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Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations

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The field of International Relations (IR) attracts students who are interested in understanding global problems and are willing to make a difference in the world. However, newcomers to the field have many doubts regarding their careers and what exactly they can do with an IR degree. These doubts are understandable because IR is not a discipline "in the occupational-career sense" (Jackson 2018, 334), which means it is not directly associated with a specific professional path. IR experts can exercise different jobs in a broad range of segments, such as public and private sectors, international organizations (IOs), academia, and non-profit organizations. This is why an education in IR must entail not only a theoretical but also a practical dimension. There is a consensus in the literature on IR pedagogies about the importance of incorporating professional training in the curriculum so students can turn into practitioners equipped with the most important skills required to perform any job: analytical and critical thinking, active learning, creative problem-solving, leadership, and emotional intelligence (World Economic Forum 2018, 12). This chapter explores the use of simulations as an effective tool to develop such professional skills and considers them a fundamental part of IR signature pedagogies.

There are examples in the literature attesting that simulations positively contribute to the formation of IR students and, in this chapter, we advance this debate by arguing that simulations themselves can be professional experiences. If planned and structured with this objective in mind, simulations can develop professional skills as a desired outcome, not as a mere side-effect. Drawing from our knowledge in implementing FACAMP Model United Nations (FAMUN)—a simulation project composed by a discipline and a conference organized by *Faculdades de Campinas* (FACAMP)*,* a private Brazilian university—we demonstrate how simulations can build students' capacity in essential dimensions of IR career performance. In this chapter, we incorporate the views and perceptions of the students who attended the discipline in 2019 and 2020. Twenty-six students responded to an online survey (from 1 to 4 December 2020), which comprised six questions that evaluated the skills developed during the project. The form was anonymous, and students could add extra comments or suggestions in the last question.

The first section of this chapter analyzes the use of simulations to teach and learn professional skills, as part of our signature pedagogy in the IR field. Section two addresses a specific format of simulations, namely Model United Nations (MUNs), and their potential to develop professional abilities. The third section focuses on how our signature pedagogy is embedded in FAMUN, which makes the simulation not only an experiential learning activity but intentionally also a professional experience. In the conclusion, we underscore the importance of adopting simulations as part of a signature pedagogy in the field of IR more broadly.

IR Signature Pedagogy and Simulations

The debate on signature pedagogies offers a fruitful perspective on how to incorporate the teaching and learning of professional skills in IR education through simulations. Shulman (Shulman 2005, 59) argues that a signature

Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations

Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
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pedagogy is responsible for educating future practitioners into the "three fundamental dimensions of professional work—to think, to perform, and to act with integrity." The importance of a signature pedagogy is that it entails the deliberative effort to provide students with a broad set of abilities to be good professionals in a determined area (Ciccone 2009, xv).

Schulman (2005, 54–55) defines three structures of a signature pedagogy: the surface, the deep, and the implicit structures. In the IR field, the surface structure involves the way IR teaching and learning are operationalized, and the literature emphasizes the use of approaches that go beyond the lecture-seminar style. Student-centered active learning lies at the core of our signature pedagogy in IR because professionals in the field are asked to connect different perspectives and propose concrete solutions to specific global problems. The deep structure addresses the way knowledge is approached in IR education. Bartell and Vespia (2009, 139, 141), when discussing signature pedagogies in human development, affirm that such pedagogies are more challenging—and exciting—for interdisciplinary areas because there is not a unified perspective on how knowledge is transmitted. This is also the case for our IR signature pedagogy because interdisciplinarity characterizes the way IR professionals impart their knowledge, regardless of their job or occupation. The implicit structure relates to the principles, values, and moral dimension of the teaching and learning processes. From our perspective, the IR field encompasses building a professional character based on global citizenship, collaboration, responsibility, and empathy for others.

Considering these structures, the literature highlights the importance of experiential learning tools for the development of professional skills in IR. Lewis and Williams (1994, 15) show that when students engage in learning by doing, they acquire "a repertoire of attitudes, skills, and understandings that allow them to become more effective, flexible, and self-organized learners in a variety of contexts," which is crucial to the formation of an IR expert. Simulations are experiential activities based on active learning and have become increasingly popular in the IR courses. They replicate the reality of a given institutional setting, which is translated into specific rules of procedure and decision-making processes. The most common simulations reproduce the structure of international organizations, such as the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, etc. But there are also simulations of governmental organizations, such as Congresses, Parliaments, Ministerial Cabinets, and Councils.

Drawing from Schulman's (2005, 59) three dimensions of professional work, the literature is consensual about the positive effects of simulations for IR students. Firstly, simulations address the intellectual dimension of IR professional work through problem-based learning. Students mobilize concepts and theories to comprehend the nature of cases of the international agenda. Asal and Blake (2006, 2) argue that simulations allow students to understand "the subtleties of theories and concepts" in a more engaging way, improving content retention in comparison to traditional class discussions. Besides, simulations are research-engaged activities, so students have to ground their performance in factual content (Obendorf and Randerson 2012, 4). Students prepare statements and position papers that express the perspective of their specific roles, which improves both their research abilities and critical thinking.

Regarding the technical dimension of IR professional work, students practice their professional behavior during simulations (Simpson and Kaussler 2009, 423). Participants can assume the role of Heads of State and Government, Ministers, diplomats, or other representatives from countries or organizations. They keep their own personalities and have autonomy over their decisions, but they do so while performing the functional role of decision-makers "with the power and authority of professionals who are trying to cope with a developing situation" (Jones 1995, 12–13). As in a professional setting, they learn how to address international issues as experts, under a predefined time frame.

In simulations, participants are required to act based on ethical and responsible behavior, fostering the moral dimension of IR professional work. Obendorf and Randerson (2012, 9) emphasize that simulations are a platform to encourage students' voice, educating them to address different points of view and listen to others with empathy. Students learn through simulations that integrative solutions are the best option, dealing with problems as a common challenge instead of a competition (Simpson and Kaussler 2009, 421). Given that simulations are grounded in the real world, "it is the environment that is simulated… but the behavior is real" (Jones 1995, 7). Students progressively incorporate the attitudes of an IR professional because simulations raise their awareness of what they already know about IR, what they want to know about the field, and what they have learned during this experiential activity.

Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations

Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
Roberta Silva Machado and Talita de Mello Pinotti

MUNs as Pedagogical Tools

One of the most popular formats of simulations is a MUN, in which participants (delegates) play the role of diplomats in a UN organ or venue, and they debate current international topics and follow specific rules of procedure (McIntosh 2001, 270–271). The origin of MUNs precedes the creation of the very UN (1945). There are records of MUN simulations since 1943, when non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and universities in the United States simulated the negotiations among 26 countries that signed the "Declaration of the United Nations," a document that sealed the commitment to fight the Axis in World War II (National Model United Nations 2020).

MUNs can provide various benefits as an IR practice. First, there is an agreement in the literature on the advantages of using a student-centered approach that combines the academic demands with professional practices (Obendorf and Randerson 2012, 3). Shaw and Switky (2018, 5–6) explain that, in this case, faculties need to set out their learning objectives when preparing a MUN simulation. For instance, they can focus the activity on content—to understand a specific international topic—or on the process—to understand possible scenarios and outcomes during a negotiation. Second, students actively engage in research: the research process for a MUN involves not only the collection of information about different international topics, but also about a country's foreign policy. In this sense, students expand their sources of research; besides textbooks and academic papers, they research UN documents and reports, official databases, and diplomatic documents (Crossley-Frolick 2010, 189). As a result, they acquire refined research skills and become familiar with research sources that will be part of their professional routine. Third, Obendorf and Randerson (2013, 351) explain that students are involved in drafting supporting materials, such as study handbooks and rules of procedure. These have specific formats and language, helping them prepare to improve writing skills and vocabulary required in IO careers. Also, since they need to understand the procedure of organizations in order to write the rules' manual, students also develop a keen understanding of the dynamics of multilateral negotiations. Fourth, the organization of a MUN conference involves practical and logistical aspects, meaning that students will develop abilities on how to plan and implement projects, which otherwise may not be acquired during their undergraduate path since many IR courses are so focused on teaching content that they fail to notice the importance of learning such practical skills (Lüdert and Stewart 2017).

Still, MUNs have also been subjected to some strong criticism towards their relevance in teaching IR content. The first simulations, organized by NGOs and universities in the United States and Europe, created the rules of procedure for MUNs based on the decision-making processes of American and European national legislative bodies, which are basically voting systems. However, this use of parliamentary rules fails in portraying the real UN and does not achieve the goal of imparting IR content because, in the UN, voting is used as a means of last resort. In the UN General Assembly (UNGA), for instance, in the last decades, states have made an effort to adopt resolutions by consensus (approximately 80% of the time) instead of by vote (United Nations 2020a). Considering the variety of agenda items within the UNGA, consensus entails complex negotiations, not only among states, but also among different political groups, which makes the decision-making process more inclusive and collaborative, a reality that is not captured by MUNs based on parliamentary rules. Another issue of voting systems used in parliamentary rules is that they create a competitive environment among students aiming to prove *who is the strongest/most dominant*. In fact, many students complain that MUNs are more centered on competition than cooperation and fail to portray real UN procedures (Parrin 2013). These are some of the issues discouraging professors to consider simulations as an effective pedagogical tool.

The UN addressed this shortcoming only at the end of the 2000s by becoming more supportive and seeking to translate actual UN rules and procedures into MUNs. First developed within the UN Department of Global Communications, as the project UN4MUN (United Nations 2020b), the initiative was further advanced by NGOs, such as the World Federation of the United Nations Associations (WFUNA). WFUNA annually hosts WFUNA International Model United Nations (WIMUN), a flagship conference that offers participants an approach that draws from the project UN4MUN and is more accurate in terms of replicating the decision-making process of the UN (World Federation of United Nations Associations 2020). With an emphasis on consensus, students learn how to negotiate, aiming at collaborative decisions instead of pushing for majorities, minimizing simplistic zero-sum mentalities. Consequently, negotiations take longer, but once decisions are reached, they are more legitimate and express more robust compromise positions by stakeholders.

Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations
Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
Roberta Silva Machado and Talita de Mello Pinotti

Interestingly, by bringing the rules of procedure of MUNs closer to the real dynamics of the UN, it is possible to enhance the potential that such simulations have in teaching IR students how to think, perform and act with responsibility as professionals. In order to achieve this goal, we suggest that educators need to combine approaches developed by the UN and WFUNA with activities and exercises that build students fundamental characteristics as IR experts. While most MUNs are developed to teach IR content and negotiation, gaining additional professional skills, we argue that it becomes possible to conceive of MUNs as a pedagogical approach within an applied IR signature pedagogy.

Designing MUNs for an IR Signature Pedagogy

FAMUN is a distinctive MUN project designed to teach diplomacy, negotiation, global governance, and especially the role and relevance of the UN system, while developing a range of professional IR skills. Since 2013, FAMUN has been one of the core activities of the Bachelor's degree in IR offered by FACAMP. It consists of an eight months-long course in which 25 pre-selected IR students are trained to host an annual conference in September. While the discipline only enrolls FACAMP IR students, the conference is open to university and high school students, who simulate eight to ten UN organs and entities, totaling around 400–500 participants.[1] In partnership with WFUNA, FAMUN adopts the WIMUN approach, which is fundamental for guaranteeing the accuracy of the simulation.

The project is based on team teaching with the presence of four professors that—although all IR graduates—share different research backgrounds. While planning the project, we as professors design interdisciplinary activities targeted at fostering professional abilities, which can be seen as corresponding to the three structures of a signature pedagogy. As characteristic of the surface structure, we apply different teaching methods, namely student-centered active learning, problem-based learning by scaffolding, and application method. The very first task is to select the team of IR students, enrolled in different semesters, that will organize and conduct the conference, assuming a professional commitment. The Secretariat is entirely composed by students, who are encouraged to apply for different positions. The selection process is conducted by the instructors considering the students' profiles and interest areas. In this sense, undergraduates experiment with how to apply for a job position during their degree program. Some students, when asked to add extra comments to the survey given at the end of the discipline, even mentioned that they considered FAMUN to be their "first truly professional experience."

Following the UN structure, one student plays the role of Secretary-General, being responsible for monitoring the work of all areas and dealing with the politics of conference preparation. The interaction between more and less experienced students is paramount in this process. The latter usually assume the position of UN officials to work as mediators in the simulations, while the former occupy Secretariat positions that are directly related to the organization of the conference, separated in three main areas: academic, logistics, and communications.

Once the team is selected, they are assigned with research tasks to define the conference theme and the topics of the simulations, which draw from the real UN agenda and campaigns. We, as professors, are responsible for choosing the organs and entities that will be simulated, but the students are responsible for doing research and choosing the topics. For example, in 2019, the conference theme was "Living Together in Peace," and some of the topics discussed were "Harmony with Nature" and "Women, Peace, and Security." In 2020, the conference theme was "Be the Change: Shaping our Future Together" and among the topics selected were "The Situation in Burundi" and "Human Rights and Climate Change." In smaller groups, students write a paper and a report about the topics chosen. The material is then published as an e-book to be used as a study guide for the participants of the conference. In the survey, 25 out of 26 students affirmed that their research abilities greatly improved through these activities. This is an example of how to engage the students in an active learning process under the mentorship and facilitation of the professors.

Our role as professors is to assist and support the team during the preparation process. Through different activities, we offer the intellectual tools with which students can accomplish the tasks that will familiarize them with the theoretical approach to diplomacy, the UN system, and its rules of procedure. This scaffolding strategy is necessary to equalize the knowledge among students from different semesters. We also introduce an application method (Bartell and Vespia 2009, 148): practical activities to develop skills required both for simulations and students'

Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations

Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
Roberta Silva Machado and Talita de Mello Pinotti

professional careers. One example is public speaking exercises with a perspective-taking approach: first, students watch videos of statements from political leaders; then, they are asked to identify any fallacies in the speeches and point out what drew their attention or distracted them. This type of brainstorming fosters critical thinking and reflections on how to write and deliver an effective and persuasive speech. Students are later encouraged to put these considerations into practice, preparing short statements to address the class. Noteworthy is that due to the previous activity, they are able to correct themselves when realizing they made the same mistakes of the videos they watched before.

Considering that FAMUN students are not native English speakers, our approach emphasizes effective English pronunciation drills that focus on practicing words commonly used in simulations. These are prepared as collaborative games, so students can help each other, avoiding a competitive atmosphere among them. Practicing helps them to improve their fluency and confidence with a foreign language, something that will be expected from them as IR professionals. When responding the survey, 20 out of the 26 respondents affirmed that these activities highly contributed to improving their command of English.

FAMUN also aims to ensure that students internalize IR practices, which is paramount to the deep structure. To this end, it is important to instruct undergraduates in how to perform as real stakeholders in a decision-making process. During in-class simulations, the professors offer a two-week intensive training so that students can learn—in practice—the rules of procedure. Following the WFUNA's approach, consensus plays a central role because it avoids the "who is the strongest" mentality, since students are encouraged to find common ground to make decisions. Thus, they learn how to listen and negotiate their interests amongst each other. They are not only encouraged to look for win-win solutions, but also learn how to do it, how to think in a way that is conducive to building compromise positions or reaching consensus across differences. Interestingly, once they learn the process, they can apply consensus-building techniques while solving issues in other environments. When responding the survey, 23 out of 26 students affirmed that they developed the skill of applying consensus-building to daily problem-solving.

Consensus requires students to prepare their negotiation strategy in advance. First, they identify their country position and list their interests; second, they are tasked with prioritizing some points over others: to choose their red lines, which are non-negotiable, as well as their middle and low priorities. Hence, they understand which of their positions can be loosened during negotiations to achieve consensus. In our survey, 73 percent of the students considered that this activity highly contributed to their skill in identifying priorities in a negotiation.

The decision-making process also includes different political and regional groups that, in specific moments, are the main subjects of the negotiation. This mirrors the dynamics of the UN through which countries regularly rely on groups to advance negotiations on their behalf. Students need to interact simultaneously across multiple levels of negotiation: with their respective group and with the whole group. They are motivated to take their decisions considering that they should be accountable to their national interests and also to their peers. The lesson is to build collective strategies and routinely engage in exchanges with a great diversity of stakeholders.

Students playing the roles of Secretariat members and officials learn to identify common grounds amidst concurring interests. As mediators, officials play a significant role in building consensus by helping delegates prioritize issues in which less bargaining is needed and where the negotiation can advance easily. This creates a positive environment leading into more controversial items later on in the negotiation process. Mediators are taught to listen to the different positions and to look for overlapping ideas aiming at consensus. After routinely practicing active listening and appreciating various perspectives, students master key skills for IR professions.

IR experts are typically focused on how to adequately express their ideas, especially when confronted with multicultural environments. Hence, another central exercise is for students to understand the substance of the documents they are negotiating. Usually, the focal point of MUNs lies in the bargaining process rather than in the decision itself. But, in FAMUN, students also learn how to analyze and understand the language of the documents they are approving. Some classes are dedicated to present students with the verbs and expressions used in UN resolutions and the specific meanings of agreed language. Then, undergraduates are encouraged to reflect on them

Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations

Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
Roberta Silva Machado and Talita de Mello Pinotti

and question the reasons for choosing specific wordings. This is especially useful for understanding the particularities of IR negotiations, and the relevance of thinking about the specificity and importance of precise language used in official UN documents.

Considering that FAMUN deals with IR students, abiding by UN procedures creates a near-real experience that helps them to better understand how the institution works and provides professional training for those who want to follow a career in multilateral entities. That is why instructors should not assume leadership roles in the simulation. Especially in curricular MUNs, it is common that professors play the role of officials or the Secretariat in order to guarantee the rules of procedure or the equality of participation among students (Engel, Pallas and Lambert 2017, 5; Obendorf and Randerson 2013, 357). But in FAMUN, students have full autonomy to conduct the debates and rely on professors' support and guidance to solve doubts and master procedures. This is an aspect that characterizes our signature pedagogy when, as Shulman (2005, 57) noted "[s]tudents are accountable not only to teachers, but also to peers in their responses, arguments, commentaries, and presentation of new data."

Other than that, FAMUN presents insights into how this methodology comprehends the implicit structure. First, by putting students in the role of decision-makers and creating space for them to own their learning experience, simulations create an atmosphere of uncertainty that challenges the students to engage in active performance. When supported to embrace their choices and make their decisions based on their own strategy, students develop a greater sense of responsibility. Second, simulations enhance autonomy and self-confidence, and foster meaningful participation of students in political processes. Noteworthy is that consensus is key: challenged to find collective answers for common problems, students need to consider their counterparts' perspectives and dedicate themselves to understand the very logic sustaining the concurring position, while exercising critical thinking and reflexivity (Bartell and Vespia 2009, 144). Students are encouraged to put themselves in someone else's shoes, developing a sense of empathy and understanding, which is indispensable to cross-cultural communication.

Third, FAMUN fosters peer-to-peer teaching, teamwork, and the development of professional networks by bringing together students from different stages of the undergraduate course. When more advanced students interact with newcomers, an enriching experience-sharing takes place that motivates students to learn from their peers and strive for a career within FAMUN. It is different from Crossley-Frolick's (2010, 194) observation that a "simulation is best run in a class with predominantly advanced students." Although more advanced students tend to centralize the discussions, in FAMUN, we notice that mixing students from different levels does not constrain the learning process of younger students, as they usually consider older students as role-models. As highlighted by Lüdert and Steward (2017), a diverse team in terms of interests and levels of experience is crucial to the learning process, since students are encouraged to have different perspectives and to collaborate among themselves to reach a common goal. Fourth, FAMUN creates an environment of affective empathy (Lüdert and Stewart 2017), in which students dedicate not only their time and work to the project but are emotionally invested and feel passionate about it. When responding the feedback survey, one of our students mentioned the following: "FAMUN awakened my personal, academic, and professional development. If I could, I would be a part of it until my senior year at university and I am sure I would still have new content to learn." Finally, we also noticed that this process fosters political engagement: as students are dedicated to conduct a long-term research project about global issues, they develop critical thinking and a keen interest in politics, becoming more sensitive to the potential of their agency as youth. These are desirable outcomes of simulations and deep learning, and are extremely valuable for future IR professionals (Hammond and Albert 2019, 3). As a central part of our signature pedagogy, FAMUN develops "the habits of the mind" by teaching students to master IR thinking. It also fosters "the habits of the hand" by immersing students in a near-real UN decision-making environment. It works for the "habits of the heart," as students stand up for values and attitudes that are key to be a responsible professional, regardless of the career they choose.

Conclusion

IR is not directly associated with a specific professional orientation, and students must have a broader formation, based on skills that can be applied in different professional settings. Departing from this assumption, the chapter revisited some aspects of the literature on the use of simulations as experiential teaching and learning tools that can develop and improve IR professional skills. We advanced the debate, showing that simulations can offer a

Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations

Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
Roberta Silva Machado and Talita de Mello Pinotti

professional performance as a desired outcome, rather than a side-effect. To this end, professors need to consciously plan and structure activities aiming at the targeted abilities. This chapter demonstrated that simulations, as a practice of IR education, are more than pedagogical tools; they are a real part of a signature pedagogy in the field. We presented our experience with FAMUN, a bold academic project that involves a long period of preparation and requires students to have an active participation in all aspects of the process. Responsibilities towards the project are equally shared among students, and they learn how to deal with uncertainties and address issues with empathy in a collective effort. There is a real sense of ownership, as they are responsible for the outcomes. Furthermore, by applying accurate procedures and selecting a decision-making process based on the reality of multilateral environments, FAMUN fosters multiple abilities. Students learn how to prepare and prioritize their negotiation strategy, to interact with stakeholders, to identify consensual positions, and to better express their ideas using meaningful language, which grants them a truly professional experience while in university. In sum, when simulations are conceived as part of an IR signature pedagogy, they can build a professional character based on autonomy, collaboration, responsibility, and empathy, which are key values to IR experts.

Notes

[1] For more information, please check the official website: www.famun.com.br

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Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations
Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
Roberta Silva Machado and Talita de Mello Pinotti

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Teaching and Learning Professional Skills Through Simulations

Written by Patricia Capelini Borelli, Patrícia Nogueira Rinaldi,
Roberta Silva Machado and Talita de Mello Pinotti

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