Simulating Statecraft

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I am a big fan of students learning by doing.

A couple of years ago I developed an in-class simulation for the international politics course I teach at CEFAM that asked students to take on the role of a state in a period of crisis. Plunged into three days of debate, discussion, negotiation, and – hopefully – resolution of the crisis, the simulation gave students what I hoped was a taste for the business of politics. I wanted them to apply the theories they had learned in class, take advantage of their business training in negotiation and direct it towards political ends, and to see that international politics is not just something that happens but rather something that is constructed and built by people just like them.

I enjoyed creating and, semester by semester, adapting the simulation in the classroom. From time to time I would throw a deliberate spanner in the works, so to speak, with a push from me one way or another either prolonging negotiations or speeding negotiations up, as the constraints of the timeline demanded. It was great fun to observe, excellent as a source of learnable moments for the students, and scheduling it for the last part of the semester allowed students the chance to build up to a great end-of-term result.

It proved popular outside of the confines of the school, too. I was invited to speak about the experiences that I had with the simulation at a conference in Romania in late 2013 and, in early 2014, I decamped for Thessaloniki, Greece, to run the simulation live at another conference. As with the politics class here in France, the participants enjoyed the simulation and appreciated the opportunity to be political actors, not only political students.

However, a change is in the air.

As I move through the process of designing the final syllabus for my 'Issues in International Politics' class for the Spring semester, I have realised that while there are many things I like about the simulation, there are others that I have grown to dislike, too.

For one, while the students and I both appreciate the timing of the simulation and its place at the end of the semester, it also means that the students have only a short window in which to be extra-active learners in practical politics. Spreading the simulation out over a number of classes might help solve this problem, but I then run the risk of asking too much of students before they have actually learnt enough to take full advantage of the complex simulation I designed.

For another, while I have developed various means to assess the students in the simulation, I haven't been able to escape the nagging thought that a practical activity demands a large measure of participation and that participation, in turn, is sometimes hard to objectively assess. I might judge a student's participation at a B level (say, 85/100) and another student as a B- (82/100). But how do I explain where the three points between the two students was lost? I've tried rubrics and I have tried asking for more written work during the negotiation stage, but the former seems to be a little too rigid for this activity, and the latter detracts from some of the interesting and very entertaining verbal clashes that the students often engage in.

So what to do? I want to keep a simulation but I want to avoid having it only at the end of the semester or relying

heavily on what might be dismissed by some students as a subjective measure of participation.

The answer, I hope, can be found in an online simulation called Statecraft.

Designed by Jonathan Keller of James Madison University in Virginia, Statecraft is an online, semester long simulation of international politics. It offers students the opportunity to represent a state – the students can choose to be democratic, autocratic, or monarchical – and engage with other teams of students in an international world that is plagued with constant tension, the odd crisis, and plenty of opportunities for the students to apply what they have learnt in class.

It starts out slowly and the first decisions in the game made by the student teams can be put off for the first weeks of the semester. I like this because it gives students a chance to get through some basic material in class and become familiar with the simulation platform. At each round of decision making the students need to submit a justification (short or long) of the reasons for their choices – I like this, too, as it gives me a basis for assessing the students continuously and picking up on low participation rates early in the semester before they become problematic.

Finally, while I think there is a lot to be said for the interactions that students have in class and for all of those interesting and entertaining negotiations I have witnessed in the last few years, there are benefits to pushing the simulation online, too. The ability of the students to work on the simulation remotely, via networks of computers, and using internet communication technologies is a net benefit to them in the final semesters before they head into a rapidly changing world of work.

Hence, come the Spring, I will be dropping my own simulation and testing out Statecraft. I'm hoping it lives up to its considerable promise and that the students find it a useful way to learn about the practical side of politics that so often escapes them in a course packed with theory, but which remains – for all of us passionate about the field – so incredibly and eternally fascinating.

About the author:

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