

Giving Up Control in the Classroom: Having Students Create and Carry Out Simulations in IR Courses

Elizabeth Frombgen, *Hastings College*

David Babalola, *Hastings College*

Aaron Beye, *Hastings College*

Stacey Boyce, *Hastings College*

Toby Flint, *Hastings College*

Lucia Mancini, *Hastings College*

Katie Van Eaton, *Hastings College*

ABSTRACT How can we make international relations real and meaningful for undergraduates? Because of my own frustration with this challenge, I tried a new way of teaching international relations. During the fall 2009 semester, the final exam for an upper-division course required the students to create and conduct a simulation to teach other students about international political institutions. I willingly gave up control of my classroom to the students!

During the fall 2009 semester, I embarked on a new way of teaching international relations: the final exam for the course required the students to create and conduct a simulation to teach other students about international political institutions. I willingly gave students control of my classroom!

PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

Given the distant nature of international relations, making it come alive for students is an essential goal. Reading previous *PS* articles on the use of simulations, such as Ambrosio (2004); Dougherty (2003), Franke (2006), Galatas (2006), Jefferson (1999), Newmann and Twigg (2000), Shellman (2001), Smith and Boyer (1996), and Switky (2004), convinced me to give up control.

THE CLASS/SETTING

The simulation was part of an upper-division course on international political institutions. This course is an elective in the

political science major and tends to attract strong, hard-working students interested in international and comparative politics. Because this course is an elective, and not a requirement, I can use a variety of pedagogical approaches. Six students were enrolled in the course: two exchange students (one from Germany and one from Italy), two Hastings College juniors, and two Hastings College sophomores. These upper-level students conducted the simulation in my 200-level survey course on world politics. The world politics course is required for the political science major, and 17 students were enrolled in the course. The class was made up mostly of sophomore political science majors, a few junior political science majors, and students in other related majors. Three students were in both courses. This simulation took place during the final 50-minute class period of the semester. I chose this timing because of the limited time available in each course.

THE SIMULATION ASSIGNMENT

See figure 1 for the outline for the assignment that I gave to the upper-level students. As can be seen, the upper-level students were given a significant amount of freedom to construct the simulation, as long as they focused on the learning objectives for the lower-level students. Decisions, such as whether to use real or made-up countries and selecting and assigning roles to each other and the lower-level students, were intentionally left to the upper-level students' discretion. I trusted these upper-level students to carry out this simulation with my role only to facilitate it. The lower-level students were given their assignments and information packets during the class preceding the simulation. In addition, the upper-level students were required to create the necessary documents used by the lower-level students such as the fictional historical background, resources at the actors'

Elizabeth Frombgen is the associate vice president for academic affairs and professor of political science at Hastings College. She can be reached at lfrombgen@hastings.edu.

David Babalola was a student in the department of political science at Hastings College in the fall of 2009.

Aaron Beye was a student in the department of political science at Hastings College in the fall of 2009.

Stacey Boyce was a student in the department of political science at Hastings College in the fall of 2009.

Toby Flint was a student in the department of political science at Hastings College in the fall of 2009.

Lucia Mancini was a student in the department of political science at Hastings College in the fall of 2009.

Katie Van Eaton was a student in the department of political science at Hastings College in the fall of 2009.

Figure 1

Parameters:

- a. You will conduct the simulation at 3pm on Dec. 11 in DC 10. You will have 50 minutes to conduct the simulation. Our class is cancelled that day so that you may prepare for the simulation.
- b. The simulation must have the following components:
 - i. Clear instructions to participants
 - ii. Any props
 - iii. Clearly articulated roles for participants
 - iv. Clearly identified pedagogical goal(s)
 - v. Debriefing for simulation participants and discussion of pedagogical goal(s).
- c. You are free to do anything in the simulation that is class appropriate.
- d. You must turn in a document outlining the following:
 - i. Introduction
 - ii. Objectives for individuals and teams
 - iii. Instructions
 - iv. Any essential historical or contextual background
 - v. Basic components:
 1. Resources
 2. Geography
 3. Trade
 4. Conflict
 5. Etc.
 - vi. Supporting documents:
 1. Maps
 2. Trade agreements
 3. Intelligence reports
 4. Etc.
 - vii. Pedagogical goal(s)
 - viii. Lesson plan
 - ix. Reflection after conducting the simulation
 - x. Bibliography/List of references
 - xi. Confidential Colleague Evaluation—handed in to me in a sealed envelope during the final exam period.

disposal—for example, planetary representatives—any conflicts with other actors, and any supporting documents such as trade agreements and intelligence.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS: THE ROLES OF THE UPPER-LEVEL STUDENTS

- Moderator—one of the upper-level students
- Madame Celestial Spokeswoman—one of the upper-level students
- Media Personnel—two of the upper-level students
- Sir Assistant Celestial Spokesman—one of the upper-level students
- Representative from Dranzer Dragoon Prime—one of the upper-level students

THE SIMULATION

The upper-level students titled the simulation “The Gathering” the goal of which was to mediate conflict between actors in the galaxy. The upper-level students assumed that there was an existing organization at the galactic level similar to the United Nations

that attempts to mediate conflict among participants. They chose to use galactic terms that they created instead of states in the world to eliminate preconceived notions about existing states. They did, however, base their planets—Zarapool, Ros, Kinstapa, Vulakota, Nricktshia, Oiquay, Evol Enigami—on the following states: Venezuela, Pakistan, the Ivory Coast, China, Canada, France, and the United States. (These states were chosen because we had conducted a simulation earlier in the semester using them.)

Because the upper-level students were given significant freedom to allocate duties among each other, they chose to have each member create a “planetary profile.” They narrowed each planet’s interests into three categories: military, trade, and human rights. They decided what the main goal should be for each planet and the preference/importance order for each planet. Each lower-level student was randomly assigned a role and given a personalized letter outlining their planet’s goal and their responsibilities during the simulation, as well as a fact sheet outlining the planet’s name, size, population, government type (e.g., democratic, authoritarian, etc.), how many players (i.e., how many lower-level students would be on the student’s planetary team) in the simulation, and what kinds of players (leaders—government or rebel—or common citizens), problems facing the planet, advantages the planet has in the intergalactic system, resources the planet has at its disposal, and a list of the planet’s interests in order of importance to the planet.

The goals of the lower-level students during the simulation were, first, to use this organization (The Gathering) to pursue their planet’s interests, and, second, to achieve a five/seven majority vote within this organization in the 40 minutes. As laid out in the instructions created by the upper-level students, “If you succeed in winning a 5/7 majority on any issue, the organization will be deemed a success, and the session will be closed victoriously. However, each group has been given a set of interests which are crucial to their planet’s well-being. Above all, you must protect your homeworld’s interests and use this institution to the greatest possible advantage for your fellow citizens.”

During the simulation, “headlines” outlining what was happening in the “galaxy” would appear on the screen. These headlines were created by two of the upper-level students who were assigned to be the media personnel. Each planet’s representatives—lower-level students—were instructed to respond to these headlines based on the interests and resources of the planet. The upper-level students laid out a specific procedure for the lower-level students to follow:

- After a headline appears, you have one minute to discuss it with your fellow citizens.
- Your representative then will go to The Gathering table and argue your planet’s position as he or she sees fit. You have four minutes to discuss.
- Madame Celestial Spokeswoman proposes a course of action for The Gathering based on what the representatives have argued. She calls for a vote.
- The representatives vote yes or no on her policy. Hopefully there is a five/seven majority, which will close the simulation. You win!

If a majority vote in favor of the proposal fails, the representatives returned to their respective tables and another “headline” would be posted. This would go on until the 40-minute time elapsed.

In addition to The Gathering discussion, there was an option for one five-minute emergency session. Lower-level students would

petition the representative from Dranzer Dragoon Prime (the hegemon) to call a session. Drazer Dragoon Prime would decide if there was enough support among the planets to call this session. Also, according to the instructions, “Only the six representatives from your planets are allowed at The Gathering table when they’re discussing their policies. However, during this time, common citizens from the planets can go anywhere else in the room and talk to anyone else they want.” This element to the game allowed for negotiations to play out in a more real-world way with common citizens forming alliances with other common citizens or trying to overthrow their government (particularly in nondemocratic planets).

Lastly, “special proceedings” were outlined by the upper-level students:

Because Dranzer Dragoon Prime is not a planetary group, but only a representative, special action that the planet takes will appear on the overhead screen. You will be able to react to the special action then.

It is possible to be eliminated from the game by death, exile, destruction of your planet, and so on. Players—lower-level students—who are eliminated will sit at a table on the far side of the room and can no longer participate. Lower-level students who are eliminated will still be able to share their thoughts, however, during the debriefing.

It is possible to rebel against your leader. The Moderator will decide whether a rebellion is powerful enough to succeed.

- If there are two citizens and one leader, you may try an internal uprising.
- If there are only two players in your groups, the common citizen may need to get outside support from another planet to have an uprising.
- Get creative!

It is possible to declare war against another planet. The Moderator will gauge the military potential of the two planets involved and decide the outcome.

The headlines may hand you natural disasters that could threaten your planet. You will have to come up with a solution, most likely by petitioning for aid from The Gathering, Dranzer Dragoon Prime, or another planet.

The sky is the limit as far as the actions you can take during the simulation. Anything plausible that you can think of (short of harming yourself or others) is an option. Good luck!

BACK TO THE ASSIGNMENT

The upper-level students were required to submit a portfolio with the outline of their simulation; the instructions to participants; the goals of the simulation; the outline of the simulation procedures; a list of roles and who would play each role; a map of the galaxy; the background information such as historical grievances and alliances, natural resources, geography, trade agreements, and conflicts both internal and external; the media headlines they used (aptly titled the “Gathering Gazette”); each member’s reflections on the simulation; and a confidential evaluation of each member’s contribution to the group.

RESULTS

The simulation took 50 minutes. The simulation started off slowly but when the lower-level students got more involved, it was very

successful. From the feedback I received from both sets of students, it was clear that—as expected—the simulation required a significant amount of work, but both the upper- and lower-level students felt they had a great experience and they learned a great deal about the theme. No one died or was exiled. One planet’s citizen (a lower-level student) attempted to overthrow a dictatorial leader with the help of another planet.

One potential design flaw of the simulation is the five/seven majority vote on any proposal at The Gathering table because the game could have ended early in the 40-minute time-frame. In fact, if Madame Celestial Spokeswoman had certified the majority vote at the beginning of the simulation, the simulation could have ended just a few minutes into the class period. Given that the upper-level students were trying to illustrate the complexity of interplanetary/intragalactic (international) relations, this would have negatively affected the pedagogical effectiveness of the simulation. The upper-level students may have overestimated the difficulty of achieving a five/seven majority vote or underestimated the time needed for the lower-level students to get into character. One solution to this problem would be to require a unanimous vote in favor of the proposal presented by the Madame Celestial Spokeswoman. Alternatively, the simulation could be designed so that it runs without the planetary representatives meeting at The Gathering table until later in the simulation thus allowing more to “happen” in the “galaxy” and for the students to react to it, and also to get into character before coming to The Gathering table to discuss and vote on a proposal. More structured free activity/behavior of individual lower-level students could create interesting and important alliances that show up at The Gathering table in unexpected ways.

From reading all their reflections on this activity, the upper-level students indicate that the assignment was a useful one. One comment that emerged more than once was the inability to predict the participants’ (lower-level students’) behavior during the simulation, which is important for students to recognize. That is, they could not plan everything, and the unique experience was specific to the individuals and their personalities, enthusiasm, and attitudes in the room at that moment. Within the group of upper-level students, there also seemed to be some unpredictability. The media personnel’s (two upper-level students) role was meant to be an outsider and not engaged directly in the simulation. It was supposed to take cues from the Moderator, but those headlines not related to what was currently going on the simulation, so that the simulation would not end after a few minutes. As expected the simulation took on a life of its own. In addition, the upper-level student reflections suggest that better preparation and design on their part would positively affect the future simulations. Here are quotes from two upper-level students

If we had to do the simulation again, the one thing I would change would be to make sure Madame/Mister Celestial Spokeswoman/person had a clearer idea of how to propose resolutions and what defined a consensus. I felt it frustrated some of the players that even if they all voted in a certain way, Madame Celestial Spokeswoman still declared that it wasn’t a consensus. We would have to change the rules to make this more efficient if we did it again; getting five of the seven people at the table to vote the same way turned out to be easier than we expected.

I think we needed more people to tell the media what was happening; XXXXX was busy trying to figure that out on the floor, and

XXXXX was working with the planets, but there was too much going on for us to keep track of everything. It would have been nice to let them run the simulation more through their actions being used by the media instead of the media dictating actions . . . But it seemed to actually start to work once they stopped being afraid to talk and really got into the simulation; they probably could have gone on for hours.

This last quote from an upper-level student sums up nicely: "As a pedagogical tool, The Gathering Simulation could certainly use refinement; my peers have pointed out multiple design flaws and ways in which it could have been better. I agree, but also submit that we were rookies at this business and created a successful simulation despite the challenges posed."

If I use this assignment again, I would provide the upper-level students with more structure and guidelines. Also because I underestimated the amount of work this sort of assignment requires, I would consider dropping one other assignment to better facilitate the construction of the simulation. I checked with the class periodically prior to the simulation about their progress, but did not require a dress rehearsal or a rough draft of the instructions for fear of stifling the students' creativity and ownership of the assignment. This process may make the simulation run more smoothly and predictable, but it may lose the excitement and unpredictability of the real world (which is precisely one of the pedagogical goals of using this kind of assignment). This partic-

ular group of students was very strong and would handle the required autonomy for this assignment, freely challenge each other, and enjoy the process (especially making the crazy hats and costumes). ■

REFERENCES

- Ambrosio, Thomas. 2004. "Bringing Ethnic Conflict into the Classroom: A Student-Centered Simulation of Multiethnic Politics." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37 (2): 285–89.
- Dougherty, Beth K. 2003. "Byzantine Politics: Using Simulations to Make Sense of the Middle East." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36 (2): 239–44.
- Franke, Volker. 2006. "The Meyerhoff Incident: Simulating Bioterrorism in National Security Class." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (1): 153–56.
- Galatas, Steven E. 2006. "A Simulation of the Council of the European Union: Assessment of the Impact on Student Learning." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (1): 147–51.
- Jefferson, Kurt W. 1999. "The Bosnian War Crimes Trial Simulation: Teachings Students about the Fuzziness of World Politics and International Law." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32 (3): 588–92.
- Newmann, William W., and Judyth L. Twigg. 2000. "Active Engagement of the Intro IR Student: A Simulation Approach." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33 (4): 835–42.
- 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): 690–94.
- Switky, Bob. 2004. "Party Strategies and Electoral Systems: Simulating Coalition Governments." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 37 (1): 101–04.

APPENDIX 1: Welcome Statement

Welcome to the first Galactic Summit, Zarapool, 2230. The six groups before you form the representation for the first six signatory planets of the Galactic Pledge in the galaxy. It is up to you to ensure the success of this monumental first interplanetary Gathering. The fate of interplanetary peace and security rests in your hands.

Allow me to introduce the mediators in their Gathering and their functions.

Presiding: Madame Celestial Spokeswoman, Sir Assistant Celestial Spokesman, Moderator, Media Personnel

Your goals are, first, to use this organization to pursue your planet's interests, and second, to achieve a 5/7 majority vote within this organization in the next 40 minutes. If you succeed in winning a 5/7 majority on any issue, the organization will be deemed a success, and the session will be closed victoriously.

However, each group has been given a set of interests that are crucial to their planet's well-being. Above all, you must protect your home-world's interests and use this institution to the greatest possible advantage for your fellow citizens.

Each of you has also been given a private briefing letter instructing you in how best to serve your people. Do not show it to anyone, and follow it truly.

A series of headlines outlining what's happening in the galaxy will appear onscreen every five minutes. You will then receive one minute to discuss your planet's position on the issues with your comrades at your home tables. Then your representative will come to The Gathering table in the center of the room. Your representative, the other five planetary representatives, and Madame Celestial Spokeswoman and her assistant will propose and argue a course of action for The Gathering for four minutes. At the end of the four minutes, Madame will outline the policy The Gathering will adopt and will call a galactically sanctioned response to the issue.

The Gathering will also be able to hold one emergency session of 5 minutes. Representatives may petition Madame Celestial Spokeswoman to call this session, and the honorable lady will decide when it's needed.

Please note that only representatives are allowed at The Gathering table. Representatives may or may not come to The Gathering during the four-minute forums. Also during the four-minute forums, citizens from each planet may go anywhere in the room except The Gathering.

Now, the first meeting of The Gathering will convene. Good luck, and remember, the fate of your planet is in your hands.

APPENDIX 2: Sample Planetary Profile

Planet's Name: Nricktshia (n rik chee uh)

Size: 6th largest (2nd smallest)

Population: 6th largest (2nd smallest)

Government Type: Authoritarian

Players: 1 leader, 1 citizen

Problems: Regional tensions with neighboring planets are very high. Nricktshia's preferred way of dealing with perceived aggressor planets is to build up its military, but it must import weaponry, since most planetary industry is concentrated on mining, Light-Stone. Since the planet is so export-oriented, most of their mined resources leave the country and do not benefit the people. Partly as a consequence of that, and because nearly 100% of revenues go to the state, there is widespread poverty on Nricktshia.

Advantages: Nricktshia is a heavy exporter, supplying much Light-Stone to the galaxy. Many planets depend on the Light-Stone and similar exports coming from Nricktshia. The planet has a charismatic and popular (even if heavy-handed) leader who can rally his people to any cause he promotes, domestic or interplanetary.

Resources: Vast amounts of Light-Stone (the common galactic energy sources, which is depletable and continually needs to be supplied to those planets who do not have enough), a moderately sized military force, and a medium-sized population for military service and hard labor in the Light-Stone mines.

Planet's Interests (in order of importance):

1. Trade—Nricktshia's primary planetary interest is acquiring good trade deals.
2. Military—Pursuit of a technologically modern standing army for defense.

APPENDIX 3: Sample Personalized Letter to Participants From the Office of President, Sifa Lia Radrazi

Dear Citizens,

Our primary goal is this: Protect the sovereignty of Kinstapa by eradicating terrorism.

We are in grave danger of being overtaken. As you know, terrorist insurgencies threaten the very existence of our planet. Our land has been ravaged by war and many of our citizens are left in deplorable conditions. Very few have the clean drinking water, food, and shelter they need. There is little we, the government, have been able to do to eradicate this problem because our attention is focused on maintaining sovereignty.

At The Gathering it is your duty to obtain as much support as possible to eradicate the terrorism threatening our planet. Your military is of the utmost importance and you must pursue military interests with your primary goal in mind. Trade is of secondary importance and you must only pursue as it benefits the planet. Finally, of least importance, are human rights. It is important to obtain as much aid as possible as it pertains to your main goals. If this happens to include the furthering of human rights, fine, but this is not a priority.

As a democracy, you three must choose a role to play and based on that choice you will be given individual goals and priorities. Choose one person to represent the planet at The Gathering, This will be player one. Players two and three will act as citizens who will provide input to the representative. After you have agreed on who will play what role, please read the enclosed player description.

Important Note: Although only one of you will be representing Kinstapa at The Gathering, you three must vote on whatever policies or issues the representative will take to the table. In order to take a policy or issues there must be a 2/3 majority in favor of said policy/issue.

I look forward to hearing back about the results of The Gathering. Good luck and represent Kinstapa well!

Your President,

Sifa Lia Radrazi