Constructing Effective Simulations of the European Union for Teaching: Realising the Potential

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ABSTRACT

The use of simulations in European Studies is becoming more widespread, given the possibilities of immersing students in complex issues and building substantive knowledge and affective understanding. We identify a number of barriers to the full realisation of this potential. Drawing on observations from various games, it is suggested that for a successful simulation, there must be: learning objectives clear to all participants; alignment between those objectives, game play and assessment; and a meaningful feedback process.

Keywords  Simulations, Game Design, Alignment, Feedback
INTRODUCTION

The use of simulations in Higher Education (HE) has a long history, across a wide variety of disciplines, including European Studies (Sabin 2012, Bobot and Goergen 2010, Galatas 2006, Zeff 2003, Tonks 2002, Van Dyke et al 2000, Kaunert 1996, Meerts 1994, Zuckerman and Horn 1973, Guetzkow and Jensen 1966, Verba 1963). That use has increased in recent years, driven both by a renewed interest in the practice of pedagogy and by an associated shift towards more active modes of learning. It builds on extensive personal experience in the design and delivery of simulations at a variety of scales and levels, from pan-European university events with several hundred people, through extended negotiation exercises with tens of university students (Usherwood 2009a), to school-based exercises for a dozen students: in addition, the author has been involved in the production of resources on the use of simulations (see Usherwood n/d), from which this article derives its basis. The range of what a ‘simulation’ covers is necessarily very broad, but it is understood here to be a recreation of a real-world situation, designed to explore keys elements of that situation. As the proverb above suggests, simulations offer excellent potential for immersion and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, if properly designed and run: while the literature on the value of simulations to learning is not clear-cut (see Raymond and Usherwood, 2013), it does still highlight the areas that need to be addressed.

Rather than focus on the benefits of simulations per se in this paper (see Chin et al 2009 for an extensive discussion), we will instead consider some of the common problems and barriers that instructors encounter when attempting to put a simulation into effect. Such difficulties
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matter because they hamper the full development of the benefits that simulations offer. Moreover, in the absence of much support for instructors who have not used simulations beforehand (Usherwood n/d is a specific attempt to address this gap), the pedagogy remains underexplored, due to a perception of high perceived start-up costs. This is all the more unfortunate, given the very positive feedback that students give to such approaches: the author’s own cohorts have repeatedly remarked not only on the enjoyability of the simulations, but also their utility in developing skills for subsequent career choices. In the one words of one student, ‘it was a completely different learning experience’; a comment that highlights the value of moving learning out of more conventional settings and validating student learning through their own actions.

THE PURPOSE OF SIMULATIONS

The proliferation of simulations reflects their adaptability of purpose: as a pedagogy, it possesses great flexibility in a number of basis dimensions, from size and level to complexity and duration. However, we can identify three main purposes that are usually understood to be in operation when running a simulation.

Firstly, simulations allow us to consider decision outcomes. Here, the focus is primarily on the substantive issues under discussion and the materials that are drawn into (and pushed out from) that discussion. The simulation here is seen as a way to allow participants to integrate a wide range of source materials into a more coherent whole and then to reflect on the dimensions and interactions which that whole contains. Thus we might run a simulation on a foreign policy decision, to allow participants to see how hard and soft elements of policy can work together in strengthening a particular policy position. Zeff (2003) suggests that using a simulation of the European Council offers improved understanding by students, as compared to more traditional teaching means, while Galatas (2006) points to a strong positive impact of his Council exercise.
Secondly, simulations allow us to consider the dynamics of negotiation and institutional dynamics more generally (Lantis 1998). This is a very common feature of EU-based simulations, where the specific institutional practices contained within rules of procedure and the varied structural power of different actors can be more meaningfully communicated to participants than in a passive learning environment: instructors might get participants to compare the institutional logics of the Council and the European Parliament, for example. Here, the focus rests on skills development, as participants come to appreciate the role of research and preparation, presentation, rhetoric and consensus-building as fundamental parts of the institutional life that they are recreating.

Finally, and more rarely, simulations allow for the development of a group identity. This is rarely the primary motivation, but simulations provide good opportunities to function as ice-breakers or as introductions to problem-solving techniques. Here the boundary to games in the broader sense becomes less clear, but certainly within HE and other educational environments, we can observe the development of group affiliation through the shared experience (Schick 2008).

These purposes of substance, process and group-building are often not explicitly articulated to this degree by simulation designers, who typically are looking to a more nebulous objective of improving participant understanding. However, as we will discuss below, having a clear and focused purpose is a common issue for simulations and designers and instructors would do well to reflect on how these potential purposes relate to their simulation. This is particularly true when considering the overlap and potential reinforcement between them.

SOME COMMON PROBLEMS IN CREATING SIMULATIONS
As a first step towards maximising the potential that simulations have to offer, it is useful to begin by considering the range of typical issues and problems that are encountered by designers and instructors. Clearly, the issues listed below are not exhaustive, but certainly point to the main areas of contention that arise, each with the potential to derail a well-designed and run simulation.

As noted above, the first issue that is encountered is the lack of clear purpose. While this might seem paradoxical, given that simulations are very obviously about simplifying a phenomenon to its key elements, it is actually surprisingly common, especially in the context of the EU. Consider, for example, the possibilities that can arise from running a ‘Council of Ministers’ game. Is the focus on the internal operation of the Council, with COREPER and working groups? Or is it on the relationship between national capitals, ministers and the Council? Or on the building of package deals across issues and over time? Or on the relationship of the Council to other institutions? All are valid and interesting dimensions, but each requires a very different simulation design and operation. Consider the very different approaches of Galatas (2006), who ran a simplified model of the Council, against the high level of complexity employed by Bobot and Goergen (2010).

By contrast, there is also a problem of over-simplification. In concentrating on one dimension, it is clearly possible to lose sight of other important and relevant aspects. This is most obvious in very strong simplifications, but it also occurs in more complex situations. To give one example, in one large-scale simulation of the Council that the author was involved with, the overarching intention was to raise interest and knowledge of that institution. A decision was made to have participants agree on values for numerical variables (e.g. costs for mobile telephone roaming charges per minute), rather than making them build a text from scratch, in order to cut down on drafting and focus more on plenary debate. When coupled to a judging system that
Constructing Effective Simulations of the EU valued competition and ‘winning’, this produced a game-play that was very vibrant, but which was not very prototypical in its absence of nested games and textual ambiguity. Again, any design can be justified, but it needs to be a well-grounded justification.

Typically, simulations have to be fitted into constrained slots – temporally and physically – within other teaching requirements: in many HE environments there is high pressure on rooming and timetabling that often takes priority in deciding on the design of simulations, before any pedagogical imperative. This matters because a key precept of simulations is that of immersion (Usherwood 2009b), creating an environment within which the student can have enough space and time to get into their roles and interactions. Without this, there is a clear risk that the major benefit of simulations is compromised through missing out on the internalisation of knowledge and practice.

It is important to find an appropriate level of conflict, at the level of how participants perceive that conflict. On the one hand, if participants think that the simulation is comprised of like-minded individuals, then they do not challenge each others’ positions, thus reducing the need to defend their own position and so appreciate the logic behind it. It can also lead to participants missing out on the more nuanced differences that exist. This was demonstrated in a simulation run by the author on US foreign policy formulation: students represented different agencies, but in deciding that all Americans agree with each other, they failed to explore much of the tensions that existed. On the other hand, overly-conflictual scenarios can raise issues of over-identification with positions and the potential compromising of real-world relationships: simulations around topics sensitive to students can set up the possibility of inadvertently offensive comments. Unfortunately, the problems either way might not become apparent until the simulation is in full swing.
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In addition to this, we can observe that structures and incentives are often misaligned. This is a particular issue in relation to assessment: for example, if assessment is to be based on an evaluation of participants’ game-play, then there need to be enough assessors present to properly observe that game-play (typically one assessor cannot follow more than about five individuals for any length of time, which implies at least six assessors for a full Council game) (Lantis 1998). Likewise, simulations that focus on the production of substantive policy outputs (e.g. a declaration or other text) often provide little or no opportunity for prior preparation or for drafting a realistic document. Where these misalignments occur, they undermine participant engagement and participation.

Finally, simulations often suffer from a lack of connection to other elements of teaching (Dekkers and Donatti 1981). Many games are built as one-off sessions with larger teaching units or modules, and so become ‘a bit of fun’, without significant explicit or implicit connection to course content. Alternatively, when simulations are more substantial, they can develop their own spheres of activity, substantial enough to seemingly not need explicit connection to other parts of a teaching programme. In either case, the lack of connection reduces the useful inputting by participants of knowledge and skills from elsewhere, and the likelihood of engagement and the benefit to participants of the simulation are less likely to be carried out into later study.

MAXIMISING UTILITY IN SIMULATIONS

If the pitfalls of designing and running a simulation appear numerous, then it is also important to observe that typically no one of them proves fatal to the success of a particular simulation, in large part because of the multiple objectives that they can serve, as discussed above. In addition, much of a simulation is contingent upon factors outside the designer’s or user’s hands, most obviously the individual participants playing any given iteration.
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Since simulations can be organised in so many different ways, it is counter-productive to suggest a single model for so doing. However, it is still useful and pertinent to observe that whatever approach one takes to building and running a simulation, three core requirements have to be satisfied as a precondition to a successful outcome (see also Usherwood n/d).

The first core requirement is that the learning objectives must be clear to all participants. This is as true for the simulation designer and leader as it is for students participating in the simulation (Gredler 1992). As has been previously discussed, without clarity of purpose simulations become little more than diversions. The designer needs to have a well-defined set of learning objectives in order to create a simulation that speaks to them, as well as an awareness of what else it might be conveying to participants: the multi-faceted nature of simulations means that it is almost impossible (and probably counter-productive) to create a mono-dimensional scenario. Likewise, for participants, there is the need to set out in explicit terms the objective of the task, the nature and degree of support and/or preparation that is available and allowed, as well as the nature of any assessment attached to the exercise.

The learning objectives can most obviously be related back to the three categories of purpose identified above: decision outcomes/substantive knowledge, negotiation dynamics/skills development or group socialisation. Their over-lapping nature makes clarity of purpose all the more important. The articulation of these objectives helps to guide everyone involved, especially in larger simulations, which by their nature tend to be less defined, particularly when participants might be asked to create or modify procedures or practices from real-world examples, or where the outputs might permit a degree of flexibility in their construction.

This leads into the second key requirement that the learning objectives have to be aligned with the game play and with any assessment. Alignment has been a key theme in education
Constructing Effective Simulations of the EU research since Bigg's work in the 1990s (e.g. 1996, 2003), not least because of its general application to all areas of teaching practice. This should follow logically from the designer describing the objectives in clear terms, since it becomes much simpler to see whether the game play allows the participants to focus on the objectives and whether the assessment tests the achievement of them. From the perspective of the participant, clear alignment of the elements reduces the potential for dislocation, improves immersion into the simulated environment and ultimately creates the opportunity for a much fuller learning experience.

Thus, a simulation that wants to build understanding of the internal institutional dynamics of the Council would be advised to re-create the levels below the Council itself (e.g. COREPER, working groups) and make use of the full rules of procedure, while a simulation that was more interested in the tensions between member states in producing policy might run on simplified rules, but allow for iterated decision-making in a crisis scenario. Likewise, European Parliament games might treat political groups as undifferentiated or with internal tensions, depending upon the purpose the designer has in mind. At the level of assessment, if the focus is on negotiation dynamics, then it is possible to assess on the basis of a reflective piece by each participant that stresses such elements in their experience, while a simulation that wants to develop abilities in substantive policy might tie the game play to real-world decisions in the same field to explore similarities and contrasts.

The final key element that has to be put in place is a meaningful system of feedback to participants. Regardless of the quality of the simulation, or of its design, without feedback the exercise cannot be properly brought back into the rest of the students' learning experience. Of all the three points set out here, this is the one that is most overlooked and the most consequential (Newmann and Twigg (2000) provide a rare example of how this can be done).
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The substance of feedback can be focused on processes, actors or outputs within the simulation: again, the emphasis would logically follow from the learning objectives, but where these are multiple in nature then it would be advisable to look at all three, since they form the basic units of any simulated interaction.

The timing of feedback is also flexible. Usually, it would come immediately after the main game play, since this is the point where participants are best able to recall detail and connect it to their wider learning; it also helps with letting participants ‘exit’ from the simulated environment, a particular issue with larger and more immersive simulations. But feedback can also take place at other points. If there is any substantial preparation required prior to the main game play, then feedback can be provided on negotiating briefs or positions, in order to ensure participants enter with a more fully prepared approach. Likewise, it is possible to design interim feedback for longer simulations, although these needs to be done with care, in order not to disrupt proceedings too much from their nature flow. One way of achieving this is to create a two-level game, with the simulation leader (maybe with colleagues) acting as national governments or parties, to whom participants report back periodically on their progress.

Whenever feedback occurs and regardless of what the focus is meant to be, the process is most usefully driven by the participants themselves, be that through verbal or written contributions. As the participants in the simulation, they have insights into their actions and outputs that might have not been noticed by the game leader or other observers: by giving primacy to their thoughts and reflections, we can also strengthen their confidence in self-evaluation and self-criticism. This participant-led feedback can then be supplemented by inputs from observers, documentary evidence (e.g. video, logs from online resources that have been used, observer blogs, etc.), as well as reflection on the simulation qua simulation, this last being instructive in promoting discussion on how the scenario differs from the real-world situation.
CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have argued that simulations have great potential to improve participants’ understanding of substantive issues and institutional logics within the process of European integration. By creating immersive environments in which relatively complex concepts can not only be articulated but also actively manipulated and internalised, simulations offer a way into understanding the EU that overcomes many of the (real and perceived) barriers that students encounter. In particular, simulations expose the intrinsically bargained nature of European integration and the effects that this has on both the process and the actors involved.

However, it is all too easy to miss out on the full benefits that simulations have to offer. This is especially the case when there is insufficient reflection by the designer on the purpose and the structure of the simulation. If it is to work properly, then it cannot be an after-thought, but rather something that speaks clearly to the overall learning objectives, that has game play that speaks to these and that pulls the participants’ reflection back into the rest of the teaching. By addressing these fundamental points, it is much more likely that students will gain all that they can from what can be a hugely enriching experience.

References


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Dr Simon Usherwood is Senior Lecturer at the School of Politics, University of Surrey. His research covers euroscepticism and European integration more generally, as well as the use of negotiation-based learning. Principal publications include The European Union: A Very Short Introduction (OUP, with John Pinder) and articles in JCMS, Government and Opposition, JEI and other peer-reviewed journals.

Key Quotes

1. a recreation of a real-world situation, designed to explore keys elements of that situation.
2. the enjoyability of the simulations, but also their utility in developing skills for subsequent career choices.
3. function as ice-breakers or as introductions to problem-solving techniques