

Learning by Doing

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, NOV 26 2013

I spent the end of last week and the weekend in Bucharest, Romania where I had been invited to lecture about the POL 210 class I give at CEFAM. In particular, and in tune with the conference theme of collective action, I would talk about the IR simulation I manage in the course and the lessons I have drawn from this simulation.

Preparing for this lecture was a useful process as I reflected, in one sense for the first time, on how the simulation I designed for the students might actually provide some lessons for those engaged in international negotiations or those seeking collective solutions to difficult problems. On that note, after reviewing the various times I had mounted this simulation three things stood out as potential lessons for effecting collective action at the international level.

First, I argued that strict limits had to be placed on the negotiations in terms of time. The longer a negotiation is allowed to continue or the mere existence of the possibility of another meeting would mean solutions were less likely to be sought. I took as my example the continuing climate change treaty saga: as long as the negotiators know they will have another meeting in a year or two, there is no need to find a real solution – hence they don't.

Second, I suggested that negotiations involve the least number of people possible, with small teams being far more effective at finding collective solutions than large teams. I again turned to the issue of climate change as my example: when states send delegations of dozens or even hundreds of people to an international conference or, as we recently saw, when of 10,000 people in attendance less than 200 are national ministerial level delegates, little is likely to emerge as consensus is very difficult to achieve.

Third, I maintained that valuable contributions to negotiations can be made through the valorisation of informal negotiations. These second and third tracks of diplomacy can see ideas tested, thought balloons floated and ideas exchanged in non-formal settings until creative and innovative solutions emerge. Here I pointed to examples from history, both in negotiations around the historical Venezuelan crisis and in the lead up to the more contemporary Iraq War.

Following the lecture I was happy to have positive feedback from other professors and research students alike, and I very quickly realised that the use of simulations and what we might call 'practical' learning in political science and international relations is rarer than I imagined. I had been fortunate enough as an undergraduate to enjoy a simulation with Dr Katharine Vadura, then of the University of South Australia, and I have long been a fan of this practical side of the classroom. Even as a theorist of international relations and someone used to losing themselves in the theoretical literature, I can see the great added value that getting students to 'play politics' can have on their understanding of the material they are studying. Yet it seems, at least on the anecdotal feedback I got from conference attendees, that this approach is less common.

It's a shame, I think, as I not only see advantages for students in international politics but also, here at the CEFAM business school, for students in other domains. The finance majors here engage in transatlantic investment challenges, pitting their wits against the ups and downs of the stock market in real time games. Management students participate in inter-cultural communication simulations that demonstrate exactly how the situations they shake their heads at in the textbook so easily emerge in real life. CEFAM's art history class gets students to complete a semester long art journal, helping them to reflect on what they are learning while demonstrating their creativity, too.

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In my opinion, these practical activities and the notion of learning by doing is an incredibly rich and useful pedagogical approach. It not only delivers significant benefits for the students we teach but, as I demonstrated in my lecture in Bucharest, it can be a starting point for delivering significant learning about the real world we are modelling, too.

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Read more from Dylan Kissane in his e-IR blog [Political Business](#)

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