciplines and engage faculty or students in Drama or Theatre programmes, since simulations involve an element of the theatrical.¹ Students were also encouraged to do their major spring research paper on the country they were assigned for the simulation, in order to maximize the quality of both their papers as well as their participation in the simulation.

My answer to these challenges was to mount a simulation, using class time, of the European Union Council of Ministers. The Council was the ideal body to simulate for a number of reasons. For a class of 44, its membership is small but not too small. It is also useful for the students to realize that in politics, like in life, power is rarely widely or equally held. The Council of Ministers, and not the European Parliament, is where the real power in the EU is found, and not all members are equal: There is a system of weighted voting in which the largest few states acting together have an effective veto. Otherwise, the Council of Ministers of the EU may be compared to the United States Senate, since it is the upper chamber, since each state is represented by a numerically-equal delegation, and because it is in this body that the interests of the member states are protected. The Council is a small group which represents the direct interests of the governments of the member states. The Council is also a good way to teach substantive knowledge about the EU. I picked the two agenda items in advance, which were the perennial problem of EU agricultural subsidies, and a more hypothetical scenario in which the EU Council had to take a position to respond to a US proposal to invade Iran using the same arguments as had been used for the invasion of Iraq.

I ran this simulation with 28 member countries (rather than 16), which included the long-standing members of the EU, those countries that entered in the 2004 enlargement, and a few others, like Turkey, that are some distance from becoming members. So simulating the Council allowed students to learn about the state they were assigned, including its internal political dynamics, as well as the workings of the machinery of the European Union. By expanding the membership beyond the present composition, this also conveyed to students that it does matter who’s in the room when decisions are being made.² I rejigged the weighted voting, so that the four most powerful countries (UK, France, Germany and Italy) had 29 votes each, while the smallest country, Malta, had three votes. There were 350 votes in total, with 270 needed for a “qualified majority.”
The first challenge in this simulation was in the assigning of countries. First of all, one of the differences between this simulation and an extra-curricular simulation is that I had to accommodate a wider range of participants in the curricular simulation. Most students in the class had never participated in a simulation, even by their third and fourth year of undergraduate studies, which alone was a good reason to do it. But this also meant that there would be a wide range of skills to contend with in terms of the quality of the simulation performance and outcomes. My first solution to address this was to be careful in assigning countries. I created a one-page form for the students to apply for a country assignment. I divided the 28 members into three more-or-less equal groups of large, medium, and small states, judged in terms of power and influence. I asked each student to check off a preference in each category. I told students that if they wanted to rank these three choices (by choosing with a 1, 2, or 3), I would try to take that into consideration. The purpose of this was so I could ensure that I had a strong student for the most important countries, while at the same time getting weaker students one of their priority choices, even if it was a middle or minor power. This worked, in that everyone got one of their three choices. It helped that I was compelled to double up country assignments in 16 cases, to accommodate 44 students in 28 countries. I was also able to ensure that weak students, or students with sporadic attendance, could be paired with someone reliable who could carry off the country on their own, if need be. This shows that when you are organizing a simulation you need to know your students, particularly their strengths and weaknesses. Based on this method I didn’t lose even a single country during the simulation, which is unusual even in extra-curricular self-selected simulations.

I prepared the students for the simulation by defining my two agenda items and by writing a document, of around 3700 words, that covered some substance but also the style and rules of the simulation. It also included references to some sources for additional research.

So far I have described the features of the simulation that I believe I designed well. Now for something that I could have done better. Normally, the EU Council of Ministers has a rotating presidency, and every member takes their turn for a month. In the real world they are all government leaders, so this is fine. But I made the mistake of allowing the students to elect the two delegations that would act as President and Vice-President of the simulation. This was a violation of my previously-successful principle that I know the strengths and weaknesses of the students best and that I should maintain control. In any event, I did have some experienced simulators, but they were not the ones the students elected. Instead, I got students who lacked experience and needed guidance from me to keep the simulation on track. As the professor I played the role of the EU Commission, the Executive of the EU, entering occasionally to give advice. The simulation would have gone better had I had the best possible chair and vice-chair.

Now what about the outcomes? On the two issues there were creative proposals and discussions, but no agreement. On the proposal to invade Iran, anything that satisfied the British and their
supporters alienated the French and their’s, and vice versa. On agriculture, the fault line, as it always does, broke along the agriculture producer/importer divide. This was fine with me because this is a good reflection of the reality. Failure to agree gives students a realistic sense of how hard it is to get agreement, especially in a system of weighted voting where only 80 of 350 votes have an effective veto over decisions. I have never agreed with those simulation directors who want agreements even if they are arrived at through error or by delegates who act “out of character.” My sense is that the students regarded the simulation as a welcome change of pace, a good way to end the course, and a practical way for them to apply their knowledge.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Prof. Cordula Quint of the Mount Allison University Drama programme for making this point during the Teaching Showcase presentation.

2. I had previously tried this rejigging at the University of New Brunswick–Saint John, in 1994-95, when I conducted a day-long UN Security Council with a membership of 25, up from 15, which at the time was the “German proposal” for a reformed Security Council. I find changing the structure demonstrates to students that structure matters.

3. Sometimes it is not fine, however, if the Minister representing a country can’t get along with his or her colleagues. On the recent controversy on Italian representation, see Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, “EU elite are filthy pigs, says Bossi,” The Daily Telegraph (London) 23 October 2003: Accessed April 5, 2005, from http://news.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml