Faculty and Staff - Articles & Papers   Faculty and Staff

1-1-2008

The Use of a Middle East Crisis Simulation in an International Relations Course

Chad Raymond
Salve Regina University, chad.raymond@salve.edu

Kerstin Sorensen
Elon University, ksorensen@elon.edu

The Use of a Middle East Crisis Simulation in an International Relations Course

All Author(s): Raymond, Chad; Sorensen, Kerstin

All Author(s) E-mail: craymond@elon.edu, ksorensen@elon.edu

In November, 2006, undergraduate students in a Model United Nations Club (MUN) conducted an exercise intended to simulate a series of crises in the Middle East. In the exercise, a total of 66 undergraduate students role-played cabinet-level officials in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, and were required to make foreign policy decisions based on knowledge acquired in the classroom and on information delivered as the exercise unfolded.

The exercise can be most accurately described as a role-playing simulation. Participants in simulations operate under a set of constraints or rules that model central features of reality. The representation of reality permits participants to experience a high degree of complexity, while the rules prohibit actions that are impossible in the real world (Lane 1995, 607; Hensley 1993, 64). When used as a teaching tool, a simulation focuses on learning how to explain situations, rather than on predicting outcomes (Guetzkow and Jensen 1966, 268). In role playing, participants are assigned a role and, though they must follow rules that constrain their behavior, can act "as they think the person whose role they are playing would act" (Dorn 1989, 3). This MUN exercise met these criteria.

While role-playing simulations have been used for decades in political science, their pedagogical value remains under debate. Classroom use of role-playing simulations is associated with a host of potential problems. Role-playing simulations can:

- engender a high opportunity cost by consuming large amounts of time during the semester that otherwise could be spent on possibly more productive teaching methods and more substantial theoretical material (Lowry 1999, 124; Rodgers 1996, 222)

- create hard-to-resolve conflicts with students, professors, and departments because of competing demands for time, physical space, and technology

- produce frustration, depression, and anger among participants by straying from students' traditional expectations of the student-teacher role in the classroom; by thrusting certain students into leadership positions that their classmates find "hard to swallow;" and by forcing students who are "unwilling to become more active participants in their own learning process" out of a preferred state of passivity (Vavrina 1995, 726)

- be difficult to grade because they are not based on factual retention

- oversimplify issues and produce inappropriate responses among students

- lack clarity in learning objectives

- produce terribly uneven student performance if some students "never move beyond a focus on classroom personalities . . . and fail even to try to engage with the historical materials" (McIntyre and Callahan 2000, 165).

Given the popularity of role-playing and other simulations, there is a surprising lack of empirical evidence on their usefulness. Simulations of all types "are rarely properly validated to determine whether/when they achieve their desired purposes or alternatively lead to dangerous or counterproductive outcomes" (Mandel 1987, 339), and claims of their pedagogical effectiveness often consist, at least in part, of the subjective impressions of the instructor (see Shellman 2001, 833). The evidence that simulations are

"more effective in teaching content, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills than conventional methods of lectures, reading, and group practice" is mixed (Dorn 1989, 8). One study involving 149 students found that a gaming simulation produced considerably less of a gain in understanding of subject material than a conventional introductory course (Wentworth and Lewis 1975, 118).

Advocates of role-playing simulations cite their ability to generate active learning as their main value as instructional tools. These advocates refer to Kolb's (1984, 21–2) interpretation of social psychologist Kurt Lewin's model of action research and laboratory training (see Dorn 1989; Brock and Cameron 1999; Shellman 2001). According this interpretation, traditional forms of teacher-directed learning are based on a form of information processing in which students first passively receive information from texts or lectures and then assimilate and understand it. Students next "infer particular applications of what is learned to general principles . . . [and] in the fourth and final stage, they learn to use the general principles to act in some way." The incentive for learning is not evident to students until these last two stages (Dorn 1989, 6).

In contrast, the active learning process described by Kolb (1984) is experiential. Students are first immersed in a particular application of knowledge that requires their active participation—a concrete experience. Students then observe and reflect upon the effects of their behavior in that instance of application. In the next stage of learning, students form abstract generalizations and concepts as they seek to understand overarching principles that may apply to their concrete experience. Lastly, students test these concepts to new circumstances both inside and outside the classroom. This active,

experiential mode of learning is believed to be better than passive learning at creating

effective thinkers (Dorn 1989, 6; Brock and Cameron 1999, 254; Shellman 2001, 827).

Simulations, because they facilitate active learning among students, can therefore:

- "permit students to experience institutional processes in ways that reading textbooks

  and listening to lectures may not allow" (Shellman 2001, 827), thereby producing a

  "deeper level of insight into the political process" (Smith and Boyer 1996, 690) and

  demonstrating how the real world often diverges from theoretical principles (Rodgers

  1996, 222)

- enable students to retain more information (Pace et al. 1990, 63) and gain a better

  understanding of abstract concepts than traditional lectures and note-taking (Smith

  and Boyer 1996, 690)

- develop critical thinking, speaking, and presentation skills among students

- generate high motivation and greater effort, and a perception of greater academic

  benefit among students (Rodgers 1996, 221; Dorn 1989, 6)

- increase student interest in the subject despite the often large amount of work

  involved (Hensley 1993, 67), which may in turn translate into more students majoring

  in the department

- result in more positive student evaluations of the course and the instructor.

Learning Objectives and Student Preparation

The goals of the simulation exercise for the instructors were to increase student

knowledge of the Middle East; awareness of how foreign policy is designed and

implemented; and the ability to evaluate the explanatory value of international relations

theories. The instructors also wanted the simulation's active learning environment to facilitate the students' retention of the course's subject matter.

Course assignments related to the simulation exercise comprised 15% of the final grade. While the instructors strove for some similarity in student preparation across the two classes, they did not create identical assignments for their students. The timing of assignments also differed across the classes over the course of the semester.

The course instructors created online discussion groups for each of the six cabinets, and the MUN provided brief country background reports to each cabinet. To emphasize the role-playing aspect of the simulation, all students assigned the task of writing a single-page profile of the officials that they were to represent. The profile required students to research each official's personal background, role in the government, and probable foreign policy positions. Students posted their profiles in their respective online discussion groups. Once this preliminary research had been completed, each cabinet was instructed to formulate three or four primary foreign policy objectives that the cabinet would try to achieve during the simulation. This task was intended to get students to educate themselves about the foreign policy interests of certain states in the Middle East and to get students to create a clear and realistic set of goals that they could focus on achieving during the simulation.

Simulation Design

The Middle East crisis simulation was designed entirely by members of the MUN. The Princeton International Crisis Simulation, which several members of the MUN had participated in, was used as a guide. Only three MUN members—known during the simulation as masterminds—knew what events were planned for the simulation. The

majority of the crises were state-oriented, but several involved non-state actors—i.e., terrorists. Crises included anti-government protests by Muslim Brotherhood in five Egyptian cities, mortar fire from the Golan Heights into Israel, and an Iraqi oil tanker drifting into Iranian waters in the Strait of Hormuz.

The students who participated in the simulation were divided into teams that represented government cabinets from the six Middle Eastern states—Egypt, Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. Each cabinet team was composed of a chairperson from the MUN, who functioned as the line of communication between his or her cabinet and the simulation's command center operated by MUN members, and 11 international relations students. Ten of the students within each cabinet were randomly assigned to represent government officials from their respective states. One student in each cabinet was randomly designated as a "special actor." These special actor characters included Major General Frank Patton of U.S. CENTCOM for Iraq, the Hezbollah representative Mullah Karim Abd Jihad for Iran, and for Israel, Lieutenant Colonel David Emmanuel Goldstein, the commanding officer of Mossad Task Force Seven. Special actors were able to submit their own action orders (see below) without the consent of their respective cabinets or chairpersons.

The simulation occurred over two successive days for total period of eight hours. Each cabinet was in a separate room equipped with a computer console, internet access, and a large wall-screen. The MUN members staffing the command center processed action orders submitted by cabinets; electronically transmitted text, audio, and video information to cabinets; and made presentations to cabinets at specific points during the simulation.

Communications from a cabinet to the crisis command center were in the form of action orders, of which there were six types. For example, an operation action order notified the command center that a cabinet wanted launch a military operation, while a diplomatic action order functioned as a message from one cabinet to another. All communications from and to the cabinets had to pass through crisis command center so that the masterminds could be aware of all the cabinets' decisions and coordinate events.

Outcomes: What Went Right

Once the simulation began, students quickly grasped its structure and rules despite having never before participated in such an exercise. Most cabinets rapidly learned of the need to discuss possible courses of action; seek out information from the crisis command center or from the internet via their chairpersons; and issue action orders in a timely fashion. Students quickly became engaged in the role-playing and real-time aspects of the simulation.

The simulation represented a large time commitment for students outside of class—a Sunday afternoon and evening, and a Monday evening. The vast majority of students attended both sessions in full, demonstrating at a fairly high degree of interest among students in participating in the simulation. A post-simulation student assessment revealed that the majority of students enjoyed participating in the simulation and believed that it was a good educational experience. Indeed, many students believed that they had learned more about the Middle East "by doing" than by listening to class lectures or reading a textbook, indicating that the simulation was an opportunity for students to experience "institutional processes in ways that reading textbooks and listening to lectures may not allow" (Shellman 2001, 827). Students gained insights into the political

processes of the Middle Eastern region and a greater understanding of the substance of international relations, such as alliance building, bargaining, diplomacy, foreign policy, power, and military force. The simulation, according to one student (and similarly expressed by several students), "made all the abstract ideas that we have discussed in class more applicable."

A large group of students also pointed out in their assessments that the simulation's complexity forced many of them to stop thinking in competitive, binary terms (winner/loser or bad/good) to more sophisticated thinking (e.g., "I never considered before that you cannot just go and bomb other countries . . . you must first plan out other ways [to deal with a crisis]"). Coping with difficult issues for the eight hour period that the simulation operated offered students insights into the plight of some people living in the Middle East region ("I never knew before that there are people who have to deal with issues of this magnitude [poverty, terrorist threats, insurgency] on a daily basis"). In addition, many students stated that they learned about their own ability to interact substantively with others ("I learned that I was able to hold conversations with other[s] on important international issues" and "I learned that I am able to be heard and get my views out to a group of people"), and about the importance of collaboration ("I learned just how important it is to listen to others when figuring out a plan . . . A lot of what we did, I never would have come up with on my own").

Outcomes: What Went Wrong

Some technological glitches became apparent during the simulation. Late in the first session of the simulation, the Skype software used for communication between the

command center and the cabinets crashed. Although the program was quickly brought back online, the transcript of what had been communicated up to that point was lost.

Occasionally cabinet chairpersons appeared to be either too active or too passive in their oversight of the decision-making process for their respective cabinets. In one cabinet, students always framed their ideas in the form of questions, asking permission of their chairperson for proposed courses of action; for example, instead of saying "we want to mobilize our military forces," members of the cabinet would ask their chairperson "can we mobilize our military forces?" This communication style placed members of the cabinet in a dependent position and gave too much control over the cabinet's decisions to the chairperson.

The quantity and quality of student participation in the cabinet decision-making process varied greatly. Frequently discussions in the cabinets were dominated by three or four students, while two or three students in some of the cabinets remained silent during the entire course of the simulation. Several students were ignorant of basic geographical, cultural, and historical knowledge about the Middle East; for example, the student playing the role of Egypt's minister for health and population was unaware that Egypt shared a border with Israel.

Several students expressed in their post-simulation assessments that they felt unprepared and that they would have prepared differently, if not necessarily more, if they had the chance to repeat the simulation. Students mistakenly believed most of the issues they would face during the simulation would revolve around relations with other states, but many events during the simulation involved domestic problems that they were unsure how to handle. Others expressed frustration over knowing little about how the countries

in the region interact with one another and about the Middle Eastern countries not represented in the simulation.

Recommendations

All of the students who participated in the simulation recognized that prior study of the Middle East would have been beneficial, and the instructors agree. As mentioned above, several students were ignorant of the most basic knowledge related to the Middle East. Also, although students had studied "their" cabinet official and knew the most detailed information about "their" minister's previous positions, educational background, relation to the royal family, etc., they knew very little about what cabinet-level government officials actually do. Requiring students to research and write background papers on the nation-states represented in the simulation, and on the governmental structures of these nation-states, would help students familiarize themselves with this critical information. Creating assignments that explore major political, economic, and social conditions of the Middle East and holding weekly class discussions of current issues relating to the region would probably also help accomplish these objectives.

Students also need more guidance in selecting the most pressing problems facing the nation-states represented in the simulation; for example, the Iranian cabinet chose illegal drug use as a major issue. While illegal drug use may be a problem in Iran, focusing on other topics more pertinent to the simulation would have offered students greater insight into Iran's foreign policy.

Students made several suggestions on how to improve the simulation in their assessments. While most of their recommendations have been addressed in this paper, the following three suggestions have not and may be worth considering:

- have students spend more time with their fellow cabinet members prior to the simulation

- offer the simulation as an extra credit so only motivated students participate

- allow cabinet members to have some jurisdiction over their field of expertise.

The method of assessing the simulation needs to be refined. It is likely that the instructors would gain greater insight into the learning outcomes generated by the simulation by asking students questions that directly address participation, collaboration, understanding of abstract concepts, and retention. These questions could include:

- How would you assess the effectiveness of your preparation for the simulation?

- What were your cabinet's policy objectives during the simulation and how did your cabinet formulate these objectives?

- How well did your cabinet function as a group? What were the strengths and weaknesses of your cabinet? What would you recommend that a cabinet should do to be a more effective and cohesive working unit?

- How would you assess your own personal involvement in the simulation, whether in terms of speaking, writing, or other means?

- What did you learn about your own ability to interact with others on important international issues in the context of a simulated international crisis?

- What did you learn about diplomacy and the foreign policy process from the simulation?

- What did you learn about the theory and practice of international relations from the simulation?

- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the simulation as a learning experience?

<u>Conclusion</u>

The learning objectives of the simulation were to increase student knowledge of the Middle East and to integrate the learning that had previously occurred in the course. Though the crisis simulation offered many opportunities for students to develop their critical thinking, speaking, and collaborative skills, these learning outcomes were only partly achieved. Several student preparation tasks and assignments failed to achieve their intended effect and thus need to be revised or dropped altogether.

According to Lowry (1999, 125),

a simulation must be realistic in three respects if it is to be a valid learning experience. First, it must be realistic in appearance. The preparation students undertake, the props, and the atmosphere must help to propel students into their roles. Second, it must be realistic in its internal process. The structure and process of the simulation activities must imitate the real world, acquainting students with the messy aspects of decision-making. Finally, the simulation must be capable of generating realistic outcomes. This possibility gives the students a sense that their efforts have purpose and their accomplishments are valid.

The simulation was successful in creating a realistic appearance and in imitating the real world in its internal process. However, it was less successful in producing realistic outcomes, especially towards the end of the simulation period when, in one student's words, it became "a rather unrealistic bombfest." Future simulations should encourage students to assume a more diplomatic approach to international crises when appropriate, and discourage unrealistic behavior by students, perhaps by penalizing the grades such students receive for the simulation.

Responses from the post-simulation assessment reveal that students did acquire a greater understanding of the complexities involved in world politics and that many had been challenged to move from a lower to a higher level of thinking (Anderson and Sosniak 1994). The current generation of students has grown up in highly competitive zero-sum war games and is used to applying a win-lose mentality to complex issues. Creating an environment in which students shed this mentality is an accomplishment that should not be underestimated.

References

Anderson, Lorin W., and Lauren A. Sosniak, eds. 1994. *Bloom's Taxonomy: A Forty-year Retrospective, Ninety-third Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Brock, Kathy L., and Beverly J. Cameron. 1999. "Enlivening Political Science Courses with Kolb's Learning Preference Model." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32 (2): 251–6.

Dorn, Dean S. 1989. "Simulation Games: One More Tool on the Pedagogical Shelf." *Teaching Sociology* 17 (1): 1–18.

Guetzkow, Harold, and Lloyd Jensen. 1996. "Research Activities on Simulated International Processes." *Background* 9 (4): 261–74.

Hensley, Thomas R. 1993. "Come to the Edge: Role Playing Activities in a Constitutional Law Class." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26 (1): 64–68.

Kolb, David A. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as The Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Lane, David C. 1995. "On a Resurgence of Management Simulations and Games." *The Journal of the Operations Research Society* 46 (5): 604–25.

Lowry, Pamela E. 1999. "Model GATT: A Role-Playing Simulation Course." *The Journal of Economic Education* 30 (2): 119–26.

Mandel, Robert. 1987. "An Evaluation of the 'Balance of Power' Simulation." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 31(2): 333–45.

McIntyre, Michael, and Patrick Callahan. 2000. "Constructing Effective Systems: Simulating the Paris Peace Conference." In *The New International Studies Classroom: Active Teaching, Active Learning*, ed. Jeffrey S. Lantis, Lynn M. Kuzma, and John Boehrer. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Pace, David, Bill Bishel, Roger Beck, Peter Holquist, and George Makowski. 1990. "Structure and Spontaneity: Pedagogical Tensions in the Construction of a Simulation of the Cuban Missile Crisis." *The History Teacher* 24 (1): 53–65.

Rodgers, Yana van der Meulen. 1996. "Role-Playing Exercise for Development and International Economics Courses." *The Journal of Economic Education* 27 (3): 217–23.

Shellman, Stephen M. 2001. "Active Learning in Comparative Politics: A Mock German Election and Coalition-Formation Simulation." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 34 (4): 827–34.

Smith, Elizabeth T., and Mark A. Boyer. 1996. "Designing In-Class Simulations." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29 (4): 690–4.

Vavrina, Vernon J. 1995. "Poughkeepsie to Person Gulf Revisited: ICONS, the Internet, and Teaching International Politics." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28 (4): 725–8.

Wentworth, Donald R., and Darrell R. Lewis. 1975. "Evaluation of the Use of the Marketplace Game in Junior College Economics." *The Journal of Economic Education* 6 (2): 113–9.