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The role of simulations in teaching European Studies

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ABSTRACT

Immense developments in teaching have brought new changes and benefits in the first quarter of the 21st century and this has also striking effect on education. This has also led to innovations in Teaching and Learning process. The purpose of this article is to reveal the effectiveness of simulations, one of the new methods in teaching and learning process. Why teach with simulations and how to teach with simulations is the main focus of the article. We share our personal experience with using this innovative method in the framework of the EU TEMPUS framework project, Innovating Teaching and Learning of European Studies (INOTLES).

The role of using simulations in teaching of European Studies

The purpose of education is not just making a student literate but adds rational thinking. When there is a willingness to change, there is hope for progress in any field. Creativity can be developed and innovation benefits both students and teachers. Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University has the privilege to be the partner University of the EU-funded project, Innovating Teaching and Learning of European Studies (INOTLES). Since 2014, the universities participating in this project have faced a number of challenges. The project aims to promote curricular reform in the field of European Studies through innovative teaching approaches. Sharing experience in terms of innovative teaching methods helped us to increase students' motivation and improve the learning process. This article examines the role of using simulations in teaching of European studies through sharing the instructor's experience. Before describing and analyzing our personal experience, we will answer the following questions: why is it effective to teach with simulations and how should we teach with simulations?

Why simulations?

Simulations help to promote the use of critical and creative thinking as they are open-ended, they encourage students to consider the implications of a scenario. The situation feels real and thus leads to a more engaging interaction among the learners. Simulations promote concept attainment through experiential practice. They help students to understand the nuances of a concept. Students often find them more deeply engaging than other activities, as they experience the activity first-hand, rather than hearing about it or seeing it. Simulations help students to develop their negotiation skills. Moreover, simulations help students appreciate more deeply the management of the environment, politics, community and culture. For example, by participating in a resource distribution activity, students might gain an understanding of inequity in society. Simulations can reinforce other skills indirectly, such as debating, a method associated with some large-scale simulations, and research skills. Simulations provide students with an opportunity to practice problem-based learning through a specific task, issue, crisis, or problem. An experience or real-life situation is imitated. Still, it is important to note that there is no one "right" answer or quick solution

(Gredler, 1992). When the situation or problem is presented, students work together to think of a possible solution.

It is impossible to fully anticipate the outcome of a simulation. It depends on how the learners interpret and experience their role and the extent to which they develop it. As such, students take ownership of their roles, have the responsibility for carrying out their assigned activities, and ultimately take responsibility for their own learning. During a simulation, the instructor functions more as a facilitator, helper, and resource person and less as an expert, judge, or tester (Hertel & Millis, 2002). This truly enhances the constructivist learning approach, as students garner meaning from their interaction with the environment. Cognitive conflict or “puzzlement” then becomes the stimulus for learning and knowledge evolves through social negotiation and individual understanding (Kirkley & Kirkley, 2005).

When students use a model of behavior to gain a better understanding of that behavior, they are doing a simulation. For example:

- ✓ When students are assigned roles as buyers and sellers of some good and asked to strike deals to exchange the good, they are learning about market behavior by simulating a market;
- ✓ When students take on the roles of party delegates to a political convention and run the model convention, they are learning about the election process by simulating a political convention;
- ✓ When students create an electric circuit with an online program, they are learning about physics theory by simulating an actual physical set-up.

We should differentiate two types of learning: deep learning and learning. Instructional simulations have the potential to engage students in “deep learning” that empowers understanding as opposed to "surface learning" that requires only memorization. Drawing on Hertel and Millis (2002) deep learning means that students:

Learn scientific methods including

- ✓ The importance of model building;
- ✓ The relationships among variables in a model or models;
- ✓ Data issues, probability and sampling theory;

- ✓ How to use a model to predict outcomes.

Learn to reflect on and extend knowledge by

- ✓ Actively engaging in student-student or teacher-student conversations needed to conduct a simulation;
- ✓ Transferring knowledge to new problems and situations;
- ✓ Understanding and refining their own thought processes;
- ✓ Seeing social processes and social interactions in action.

To achieve an effective simulation, it is necessary:

- ✓ Teacher preparation; the good news is that instructional simulations can be very effective in stimulating student understanding; the bad news is that many simulations require intensive lesson preparation;
- ✓ Active student participation; the learning effectiveness of instructional simulation rests on actively engaging students in problem solving;
- ✓ Post-simulation discussion; students need sufficient time to reflect on the simulation results.

Some simulation games used in teaching European studies

Using modern methods in political science education has a long history, and evaluations show that it has a positive impact on learning and teaching process. We would like to share our personal experience concerning the use of simulation in teaching European Studies. The simulation game discussed below reflects the complex nature of the European decision-making process. The participants get the roles of the members of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council and Economic and Social committee and discuss the topic "driver's license in the EU." Simulating the role of a certain body of the EU and examining the scope of its competences, the players know what different stage decision-making has a corresponding right to vote and the possible impact on this process, as well as the way in which you can build a variety of informal strategy and tactics of action in European politics. Due to this, the participants get a wide experience in this field. The simulation focuses on three aspects.

- A) Should the validity of a driving license be limited and, if so, for how long?

B) Is it necessary for all holders of driver's license to have a medical examination? If yes, how often should it be done?

C) Should biometric data be included into the driving license? If yes, what type of data fingerprints ?

The procedure of the game is as follows:

Step 1. Participants are divided into four groups with at least three members in each group which will represent each of the following actors: The European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee. (5 minutes to form groups)

Step 2. Each group at the first stage receives a detailed description of their role profile - structure, objectives, principles and mechanisms of activity, especially in collaboration with other EU bodies, a flowchart of the process of decision-making in the European Union and the description of the various countries' positions, factions and interest groups (NGOs, associations and unions) in respect of common European driving license. They should meet with their role-profile and define their position as one of the EU institutions, on the subject under discussion. (15 minutes)

Step 3. In the next step, in accordance with the European decision-making procedure, each group uses its authority and ability to influence, approves the strategy of their actions and takes decisions on their next steps. Meanwhile, the “European Commission” develops a draft framework for guidelines on the pan - European driver's license. (20 minutes)

Step 4. In the next step, “European Parliament” Council” and Economic and Social Affairs Committee” are further divided into “small political groups” (the Socialists, the European People's Party, Green), representatives of the countries (Germany, United Kingdom, Poland) and interest groups (NGOs, associations and unions) who then discuss and coordinate their interests in relation to the three particular aspects of the issue under discussion. (30 minutes)

Step 5. In the course of the game, it is allowed to have informal conversation, especially in order to facilitate reaching agreements between all groups.

- Step 6.** At the end of this stage the small groups formulate the interests and positions of the respective European institutional actors and start to negotiate with each other. They have to reach an agreement, following the pertinent EU decision-making rules at the same time, the European Commission actively seeks to identify potential areas of compromise among the different actors in order to reach an agreement. (20 minutes)
- Step 7.** The European Economic and Social Committee expresses its views on the subject under discussion (primarily, in his three dimensions). (3 minutes)
- Step 8.** Further, the European Commission is consulting the possible changes in the framework of the provisions of the draft law to the Council or the European Parliament and consider whether they want to include these changes to the project or to withdraw their offer. (15 minutes)
- Step 9.** In accordance with the European decision-making procedure, the players at the next stage are trying to reach the joint solutions. (5 to 30 minutes)
- Step 10.** Framework provisions are submitted to a vote in the European Parliament and the Council in accordance with the procedure in these institutions vote. (2 minutes)
- Step 11.** In conclusion, the participants either reach a consensus among all parties or the result is a deadlock regarding the framework position of pan-European driver's license.
- Step 12.** The final stage of the game is the joint meeting of the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council which represent those various positions that emerged during the discussion of this issue within the institutions and the decision is announced. The European Commission declares final decision and. At this stage, it is also important to visualize the proposals of relevant institutions. (20 minutes)
- Step 13.** Summing up the game-simulation - feedback of the participants. (20 minutes)

The game simulation can be carried out in the framework of the seminar or other educational activities related to the EU. It is aimed primarily at deepening students' understanding of the EU and of the complex European institutional structures and the decision-making process.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of teaching through simulations?

Using simulations showed that there are advantages and disadvantages in simulated teaching method as for the advantages of simulations it is worth noting that it helps linking theoretical knowledge and practical skill. This method, helps promote -confidence among students, constructive feedback, and the development of critical thinking. Simulations increase student motivation, facilitate the affective aspect of learning, enhance interpersonal relations and promote interpersonal reward structures for learning. Lastly, they tend to improve communication and discussion within the classroom and promote individual learner discovery.

On the other hand simulations also have several disadvantages. The role-playing is done in artificial situations because the simulation portrays the real situations in a simple way, which in real-life might be very complex and difficult. Also, designing simulation games are time-consuming.

Conclusions

To keep up with the developments in teaching and learning process, the teachers are expected to use innovative teaching techniques. Simulation games offer the possibility of learning about and experiencing real-life situations. By using simulations to complement and enhance traditional teaching and learning, students are given an opportunity to participate in active learning. They are called upon to make decisions and, through this team-based exercise, they gain a better understanding of group dynamics and processes. What is more, simulations allow for a deeper exploration of a complex issue or concept with greater student involvement and enjoyment in the learning experience. Based on our experiences with our students, we would strongly encourage teachers to experiment with simulations in their classrooms for authentic, collaborative, and constructivist learning. As our students' experiences showed, developing simulations can be a challenging process, but teachers can use their creativity and innovation to come up with interesting and fun simulation activities for their students.

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