Signature Pedagogies and the Use of Violence in In-Class Simulations

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/05/16/signature-pedagogies-and-the-use-of-violence-in-in-class-simulations/

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The field of political science, but particularly the field of International Relations, is one of the few academic disciplines in which professors can openly discuss, in the classroom, the mass slaughter of human beings in what may come across as amoral terms. Much of this, of course, derives from the questions that drive our research. When studying why wars start or escalate, the researcher may be driven to the subject for normative purposes, but the requirements of supposedly impartial research have in many ways sanitized our variables—deaths become data, not bodies. While this may be necessary for research purposes, when translated back into the policy world, it may have the unintended consequence of minimizing, in a policymaker's mind, the full range of consequences that accompany decisions to use violence. This creates critical ethical problems if one of our purposes as teachers is to, in fact, train the next generation of foreign policy decision-makers. In short, how do we teach and train students who may be entering a profession in which they could ultimately be called on to make critical choices on the use of violence? This chapter engages this question by questioning how we use in-class simulations—which often have a violent component—as a method for developing a signature pedagogy for the discipline.

A signature pedagogy encompasses the ways that we train the next generation of professionals in our field to think, perform, and act with integrity (Shulman 2005). One important difference between the field of International Relations and many of the fields highlighted by Shulman (i.e., law, medicine, engineering, etc.) is the that total number of people who are ever put into positions of leadership with the authority to make foreign policy decisions for a state is very small. Therefore, it becomes very unlikely that someone sitting in our classroom will one day be personally making those decisions—although they may be a higher likelihood that they would be responsible for crafting the analysis and justifications that could assist in making those decisions. This assumed distance of the learner from the possible future act may mean that, at times, instructors do not feel the burden of developing a signature pedagogy around questions of initiating war and violence—these are decisions made by others, we just study them.[1]

This distance is amplified due to the fact that the field of conflict studies has largely relied on the collection of secondary event data to construct datasets that then are used to statistically test different hypotheses.[2] This reliance on event data and large-n studies to understand war, along with the, thankfully, speculative underpinnings of nuclear deterrence theory, meant that how we have tended to talk about war in our classrooms has either been reduced to an easily observable variable (e.g., 1,000 battle-deaths) or presented in highly abstract terms (e.g., the consequences of deterrence built on mutually assured destruction failing). Ironically, these approaches to the study of war also meant that an area of research specifically concerned with the harm and death of human beings could largely avoid falling under the human subject requirements of Institutional Review Boards (IRB). This distancing of the human-made choice to use violence in international politics from the human bodies that absorb that violence raises serious questions about how we teach these topics, particularly when choosing to construct in-class simulations designed to mimic decision-making processes.

Games and in-class simulations are one mechanism to meet the goals of a signature pedagogy within our teaching. A

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well-designed simulation can expose students to the complex decision-making processes that foreign policy actors may face in their jobs. Games and in-class simulations have shown themselves to be effective ways for teaching and reinforcing course content (Asal and Blake 2006; Giovanello, Kirk, and Kromer 2013). These activities engage students in ways that traditional forms of teaching are frequently unable to and can help highlight each of the core elements of a signature pedagogy—how to think, perform, and act with integrity. However, what may be overlooked when designing and implementing in-class simulations is the way in which violent assumptions are often embedded within them and how these might undermine training our students in how to act with integrity. This issue emerges in two ways: first, through the effects that violent decision-making has on those participating in the simulations; and, second, through the built-in assumptions of classroom simulations that can make the use of violence seem like a forced choice.

All in-class simulations are designed to be played by humans. Consequently, they typically mirror the type of research that would require IRB approval, but because they do not fit under the federal definition of research (46.102.l), they would not be required to go through an IRB process. Just as with human subject lab experiments, most simulations introduce a scenario, a treatment, and then a set of choices that the students have to make based on their evaluation of the situation. These decisions are often interdependent with other students' decision-making within the class—students who, not inconsequentially, may have to interact with each other in other contexts throughout their day. Research has shown that participating in these simulations create emotional affect for these students, and that these affects effect how students both play the game and view the world (Zappile, Beers, and Raymond 2016; McDermott et al. 2007). A simulation that forces students to make choices around the use of violence may have unintended emotional consequences from feeling uneasy about instigating said violence against another student or feeling unfairly targeted by students who are instigating violence against them. A study by McDermott, Johnson, Cowden and Rosen (2007) showed that men were much more likely to use aggressive actions than women. A game that rewards aggression may have unintended consequences for what already are difficult classroom gender dynamics. As educators, we should think deeply about the long-term implications that our pedagogical approaches have on our students' thinking about the world and to consciously work to design simulations that teach the basic principles of the class while avoiding unnecessary harm to our students and the potential of harm to others.

Games, it should be recognized, are a central component of most students' lives and many games—both video and board—have the players engage in a continuous stream of violent decision-making. That said, these games are almost universally understood to be for entertainment and are not see to reflect the player's daily reality. Classroom simulations, on the other hand, are not designed to entertain, but to provide students with the opportunity to engage and learn about actual decision-making processes. The ultimate goal of these simulations is that the experience or the lessons learned from that experience can then be used in real world scenarios. As teachers of international politics, we should, despite its low probability, always assume that the students in our classroom may, one day in the future, be in a position to make the very types of decisions that are being role played in our simulations. This obligates us to take the design of these simulations seriously and consider carefully what the possible real-world consequences of the game, if drawn out to its obvious conclusions, could be.

As with data collection on war, sanitization—by which I mean the presentation of concepts that have been stripped from the trauma one experiences when said concept is being performed on you—can be a useful, but consequential aspect of simulation design. One common type of simulation follows the parameters found in rational choice models in which players are asked to coerce or accommodate an opponent who also has an identical or similar set of choices. These simulations will typically give the option for one of the players to opt out of the game and declare war. Who "wins" the war will sometimes be determined by a coin-flip or some other method of randomization (see for example Kraus et al. 2008). These are very straightforward simulations and they do a good job helping the student work through some of the game theoretic logic of rational choice models. Because the choice environment is simple, the simulation is easy to explain and play. However, just as with rational choice models they run the risk of minimizing the layered and complex costs of war.

First, wars are rarely "won," at least not in the definitive way captured by a coin toss. A coin toss is predictable in that one can calculate the outcome and compare it to the other available options. A player versed with very basic knowledge of expected utility theory can easily do the math to determine whether they should risk initiating a war. For

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those participants who are math-averse, they can still rely on a wide range of social-psychological heuristics to make somewhat predictable choices. In the real world, however, these choices to use force are riddled with both known and unknown risks as well as costs, and will often have long-term consequences far beyond the immediate coin-toss outcome. Underspecifying costs and risks within a simulation may have the unintended consequence of training students to under-determine the risks of war within real-world scenarios—a basic win the war, but lose the peace outcome. Of course, there is also the possibility of over-specifying costs and risks, but the very nature of the simplified odds found in most simulation designs make under-specification more likely.

The mechanics of any game are going to affect how the game is played, when and how the choice to use violence is made, and the range of possible outcomes. The field of International Relations is highly contested over the likelihood of conflict or cooperation. Many simulations can be used to demonstrate how certain sets of assumptions can lead to certain outcomes. A "state of nature" game, for example, is based on a very narrow premise about the condition of the world. This premise, of course, is highly contested, but without appropriate context a participant can leave the simulation believing that that is, in fact, how the world works. If the real world is not actually a "state of nature" game, but behavior is driven by the assumption that it is, there is a high likelihood for inefficient outcomes. The same can be said of Prisoner's Dilemma or Stag Hunt or any of the other simplistic scenarios we have concocted over time to make sense of a complex world.

Of course, a more realistic capturing of the dynamics of violent conflict means that we are asking participants to make choices for which they may not be adequately prepared, either on an emotional or maturity level. This problem is reflected in how roles are assigned and how participants respond to those roles. Psychological experiments have consistently shown how immediately participants take on the roles that are assigned to them. Often this role adaption will reflect the extremes of what the participant believes the role is. In the Stanford Prison Experiment, in which undergraduates were put in a basement and assigned the roles of prisoners and guards, participants reflected on how they took on the characteristics that they *thought* that role would have. Of course, it is highly unlikely that undergraduates had much real-world experience as either guards or prisoners, thus their performance in the simulation was more akin to familiar tropes than the actual day to day behavior of guards or prisoners (Carnahan and McFarland 2007; Texier 2019; Zimbardo 1973). The Milgram experiments, in which participants were asked to administer electric shocks to an actor who they believed to be a co-participant, also demonstrate the impact that forcing participants to behave in ways that they understand to be immoral can have (Milgram and Gudehus 1978). Films of the experiment as it was being conducted show high levels of stress on the participants as they comply with the administrator's orders. A simulation like the Wave at Cubberley High School in Palo Alto, California, in which a teacher created an in-group and out-group to demonstrate how easily they could be pulled into and adopt the behaviors of a pseudo-fascist organization, may also have had unintended psychological effects as participants were unwittingly forced to self-reflect about their conduct in the grossest of possible ways (Saari 2020). Even when guarding against these high-profile excesses, some of the same dynamics may play out in subtler, albeit similar ways.

Knowing the strong affect that situational determinants can have on participants, simulation designers should consider how role assignment shapes the simulation and the lessons that participants take away from it. One assumption that should underlie our thinking is that participants will gain sympathy for the roles that they are assigned—or at least will not fully question any underlying moral problems that the role might require. These issues may manifest themselves differently depending on whether the simulation is based on fictitious or real-life scenarios, but they are present in both types of designs. A second assumption is that a simulation that is specifically designed to garner hostility and competitive play between students could break those boundaries outside the classroom. This can be particularly amplified when gender or racial dynamics start driving how the game plays out.

When designing a simulation with a real-life scenario it is possible that some roles will be actors that have committed atrocities. How are the parameters around atrocity crimes handled? Do the game mechanics allow for atrocities and, if so, how are payouts weighed for these types of actions? If participants can choose to engage in atrocities, what is our moral obligation regarding consequences for these choices? If atrocities are not included within the choice set, meaning the role has been sanitized, how is this addressed? Similar questions can be raised for simulations that are based on a fictitious scenario modeled around real-world events. While such scenarios do provide for both more

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flexibility as well as constraints in what can be addressed, fictitious countries or groups cannot be studied and therefore cannot be understood outside the parameters of the simulation itself. Consequently, participants may be more inclined to adapt tropes in their role-playing approaches. If "Trope-playing" only reinforces preexisting stereotypes it is less likely to help the student develop a deeper understanding of the complex set of preferences and interests that underlie political decision-making.

These are complex questions that go to the roots or our moral obligations as instructors. Frankly, the vast majority of atrocities that have been committed throughout world history have gone unpunished. Many times, these atrocities have advanced the strategic objectives of those who have carried them out, meaning they cannot simply be made exogenous to these simulated worlds. Thus, we need to engage the deeper question of what pedagogical purpose the simulation has and what ultimate lessons may come out of playing the game. If the simulation does not go beyond "crime pays" or similar types of lessons, then should we be engaging students in these scenarios? Without this reflection the question of whether a simulation can serve as a tool for presenting a meaningful signature pedagogy comes into question.

The questions raised here serve as a starting point for a broader discussion on how we use games and simulations in the classroom. Its main call is to be more reflective about how we approach these activities and to more closely consider the short- and long-term impacts they may have on our students. This final section engages some steps we can take now to improve the environment in which we conduct these simulations that would more closely align with the development of a signature pedagogy for International Relations.

Think about how violence is used, who gets to use it, and against whom: Violence is a key component of International Relations, therefore, it is unrealistic to develop scenarios that eliminate the option for violence altogether. However, it may not be necessary for the students to take on that role or to be the ones who are targeted with violence itself. This role can be taken on by the instructor or it could embedded within the scenario. For example, in a simulation that occurs over multiple rounds, violent acts can provide the background for the negotiations that are taking place between players. The players themselves are not choosing violence or even having violence used against them directly, but are instead responding to "spoilers" who use violence to disrupt the negotiations. Importantly, one should ask what the violent options of the scenario ultimately teach us. If they are not a core part of the pedagogical purpose of the exercise, they should be de-emphasized.

Engage students in the process of simulation design: A simulation that is simply presented as a given requires little critical evaluation on the participant's part. When students design their own simulations, they begin to challenge the assumptions underlying the basic gameplay. A say in the game's design might also decrease the emotive effect that role-playing will often elicit. When they think about the roles and the interests of the actors, they may be more inclined to challenge stereotyped assumptions. At the very least, as instructors, we can challenge them to question those assumptions. This activity may not result in the actual playing of the simulation, but the exercise can help them engage with many of the theoretical assumptions that were engaged during the course of the semester.

Leave time for reflection and discussion: Simulations can be intense experiences, particularly simulations that involve violence. A simulation that includes any level of ruthlessness in which participants take advantage of each other should not be ended without closure. As an instructor, it is important to engage with the participants on the emotionally intense moments that participants experienced. Highlighting how easy it was to develop these emotions, though, can provide insight into how real-life conflicts can escalate and persist.

Be willing to stop the simulation if emotions get too high: Sometimes, things do not go as planned and, as an instructor, it is important to recognize when a simulation needs to be stopped. If such an event happens, discuss what happened and how they escalated. After the conversations, the students may be in a better place to re-engage with the simulation. If not, it is ok to move on. A simulation is only as good as the core ideas it is teaching. If those core ideas cannot be engaged, there is little need to move forward.

Conclusion

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This chapter engages some key questions associated with simulations that incorporate violence into their gameplay and links it to the question of whether such simulations are an appropriate vehicle for a signature pedagogy in our classroom. While simulations are useful pedagogical tools, as instructors, we need to be cognizant of the potential impact that these exercises have, particularly as they relate to training future foreign policy decision-makers. Thinking of our students as future decision-makers puts the onus on us to design scenarios that adequately prepare them to engage matters of life and death from both a strategic and moral position. However, we should also be aware of the intense emotional effects that these games may have on students participating in them. Being aware of these effects and being adequately prepared to address them can make the simulation environment a much more useful experience for all participants.

Notes

[1] Of course, this is not universally true, as many courses and textbooks on ethics in International Relations exist. However, these courses often exist *outside* what may be deemed as more traditional courses in International Relations and security studies

[2] Thankfully, this is changing as we are beginning to see more methodological diversity within the field, as well as more forthright discussions about how to ethically conduct both desk and field research (see Hoover, Green, and Cohen 2020; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018).

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