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Empowering students with simulated negotiations

Elizabeth Mendenhall, PhD Candidate, Political Science, JHU

The issue

In the global environmental politics classroom, the problem of student attitude is often acute: students of global environmental governance are particularly prone to negative emotional reactions, including feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, which can engender apathy and cynicism.



Nations was gearing up to negotiate a new treaty to govern the high seas. This provided me with the opportunity to design a politics simulation that hewed as close to the real world as possible, where students could practice negotiating a treaty that addressed many of the problems they had learned about in class.

Why does it matter

Students come to believe that the complexity and depth of problems like climate change make effective action impossible. Students who do not believe a problem can be solved are unlikely to seek solutions to that problem in their post-college careers.

As college educators we want our students to acquire more knowledge and be better critical thinkers, but also to feel empowered and energized about their future contribution to society. Students who are motivated and ambitious are more likely to pursue personal opportunities and inventive ideas. Although a positive attitude often comes from within the student or outside the classroom, the structure of learning also has an impact.

Solution

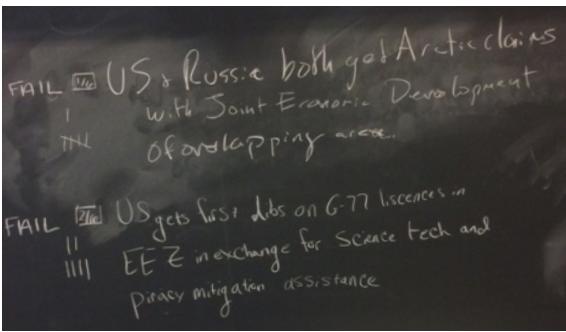
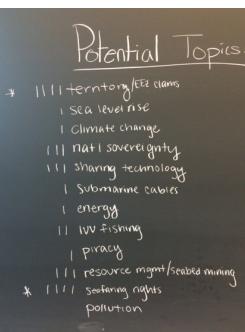
Using active learning techniques like simulations (situational role-play) can combat negative attitudes by giving students the opportunity to collectively investigate and tackle barriers to international action.

I designed a simulation for the last week of my fall 2016 “Politics of the Ocean” class, because I noticed that the students often left class in despair. Solutions to over-fishing, plastic pollution, dead zones, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, and other ocean issues seemed out of reach because of political and economic barriers. The number and complexity of ocean issues seemed overwhelming. Yet we knew that the United

I started by assigning students to polity teams in the week before the simulation began. I chose countries that have had the most influence on ocean governance historically, and groups that would likely have influence in the upcoming negotiations: The United States, China, Russia, the G77 coalition, Singapore, and NGOs. I asked students to do the assigned readings for the next week—each of which contained a specific proposal for ocean governance—with their team in mind.

The basic structure of the course influenced the simulation design. I had 15 students, and we met twice a week for a total of 2.5 hours. The simulation was divided into two days. On day one, students worked within their teams to answer a series of questions like “Who are the primary ocean interest groups in your country?” “What are your priorities for ocean governance?” and “What treaty design best serves your interests?” Students were instructed to work with their teammates, and to do supplementary in-class research to help flesh out their positions. Additionally, the Singapore team had to determine how the negotiations ought to be run, because of Singapore’s historic role as a leader in organizing past Law of the Sea negotiations.

On day two, students entered the classroom to discover groups of tables designated with small flags. Singapore ran the negotiations



List of potential topics and example of discussion results from class

while I took notes, with some minor interventions. Each team started with an opening statement about their key interests and main concerns, with short rebuttals following. Then Singapore asked each team to submit a list of priority topics, and chose the top four. While the original plan was to address each in turn through speeches and open discussion, the students ended up deciding to address all the issues simultaneously. In the last ten minutes, Singapore collected specific treaty language proposals. Each of six new proposed rules was voted on individually, and those with a majority of teams affirming became the agreed upon treaty.

Results

I designed this simulation to achieve attitudinal goals in three ways. First, role-playing required students to formulate policy proposals from the ocean problems and governance models they had learned about in class. The idea is that practicing advocacy will help students recognize that they have informed opinions about ocean issues, and see themselves as agents of change.

Second, the format shows students that complexity is not the same as intractability. The two-day design allows group work to break down the structure of a collective action problem, construct a policy agenda and negotiation strategy, and consider various policy models described in the literature. Third, the negotiations allow students to directly encounter barriers to consensus formation. Confronting obstacles to agreement this way may illustrate the utility of issue-linkages, and demonstrate that there are coalitions willing to move forward.

I assessed the achievement of attitudinal learning outcomes using a short pre- and post-simulation survey, which asked students to rate their level of agreement with statements like “All relevant parties can get what they want from the oceans” and “The situation in the high seas is too complicated for effective management.” The survey also asked students to rank the importance of different conditions for an international treaty, like “political will” and “public education.” The final questions were open-ended, and asked students to use one word to describe the state of the ocean and how

they feel about it. While the survey results showed a slight improvement in optimism, the students started out more optimistic than I expected.

Benefits

This type of simulation is relatively easy to design and implement, and there exists a broad literature relating game design to specific cognitive and attitudinal goals. Even though this simulation was imperfect, students reported on their course evaluations that they appreciated doing something different, and having the chance to work through obstacles to consensus as a group. This type of simulation can be used with a larger class size by adding more teams.

Other thoughts

The biggest mistake I made in the design of this simulation was asking the Singapore team to take a leadership role by designing the basic structure of the negotiations, and leading the class on day two. Although I chose two students with obvious leadership qualities, they found it difficult to command authority among the teams, and to push for efficiency in negotiations. They also seemed displeased that they had a “special” role, and more interested in participating as a regular team. Most of the students reported wanting to start the simulation earlier in the semester, so they could have more time getting into the details of constructing a workable solution to collective problems in the ocean.

Additional resources

- Asal, Victor, and Elizabeth L. Blake. “Creating Simulations for Political Science Education.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 2, no. 1 (January 2006): 1–18.
- Smith, Elizabeth T., and Mark A. Boyer. “Designing In-Class Simulations.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29, no. 4 (December 1996): 690.
- Baranowski, Michael K., and Kimberly A. Weir. “Political Simulations: What We Know, What We Think We Know, and What We Still Need to Know.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 11, no. 4 (October 2, 2015): 391–403.
- Glazier, Rebecca A. “Running Simulations without Ruining Your Life: Simple Ways to Incorporate Active Learning into Your Teaching.” *Journal of Political Science Education* 7, no. 4 (October 2011): 375–93

Author's background

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Elizabeth Mendenhall is a PhD candidate in International Relations. Last fall, she taught “Politics of the Ocean” as part of the Dean’s Teaching Fellowship program. After defending her dissertation in summer 2017, Elizabeth will begin as an assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island in the Department of Marine Affairs.