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Simulating European Union Policy Making.

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This paper discusses the use of simulation exercises as alternative learning and assessment pathways in Politics and International Relations. It will consider Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984) and its relevance to simulations, before outlining the experience of tutors and students on the year two undergraduate module, *Politics of the European Union*, at De Montfort University. The paper will then address the benefits and challenges of supporting and assessing students' learning in this way, and reflect on how approaches can be developed to enhance experiences and outcomes.

Why use Simulations?

National and University Teacher Fellows in The Department of Politics and Public Policy at De Montfort University have been looking to move away from conventional divisions of students into "active" and "passive" learners. The rationale for this is that we consider all learning to be active; however, there are varying degrees and types of activity. Simulations offer an alternative approach to traditional lecture / seminar / essay / examination formats, and emphasis on "learning by doing" encourages students to take control of their own learning, and see themselves as shapers of scholarly debate, rather than mere observers. Simulations place students in the role of decision makers, not only in terms of the agreements they reach during the process, but also regarding what they learn. Whilst the tutor provides the framework and learning objectives, it is the students who come to group decisions about how to proceed. In this sense, the simulation is a protected space for students to discuss their ideas away from the tutor's control.

Other pedagogical benefits of simulations are that students are able to put what they have learnt into practice, retain more information, gain a deeper understanding of an issue, and examine issues from a wider range of perspectives (Youde, 2008: 348). This helps to make abstract ideas and theoretical concepts more concrete. As preparation for simulations or even the simulations themselves can take place over a number of weeks or months, knowledge acquisition is incremental over the longer term, less strategic, and, therefore, not so instantly forgettable than, for example, revising for an unseen examination.

Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984) and his notion of learning cycles provide useful context for simulation activities. Kolb cites four learning stages; concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Brook and Cameron argue that taking students through these four stages will "lead to graduates with more highly developed thinking and problem solving skills" (1999: 252) Indeed, problem analysis and solving is one of the key graduate skills simulations seek to develop and test.

Simulations also offer students the opportunity to connect different elements of their learning. As van Dyke et al note, one of the greatest challenges students can face is establishing links between theory and practice. Their work with the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation Consortium (MEUSC) has identified simulations as powerful tools in bridging this divide, and presenting theoretical and analytical issues surrounding European integration to students (2000: 156)

Simulations can be used to create a strategic environment in which students put themselves in the position of policy makers, so as to better understand the opportunities and constraints they face. Students of Politics and International Relations need to understand the power differentials between different actors, and how these can accommodate or impede agreement between competing interests. As Youde notes, simulations can also be highly effective in tempering idealism and/or challenging pre-conceptions, by forcing students to acknowledge political realities (2008: 348) Asking students to represent views with which they disagree, or which they find morally reprehensible, can support them to understand negotiations less in the context of who is right or wrong, but more in terms of trying to find innovative techniques for reconciling different world views in a mutually agreeable framework. In Youde's words: "This is more than a lesson in acting; this is crucial for understanding and resolving ... conflicts". (2008: 350)

Following on from this, simulations can be used to emphasise the importance of process as opposed to outcome. Indeed, this is the most important lesson we at De Montfort look to pass on to our students. Not only can students reflect upon the implications of the agreements they have reached, were they to be acted out in actuality, they can also learn invaluable lessons in why negotiations fail. Sasley takes this one step further, by using simulations to help students learn *how* to fail as: "Students need to understand that world politics is as much about failure as it is about success". (2010: 62) This notion of allowing students to fail is an interesting one. A University system in which continuous assessment, with several components coming together to determine the module grade, is the norm, offers less time and fewer opportunities for students to make mistakes upon which they can reflect, and from which they can learn and develop as scholars. Simulations provide a safe environment for failure; one which does not necessarily impact negatively upon students' final grades, and which empowers them to demonstrate an understanding of why they failed to reach agreement, and what they have learned from the experience.

Finally, given the students are placed in a position of control over their learning and assessment in simulations, these approaches become useful tools in supporting students to learn rather than be taught. The nature of simulations can prompt students to engage much more dynamically with the learning process than they have previously. Setting a series of deadlines, in which students have to make decisions and produce interim reports, provides a strong sense of momentum and interest. The competitive element of having to overcome the opposition of some actors to realise an outcome, or even "get one over" other delegations underpins this, and places the students in the position of being genuine stakeholders in the outcome of the exercise.

Simulating EU Policy Making. The Experience of Tutors and Students at De Montfort University.

The final assessment on the second year module, *The Politics of the European Union*, is a day long simulation exercise, divided into a morning session, for delegation or cross-delegation based discussions, and an afternoon plenary. The preparation for the event takes place during the final five weeks of class contact time. This is to ensure that all students are familiar with the relevant processes and conventions of summit level negotiations, and to establish the core themes students are expected to learn and debate. As Usherwood (2009) argues, this pre-game phase of the assessment is crucial to establishing and managing students' expectations. It is here that they are introduced to those key themes, and begin to understand them in the context of the delegation they are representing.

The overall theme of the simulation varies from year to year, depending upon the key issues and challenges facing the EU at the time. For the 2012 event, students were asked to consider, agree and draft a response to the Eurozone crisis. Students were divided into seven delegations of three to four members. As having all twenty seven member states plus relevant EU institutions was not manageable for a simulation of this kind, tutors identified some of the principal actors in the Eurozone crisis, and decided to focus negotiations on them. This, of course, means that the experience is not entirely "true to life" as the priorities of other key member states are ignored. Nevertheless, it does give students the opportunity to consider the crisis from multiple and competing spheres of interest. For the purposes of this exercise, the delegations selected were as follows:

- President of the European Council
- European Commission
- European Central Bank
- Federal Republic of Germany
- Greece
- Italy
- Republic of Ireland.

In the first week of preparations, students were divided into their delegations and provided with an overall brief, which required them to concentrate on four core questions:

- How effective is the EU's response to the Eurozone crisis?
- What steps are required for the EU to resolve the Eurozone crisis?
- How can the EU pursue economic growth?
- How can the EU tackle youth unemployment?

These are deliberately broad, so as to enable delegations to explore the themes which are most relevant to that member state or institution they are representing. A possible

downside is that delegations can present highly disparate agendas which are unmanageable in the time scales available. However, this too is useful, as students are forced to prioritise what is really important when the delegations come together during the morning session of the assessment to agree the agenda for the afternoon plenary.

The remaining four weeks of contact time are divided between lectures, which lead off on each of the four core questions, giving an indication of the themes delegations need to address in their preparations, and seminars in which students are given a variety of tasks and short interim assignments to complete. In the final seminar session each delegation briefly outlines the key principles of its approach to the policy area or problem under discussion to the rest of the class. Students undertake two short individual written assessments during this stage of the simulation. Firstly, they submit a source review. Secondly, they produce a pre-simulation day report which presents the core elements of their delegation's negotiating strategy, establishes their key objectives, considers scope and terms for compromise, and flags up any "red line" issues they have identified in the course of their preparation. These reports are posted on cross-delegation pages of the specially designated space on the module's Blackboard site. This enables all delegations to download and study one another's strategies prior to the simulation day. The purpose of this is to aid delegations in identifying possible negotiating partners, and areas of concurrence and dissent. This is important as a crucial aspect of the morning session of the simulation day is where delegations look to open up negotiations with one another in order to make deals or identify areas of contention prior to the plenary.

Technology, especially social media, is a useful tool for creating space outside the classroom for preparation, debate and reflection. The simulation exercise has its own space in the module's Blackboard shell. This is used to post general announcements regarding the pre-event preparation, and timings and room allocations, as well as being a useful interface on which to post articles and research papers of general interest. In addition, each delegation has its own group page on which students are able to establish discussion boards, post documents of specific interest to their member state or institution, and email one another.

In addition to the use of the University's Blackboard interface which is a requirement for all teaching, tutors have been keen to experiment with external social media formats, most notably Facebook. In 2011 and 2012 Facebook discussion groups for the simulation exercise were established. Membership was voluntary, as the use of such media does raise considerable ethical issues. This meant that all material had to be cross posted on the Blackboard shell also to ensure equality of access for all. Such activity has obvious time implications. Nevertheless, the Facebook groups have proven extremely popular with students, probably because they are formats outside the University's control. Be that as it may, social networking has become so integral to the lives of many students that those joining the group admitted they were far more likely to check it as part of their normal daily routine than to go through the rather more laborious task of logging on to Blackboard and navigating their way through a more complex system to check whether anything new had been posted. In contrast, students who used Facebook state that they like the instant nature of its notifications system. Overall, the use of external social networking has enabled tutors and students to continue and develop informal and lively discussions and reflection outside the classroom, and has assisted students in their realisation that they can and do shape debate rather than follow their tutor's lead.

The simulation day is divided into two parts. During the morning students remain mostly in their delegations to finalise their negotiating strategies for the afternoon plenary. They are expected to open negotiations with other delegations to look to establish common ground, potential negotiating partnerships, and scope for compromise. The negotiations have to be conducted via the tutors, so that they can observe and monitor progress. Tutors will also issue their own memoranda and instructions during the morning. Normally delegation chairs will be required to set the agenda for the afternoon plenary, whilst other team members will conduct cross delegation meetings to establish areas of agreement and discord. In addition tutors might ask delegations to write short press releases or deliver brief press conferences on a theme relevant to their negotiating strategy. Currently the day long simulation is assessed as a piece of group work, with the accuracy of each negotiating strategy, and the extent to which a delegation stays true to its agreed strategy being the core criteria applied. This approach is, however, potentially problematic, not least due to the scope for subjectivity, and has led tutors to consider alternative means of assessing student performance which shall be discussed below.

Reflections on our Experiences.

Role allocation is an important part of the pre-game phase of simulations. If students are to be challenged in their thinking, it is necessary to allocate to them a role which does not enable them to take their pre-conceptions or idealism to the negotiating table. Hence, the class's arch Eurosceptic is the prime candidate to be the Chancellor of Germany, and the Europhile becomes Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. This forces students to step outside the comfort of their pre-conceptions, and make a genuine attempt to learn and defend a fundamentally different viewpoint from their own. In so doing, students are given the opportunity to understand better the historical, political, economic and social factors which contribute to the value position a particular member state occupies. It should be noted that this is not an exercise in brainwashing, more an endeavour to help students appreciate why particular member states follow the courses of action, and defend the standpoints they do.

When allocating students to groups, it is important to take group dynamics into account. At De Montfort we never allow students to select with whom they wish to work, mainly because they would almost always opt to team up with their friends. Although this approach would not be without advantages, the purpose of the exercise is to bring together students with different learning styles and values. Whilst it can be frustrating for a highly organised individual to work with someone who is more laid back, and inclined to leave preparation until a later stage, the experience can have its merits. In the same way that students are confronted with and learn to respect counter opinions and agendas to their own, they can also come to appreciate that no one learning style is necessarily better than another. In this way, students are encouraged to adapt and share their own techniques to accommodate those of others, and reach agreements to create a mutually beneficial learning environment.

Team-based simulations are particularly effective because they add an additional layer of internal negotiation into the exercise, build valuable collaboration skills, and emphasise the role of consensus in politics and international relations (Wedig 2010: 551). Furthermore, team assignments, in which students work in groups, and take on individual roles, give

students the opportunity to specialise in particular issues, emphasise their strengths, and develop new ones.

There are, of course, disadvantages to team based assignments, especially if a group assessment is built into the process. As Wedig notes, some students might be tempted to “free ride” (2010: 551). This problem can be exacerbated by other group members’ reluctance to complain. The issue does arise, but is not insurmountable. At De Montfort, we have found that peer pressure can prevent students from not doing their share of the work. In post-simulation feedback students regularly cite the desire not to look foolish in front of their peers, or a reluctance not to let their team down as reasons for committing themselves fully to the task. In addition, the individual pre-simulation day assessments help ensure that students are rewarded for the work they actually do, rather than for that of others. Only occasionally have tutors had to intervene to resolve disputes amongst delegations, and in eight years of running simulations, only two students have failed to attend the simulation day due to circumstances in their control.

Receiving and reacting to student feedback is an essential component of successful simulations. Each time the exercise is run, procedures are altered and guidance is reworked to take into account how previous cohorts have evaluated their experiences, as well as the different dynamics across cohorts. The survey for 2012 (see Appendix I) established that students found the process an exciting, useful and relevant method for the practical application of the knowledge they had acquired during the module, but were frustrated by what they saw as the egoism and intransigence of other delegations which made agreement difficult or impossible. This brings us back to Sasley’s (2010) work on using simulations to support students learn why negotiations fail, and indeed, how to reflect upon their own failure to reach agreement. What became clear from the 2012 simulation was that an insufficient number of students had realised it would not be possible for them to resolve all the issues they had been tasked to discuss. This is the most important lesson which tutors have agreed to take forward when planning the 2013 simulation. Instead of assessing the process of the simulation day, students will produce a post-simulation reflective piece in which, amongst others, they are required to consider why the class failed to reach agreements in particular areas. It will be emphasised that students must not play the “blame game” here. Rather than complaining about a particular delegation’s refusal to cooperate, they must acknowledge why that delegation was unable to agree to certain proposals, taking into account the economic and political pressures that member state or institution faces, as well as acknowledging historical and social factors determining a particular set of values. Another development for the 2013 event will be the incorporation of peer evaluation into the process. This will be within and across delegations. These changes should enable students to think more constructively about how the simulation has developed and tested their knowledge and skills. The feedback from 2012 demonstrated that this will be a useful exercise for students, as they already acknowledge that the process develops their subject specialist and transferable skills in equal measure (see Appendix I).

Finally, it is worth commenting on the value of designing bespoke simulations rather than using a pre-written online version. This enables tutors to choose themes which are relevant and contemporary. There is also considerable merit in selecting an issue to which there has not yet been a resolution in the real world. The lack of an actual outcome means students feel less obliged to achieve that particular result. It also underpins the notion of providing a

safe environment in which students can experience failure. Students seem to prefer simulations on themes without a known outcome. One of their complaints about the simulation on the Cuban Missile Crisis for the final year module, *International Security*, is that they are guided somewhat artificially towards the known outcome. This, they feel, impedes their creativity and negotiation. Indeed, one of the Soviet delegates for 2012 admitted that he would have loved to unleash nuclear Armageddon, but was aware he might lose marks for lack of realism.

To conclude, simulations offer students the opportunity to develop, apply and test the subject knowledge they have acquired during a module in a more practical and meaningful way than some more conventional approaches to supporting and assessing their learning. Simulations facilitate the acquisition of deep, specialist and long-lasting knowledge. They encourage students to be less strategic about their learning, and force them to confront viewpoints with which they disagree or find unpalatable. The process also helps students understand the complex nature of political negotiation and decision-making by requiring them to engage in internal and cross-delegation collaborations. Also, simulations facilitate failure in a way which does not impede a student's progress. On the contrary, sound reflection on why negotiations failed to achieve consensus, can play a crucial developmental role in a student's awareness of his/her own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of international organisations such as the EU.

Simulations are complex and time consuming to organise. Group-based assessments are often beset by complications, especially if not all participants are taking their equal share of the workload. They are also difficult to assess because delegations spend a lot of their pre-event time discussing their strategies away from the control of the tutors. Even with regular progress updates, it can be difficult for tutors to keep track of exactly who has done what. Nevertheless, students need to work collaboratively on projects to better understand and respect the different learning styles they practise and values they represent. The assessment issue can be overcome with individual interim assignments and a final reflective piece which comments on group and personal performance.

Experience at De Montfort University suggests that students find simulations richly rewarding, engaging and, most of all fun. Students generally perform better in such assignments than conventional unseen examinations. This inevitably has led to the charge that such practices are easier and less rigorous. Evidence contradicts this suggestion, however. At De Montfort students devote at least as much, if not more time, to preparing for such assignments than examinations, and perform better because they are more motivated and enthusiastic. Their feedback states that this is because simulations give them the opportunity to apply and demonstrate their subject understanding in a context which has meaning and relevance to their post-University ambitions. At a time when graduate employability is being placed at the heart of degree programmes in the United Kingdom, such emphasis on the applicability of scholarship cannot be understated.

Appendix I

Simulation Exercise Questionnaire.

The 2012 simulation received twenty two responses to the questionnaire.

1. What did you enjoy most about the simulation exercise and its preparation?

Students enjoyed the practical nature of the assignment: “It was like I was preparing for an EU summit”. They also commented on the opportunity to gain a thorough knowledge of an EU member state or institution. They also enjoyed debating and formulating strategies.

2. What did you find least enjoyable about the simulation and its preparation?

There was a strong sense that other delegations were egotistical and unrealistic in their proposals. Some students complained that other delegations failed to make their policies clear. Others felt they struggled to contain strong personalities within their and in other delegations.

3. Which skills has the simulation tested and developed the most? Tick the **four** which are most relevant to **your** experience of the process?
 - a. Communication (speaking); **11 responses**
 - b. Communication (listening); **8 responses**
 - c. Working as part of a team towards a shared objective; **13 responses**
 - d. Time management and planning; **4 responses**
 - e. Negotiation; **12 responses**
 - f. Compromise; **5 responses**
 - g. Critical evaluation and analytical ability; **4 responses**
 - h. Deep knowledge of a key area of EU activity; **12 responses**
 - i. Understanding of the key impact a key area of EU activity has upon (a) particular member state(s); **8 responses**

4. Which of the above skills do you feel the exercise developed least for you, why was this?

Not all students answered this question.

Communication (speaking); **5 responses citing hectic nature of negotiations, difficulty in expressing views because some were talking over others, and lack of time.**

Compromise; **4 responses citing lack of willingness of other groups to compromise.**

Deep knowledge of a key area of EU activity; **3 responses although no reasons why were offered.**

Negotiation; **3 responses citing egoism and lack of realism in some delegations.**

Time management and planning; **2 responses, 1 stated that skills were already developed, the other suggested they weren't necessary!**

Understanding the impact of a key area of EU activity on particular state(s); **1 response from a student representing an institution rather than member state.**

Working as part of a team; **1 response from student who felt s/he already did that a lot.**

5. How extensively did you use the Blackboard interface in preparation for the simulation? What did you use it for?

7 students indicated that they used Blackboard regularly.

6. If you rarely or never used Blackboard other than posted assignments, did you use the Facebook group page instead?

Only 1 student did not sign up to the Facebook group.

7. How could the assessment have been developed to enhance its impact on your learning?

The most frequent response (5 students) was to extend the length of the simulation event itself across at least 2 days. Other suggestions were for some delegations to be more realistic in their proposals, and stricter rule enforcement by tutors to ensure all delegations have sufficient time to present their proposals properly.

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