



# Simulating in Cyberspace: Designing and Assessing Simple Role Playing Activities for Online Regional Studies Courses

MARY JANE C. PARMENTIER  
*Arizona State University*

Classroom simulations are a well-known tool in learner-centered education, and in the field of international relations, simulations have been utilized for years to stimulate student learning. The literature has shown that simulations encourage active learning and retention of information; however, there are challenges with conducting simulations online, and the tool has been relatively underdeveloped. While there are commercial online simulations, there has been less research on the effectiveness of various approaches, particularly in classes that are completely online, with simulations entirely designed and implemented by faculty. This paper reviews some of the literature on simulations, hybrid and online, creates a design framework from the literature and analyzes a simulation implemented in an online mixed graduate/undergraduate regional studies political science class. Results showed positive learning and feedback from the students; however, several features will be changed in the simulation design to improve future simulations. Further, suggestions will be offered on how this type of simulation can be tailored for different courses.

**Keywords:** online, simulations, role playing, regional studies, teaching

---

University teaching in the twenty-first century has meant, for many faculty, grappling with the radically new learning environment of online instruction. Many of us struggle with the replication online of successful activities from our physical classrooms. While transfer of face-to-face classroom techniques to the online classroom is necessary, it is optimal to recognize the unique format of the online environment that can allow traditional activities, such as role-playing simulations, to be carried out in different and enhanced ways. Simulations offer increased interaction and virtual socialization, one of the most significant challenges of teaching online. While simulations have long been used as a teaching technique in the social sciences, and specifically in political science and international studies, the online learning environment forces faculty to try and re-create this traditional learning activity virtually. The training for faculty to learn how to teach online, when it exists, does not include models for simulations, nor is there extensive literature on implementing successful simulations online. There are commercial programs for purchase, but there is a need for faculty to have the ability to create their own simulations that fit specific classes and learning objectives, to be conducted efficiently in their online courses without extra expense. This paper offers a flexible method for designing and implementing simulations in online courses as an activity to increase student interaction and experiential

learning, through the utilization of basic online teaching technologies. Recent literature on role-playing simulations, both live and virtual, will be reviewed, from which simulation guidelines will be tested in an online undergraduate/graduate regional studies course on Latin America that ran during the fall semester of 2010. The overall intent is to design an online format that functions for conducting simple role-playing simulations in any online regional studies course, or any international studies courses in general, for faculty seeking to enhance the interaction of their online courses and to address certain learning outcomes in an experiential manner.

First, it is worth reiterating that the research has shown that traditional classroom simulations are extremely effective teaching tools. Experiential learning tends to allow students to retain knowledge more effectively, since they have had to participate and take action, rather than simply reading about something. In the area of international studies and political science, simulations allow students to take on roles, viewing the world from someone else's perspective. In the most famous, the Model United Nations, students can gain an understanding of how the international system works and are able to experience elements of abstract international relations theory (Starkey and Blake 2001; McIntosh 2005). Less elaborate or time-consuming simulations have also been shown to enhance student learning, and they can be designed to contribute to acquiring content or to comprehending processes (Asal 2005). Evidence supports the notion that simulations in international studies engage students in the learning process by stimulating their interest, increasing knowledge and understanding of concepts and processes, and enhancing the retention of the learning experience through learner-centered involvement (Lantis 1998; Krain and Lantis 2006; Shellman and Turan 2006). Certainly, one of the most frequent uses of simulations is in the area of cross-cultural learning, where several commercial games such as *Bfa Bfa* and *Barnga* have been used extensively in the field of cross-cultural training in order to simulate the cross-cultural environment for professional training as well as classroom learning (Fowler and Pusch 2010). Over the past twenty years of teaching, the author has utilized a range of simulations in international politics classes, intercultural communication classes, and professional intercultural training sessions, with positive results each time. This has led to the current objective of implementing this valuable learning activity online.

### **From Physical to Virtual**

Running simulations in online classes also holds the potential of addressing some of the most significant challenges and obstacles of the virtual classroom. These barriers to online learning are essentially the lack of a physical social setting in which participants can form the familiar types of relationships with each other and the instructor that characterize a traditional physical classroom. This social cohesion is essential to learning outcomes, as students engage more as the interaction deepens (Swan 2002; Dolan 2008; Slagter van Tryon and Bishop 2009). The literature suggests that the best method of addressing this issue is through increasing interactivity, primarily through discussion board forums, but also through carefully crafted discussion board activities, including collaborative problem solving. When students must collectively solve problems, listen to each other, and make meaningful responses, their level of social interaction and engagement in learning apparently increases (Lou 2004; Wilson, Pollock and Hamann 2007; Hamann, Pollock and Wilson 2009). Role-playing simulations can provide scenarios for problem solving and necessitate students' reading and responding to each other, thereby engendering dynamic and interactive collaboration and discussion. They can be an extension or addition to other traditional classroom activities that have been successfully imple-

mented online, such as classroom discussions and debates, peer reviews and critiques, and presentations.

The use of computers in facilitating simulations was recognized before personal computers revolutionized technology and education, but the evolution from the use of computers for modeling and computational exercises to the medium of communication is significant for our study of online simulations (Starkey and Blake 2001). Beginning in the 1990s, large-scale commercial simulations were designed and are available now, allowing faculty to connect their classrooms to those at other universities and participate in predesigned scenarios (see, for instance, ICONS 2011; and Statecraft 2011). Salmon has noted the vast potential for educational simulations online in the virtual world *Second Life*, where students can experience other cultures, environments, and scenarios can be created (Salmon 2009). In an earlier work, Salmon (2005) also warns that technology does not take the place of traditional pedagogical steps, a solid design and the role of the instructor. There is an exceptionally high risk for proceeding with the assumption that technology-enhanced learning is automatically superior (Salmon 2005). Thus, an enhanced virtual environment could result in more realistic and creative simulations, but the basic preparation for developing a sound educational tool, as well as research on outcomes, must be accomplished.

On the other side of the spectrum, teachers began experimenting at the same time with smaller-scale simulations, created by several faculty, utilizing chat rooms and e-mail for online discussions involving several universities (Vincent and Shepherd 1998; Maier and Baron 2005). Hybrid simulations have also been implemented, utilizing the Internet for some phases of simulated negotiations, for instance, or for making virtual visits to other countries for information gathering, or for gathering data during the de-briefing phase at the close of a simulation (for example, Martin 2003; Stover 2005; Oertig 2010). Asal and Blake (2006) have contributed to our understanding of how to design effective simulations, whether face to face or online, with their emphasis on the importance of establishing simulation goals before deciding on a structure.

What is lacking in the literature is research on faculty designed simulations for online courses and methods for integrating simulations into an already online curriculum. Asal notes that in general what is lacking in the research is not evidence of the effectiveness of simulations as teaching tools, but instead research and guidelines for effectively integrating simulations into the curriculum (Asal 2005). The professional training in online instruction does not specifically address how to implement online simulations, based on the author's experience in such classes with various teaching platforms. The tools for discussions, group work, synchronous and asynchronous communication, etc. are available, and faculty members are encouraged to utilize them to enhance the interactivity of the class, a key component of successful online classes (Swan 2002; Smith and Winking-Diaz 2004; Slagter van Tryon and Bishop 2009). Yet, even an experienced simulation facilitator faces considerable challenges when replicating the activity in a completely online environment, where students and faculty never meet face to face in a physical classroom. The literature contains the elements of the "best practices" when designing simulations, with some guidance for online simulations as well. In the implementation of the simulation in the *Political Development in Latin America* class for the current study, these established elements as well other suggestions were utilized in the design of the activity. This framework will be reviewed in the next section, followed by a description of the simulation and results of the study.

### Designing Simulations

The literature on simulations in the social sciences agrees on the basic outline of well-designed simulations: establishment of the goals of the simulation;

preparation of the participants (learning roles and scenarios); the actual interactive simulation activities; and finally the de-briefing of the experience. Each of these includes challenges for online implementation and is influenced as well by the goals and objectives of the experience. Asal (2005; and Asal and Blake 2006) notes that there are two possible goals for simulations in political science; a *content* emphasis in which students gain information and understanding about a subject, or a *process* emphasis where students come to comprehend for instance how the international system functions, how negotiations take place, etc. Vincent and Shepherd (1998) found that representing different groups allowed students to *empathize* with those they previously did not understand, or were even hostile to, arguably an element of both content and process goals. It is also necessary to decide whether the simulation is to be abstract (i.e., countries X and Y) or real (actual countries, real leaders, as in, for example, the Model United Nations).

The online environment provides some unique elements for the preparation phase. Traditional practices, such as research papers, briefing papers, lectures, and films can all be used online; but the Internet also allows students to virtually visit other countries and governments, gaining access to primary data and media sources from outside their own countries, an obvious advantage in learning the new context for role playing (Starkey and Blake 2001; Martin 2003; Stover 2005). The online setting also offers advantages for the timeline of the running of the simulation activities, which are often restricted by traditional classroom contact hours (Martin 2003; Maier and Baron 2005). The range of activities and the time frame in which to accomplish them is greatly extended in a semester length online course. Online debriefing, even for face-to-face simulations, Oertig suggests is a better method for soliciting student reactions, giving them time and potentially the anonymity to feel comfortable in expressing themselves and giving more extensive reactions (Oertig 2010). Crookall argues that debriefing is the most important learning aspect of a simulation, and one that is often underutilized in online role plays (Crookall 2010). Finally, another element identified in the literature as being essential for successful online simulations is the creation of *social presence*, meaning a sense of community is created, allowing participants to feel safe in playing their roles (Maier and Baron 2005). Maier and Baron (2005) have suggested a *community of inquiry* approach, whereby the instructor not only designs the simulation structure, but strives to create a community of learners throughout the process.

The work of Salmon incorporated by Rofo into teaching international relations online is extremely relevant for developing and implementing simulations as well, as it is founded on “critical discussion informed by the student’s individual private study,” which are the essential mechanics of a simulation, especially online (Rofo 2011, p. 106). All online activities, or *e-tivities*, are constructed according to a five-state model that begins with (i) access and motivation, which covers the construction of the online system, which can include the guidelines, structures and explanation for the simulation. This is followed by (ii) online socialization, similar to the creation of *communities of inquiry*, and (iii) information exchange, which would cover the methods of communication for students. Steps (iv) knowledge construction and (v) development correspond to the individual study in preparation of the simulation and the discussion that unfolds during its implementation.

Thus, from the literature, the following framework, or guidelines, can be derived for designing and implementing simulations:

- Establish goals, objectives, and online structure of simulation on course shell

- Create assignments for preparation phase—create online sense of community—preparation includes student interaction regarding roles after individual research
- Implement simulation activities—conduct several activities to allow for the construction of knowledge—by individual research and group sharing
- Debrief participants on simulation
- Redesign simulation based on feedback (optional)

### **Simulation Design for Latin American Regional Studies Course**

The course chosen for the simulation experiment is a combined upper division undergraduate and graduate area studies course, focusing on political and socio-economic development in Latin America from historical and contemporary perspectives. As stated on the course syllabus, the expected course outcomes are that students will:

- Understand the significant historical trends and events that have shaped the region.
- Evaluate how the region is being affected by the current era of globalization and its relations with the rest of the world economy, particularly the United States.
- Identify economic, political, and cultural patterns that are common to the region.
- Compare and appraise the current political developments, such as an apparent return to socialism, the backlash against globalization, and the mobilization of indigenous groups.
- Indicate and analyze development priorities for the region (graduate students), or a current political issue, with a focus on a selected country.

This course has been taught online for 3 years, with these outcomes underlying the design of the class. The various projects, including a discussion board, a research paper, and country study groups have been largely effective in meeting these outcomes, as assessed by quizzes and written work. However, it has been noted that it is difficult for students to step out of their own country context, in this case, for the majority of students, the United States. The perspective of the media from the United States has led to certain assumptions about Latin America (and other regions of the world), which are very difficult for students to question and get past. Furthermore, news from Latin America is generally not prominent in the US media, or it can portray Latin American politics in a negative light. As Stover (2005) has stated, “If another state does not act in accordance with those values (of their own political culture), its leaders are labeled irrational” (p. 207). This had been apparent in this class, for example, with negative and unhelpful references to the leaders of Cuba and Venezuela, thereby shutting down any deeper understanding of the political contexts of those countries. It is suggested, therefore, that a goal implied in all of these outcomes outlined above is that of empathy in order to better comprehend the historical developments and perspectives from *within* the region and the countries.

Therefore, it was determined that with the stated outcomes and the necessary goal of empathy, a realistic simulation that was both content and process orientated would be required. Thus, the Organization of American States (OAS), an organization that is regional, but which is perceived to be dominated by the United States, was chosen to be the forum for the simulation. Participants would need to determine whether their countries would even attend an OAS gathering, and, if not, make alternative plans. This addressed the dual objectives of students learning their countries’ particular socioeconomic and political realities, as well as experiencing international relations with each other and the power to the North.

It would be necessary for students to conduct research on the history of their assigned countries, as well as follow the media from within the countries and within the region. Through the simulation, an understanding of the process of multinational negotiations could also be achieved. As the simulation was being designed, an application for exemption was filed and accepted by the institution's Institutional Review Board, thus enabling research on the participants to be undertaken.

The need for content influenced the methods for preparing for the simulation activities. Raymond found in an empirical study of a simulation (face to face) that exam scores did not increase when compared with a class that did not experience such an activity (Raymond 2010). Exams, however, are only one method of assessment; in this course, the discussions in the groups and the discourse of the simulation meetings would provide evidence of acquired content. Students in this class had already, each semester, been grouped into various countries in Latin America, which they had some freedom in selecting, with instructor input in order to insure wide coverage of the region. The course typically has around thirty students, resulting in ten country groups, with three students in each group; this was the case during the fall of 2010. The students were then given the simulation scenario, organized into small group discussion forums on the online course platform, and given some directives and media suggestions to pursue information about the contemporary political system and culture in their countries. At the same time, the entire class was reading several books on the history of the region and discussing historical political events and trends on the class discussion board.

The students were also given the simulation scenario at the beginning of the class. Since it was an online class, they had permanent access to the pages describing the simulation. The simulation was set up with three regional meetings (sample handout in Appendix A) throughout the semester, followed by a summit meeting at the end of the semester under the auspices of the OAS. Taking the advantage of our Internet environment, students were given the link to the OAS and instructed to look over the priorities of this regional organization. They were to prepare, in their regional meetings, for the OAS summit, attempting to reach consensus on a variety of suggested topics. The OAS summit would be led by the United States, who might raise any of these issues. The issues included the illegal drug trade, democratization and human rights, free trade, and economic development and the environment, all stated priorities of the OAS (Organization of American States 2010). The entire simulation was to be carried out on the class discussion board, with special forums set up for each meeting. Preparation for the meetings was to be done in the country small group discussion forums. The students were instructed to take on the role of representatives of their respective countries, with no specification made as to their positions or job duties. The final summit was to be held under the auspices of the OAS, led by the United States, who would bring up several priority issues for discussion and agreement; the participants were not told what these were, but that they would come from the list above.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The U.S. (the facilitator) stated the following positions at the final OAS Summit:

- 1 The U.S. would like to re-open constructive talks about the establishment of the Free Trade Area of the Americas ([www.ftaa-alca.org](http://www.ftaa-alca.org)), which would extend NAFTA to include all of the Americas except for Cuba. It is important that we pursue intellectual property rights and the removal of trade barriers in the south.
- 2 The advancement of democratization is one of the four main pillars of the OAS ([www.oas.org](http://www.oas.org)), and in recent years there have been disturbing signs of some backward movement in this area, particularly with economic and political freedoms being comprised as some countries have nationalized industries and restricted the media. It is imperative that these trends are reversed.
- 3 It is evident that the illegal drug trade is a concern to everyone in the region, and the U.S. would like to draw the region's attention to advancing a more concerted effort in this area. It is felt that the OAS strategy that emphasizes "supply reduction" (<http://www.oas.org/en/topics/drugs.asp>) is the most fruitful policy to re-enforce, which relies on each member state to step up drug cultivation eradication measures.



The creation of a sense of community in this online class had historically been done through introductions on the discussion board, interaction in a course “cyber cafe” forum, and interactions on the weekly discussion board. It was expected that the additional assignment of the simulation preparation on the small group discussion forums would foster cohesion and mutual learning within the groups.

The simulation meetings were then spread throughout the semester, with the first one scheduled for a month after the start of the course, and the final summit being held the last week. The students would therefore have the whole semester to integrate other components of the curriculum into their work on creating their country roles. This would also allow time to follow actual news and events from each country to incorporate relevant themes into the discussion. Debriefing was built in with a post-simulation survey, which would be administered at the end of the semester.

### Results and Evaluation

This section is organized to first analyze the design of the simulation, from the facilitator’s perspective and the students’ feedback, followed by a discussion of the data on learning. The intent is to reflect on how well the design of the simulation worked, as well as what the students achieved through their participation. The data are derived from the students’ discussions, informal feedback to the instructor, post-simulation de-briefing survey, and the final course evaluations. Pretest and post-test were designed, but due to a very low response on the pretest, it was determined to discontinue this test. In future simulations, incentives are needed to secure student participation in this sort of assessment.

#### *Simulation Design*

For the particular objectives of this class, the use of a real scenario with the Organization of American States worked well with the goal of creating feelings of empathy and understanding from the perspectives of the countries in Latin America. For a class focusing on Latin American politics, a role play involving real actors and scenarios seemed appropriate. Student comments in the post-simulation survey included “I really enjoyed how everything was laid out... and the student-student participation as well as the teacher-student participation” and another commented that the final summit was one of the best features of the whole course. The number of simulation interactions also seemed to work well, with the three regional meetings, following by a summit that included an outside actor, the United States, played by the facilitator. Furthermore, the format design was not too complex or time-consuming for the instructor, thus allowing the simulation to integrate well with the rest of curriculum and not take away from time spent on other aspects of the course, such as weekly discussions of regional themes and issues. Several students noted, however, that they would have liked the final summit to be scheduled either earlier or later than the due date of the final research paper; the final requirements of the course, including the final simulation interaction, seemed to be overwhelming for some students.

The most difficult aspect of the simulation, in terms of design, but also one of the most essential, was the group work arrangement; participation in the groups was uneven and problematic. Using the “groups” feature on our course site, students self-enrolled in their country groups, already set up by the instructor, allowing them to have open discussions, collaborate, share documents, and connect by e-mail with other members of the group. This was where they were to share research on their country and prepare national positions on the topics outlined above. Some of the groups worked together very well, and student feed-

back in the post-simulation survey included comments such as “I had a great group” and “the group discussion board is an excellent feature... allows for the free flow of ideas”; other groups chose to collaborate using e-mail instead of the group discussion forum, and this seemed to work well for them. The problems arose when, in some groups, there was a serious lack of participation from some of the members. Several students commented that “people did not participate... I would have enjoyed the collaboration but not all students are equally committed” and “honestly I did not enjoy it... it was frustrating trying to work with ... one (group member) that did not participate at all.” Other comments included “I felt like I was working alone” and “most people didn’t post until the last minute making it hard to have a suitable conversation.” Overall, it seems that at least half the groups worked very well, and the rest had varying degrees of participation issues. Also, it was observed that it took some time for the groups to gel and the participants to take on their roles. For instance, from the first regional meeting to the third, there was an evident evolution from the use of the third person (Cubans, citizens of Colombia, etc.) to first person (fellow Colombians, we Mexicans, etc.) Thus, a more effective creation of the *communities of inquiry* has been identified as a significant area to address for the next simulation.

#### *Learning Outcomes*

The students’ written interactions and solicited and unsolicited feedback indicate success in the area of gaining empathy with the countries in Latin America, and a new perspective on how the United States is viewed from the region. One of the most dramatic indications was a student who e-mailed me early on in the simulation, struggling with his role as representative of the government of Venezuela, who later told his group “I feel like I’m going over to the dark side” and still later commented that it allowed him to see things from a non-US perspective and gain a better understanding of Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela. In the post-simulation survey, students commented that “it took me outside my comfort zone to consider a viewpoint I didn’t necessarily agree with,” and “the simulation was a powerful exercise... (and) helped us learn how to respectfully agree to disagree.” There was feedback offered on the simulation in the final course evaluation, as well, although it was not specifically solicited. A student commented that “we tried to understand how our country (is) seen from Latin America” and another commented that one of the best aspects of the course was the regional summit meeting and that “I learned a lot more (in) this course than I thought I would.” In terms of learning more about their specific countries, this was apparent throughout their group and simulation interactions as they demonstrated knowledge of the countries in order to portray their positions on the various issues. Responding to a question in the post-simulation survey about the perception of the United States in the region, answers included “it seems to me to be mixed bag” and that the United States is viewed negatively as an interventionist, but also a critical global leader. Another, along the same lines, noted that it can be viewed as a “menace to newly elected governments.” Others commented that the United States is viewed as a hegemon, a “necessary evil,” a bully and an ally. Yet another commented that the most important thing they learned “was that what we hear in America is not necessary truth or reality.” Thus, the goal of stepping outside the cultural screen of their home country seems to have been met to some degree. The final summit discussion was particularly telling when the students had to represent their countries in response to the US-led initiatives on cracking down on the war on drugs, free trade, and human rights. The country representatives all worked very hard to respond to each of these initiatives separately, indicating some in-depth understanding of their countries as they did so. Argentina had a nuanced approach to the United States, agreeing with free



trade and human rights, but disagreeing with the stance on how to handle the drug trade. Peru was concerned with trade equity while supporting the notion of free trade, and while Mexico supported free trade and the war against drugs, they were also concerned with the flow of illegal weapons from the United States into Mexico. While Brazil and Colombia were open to the idea of negotiating a region-wide free trade agreement, they were hesitant to resurrect the problematic Free Trade Area of the Americas initiative. Chile, notably, agreed to all points made by the United States.

The student's research, then, was well reflected in the realistic and generally accurate positions they took vis-a-vis each other and the United States. In fact, overall, one of the most interesting observations about the simulation was the replication of regional political trends, and the patterns of relationships among the countries and with the United States. Cuba, of course, did not attend the OAS, but the representative sent a letter countering the US positions and demanding "is the OAS even relevant anymore? NO! It is outdated, with ideas sourced from the Cold War and more importantly is controlled by the U.S." Venezuela attended and had a lot to say to the other Latin American countries and to the United States, including calling on it to open relations with Cuba and defending Venezuelan democracy against false accusations by the "arrogant West." Bolivia was particularly offended by the US insinuation that democratization was backsliding in the region, disagreeing with its hardline approach to illegal drugs. Mexico and Colombia appeared to be trying to walk the line between the US positions and others in the region, attempting especially to reconcile them with the stances of Venezuela and Cuba. Thus, with realistic patterns emerging, it seems plausible to conclude that overall the goal of improving student understanding and empathy with the countries of regions was addressed. At the same time, there were flaws in the simulation design that did not extend the experience to all participants equally. The final section will review recommendations for further design innovations based on these results.

### **Conclusion: Innovations for Reimplementation**

As noted above, the creation of Maier and Baron's (2005) *communities of inquiry* were not complete in the country groups; in other words, Salmon's (Rofe 2011) socialization phase was not fully implemented. While some collaborated extensively as a team, others had individual members reporting in the group simulation phases, rather than as a group. It also seems possible that the *social presence* component was not evenly or completely reached, which is achieved through "an appropriate online communication framework" (Maier and Baron 2005). It is proposed that the successful implementation of country group tasks and communication will address the need for each participant to feel fully engaged in the event. There are several changes in the simulation that could improve this critical aspect of the experience.

While the students were given open-ended roles as "representatives" of their countries, it would work better to assign them actual roles, that is, president, foreign minister, minister of economic affairs, etc. Some of the students were able to take on the general role of representative; however, the lack of a specified role might be the cause of the delay in student's acquiring their roles and in the lack of participation on the part of some students. The students' first assignment could be to look up the real people currently in these roles in their country, thereby fostering identification with the role as well as familiarization with the structure of their government.

As noted, the most problematic aspect of the simulation was small group participation, which is a critical piece to the learning outcomes. Thus, the most significant innovation will need to be in this area. A task in the beginning must

be implemented to get the group members into their roles and fully participating. The consensus in the literature is that the research period is critical; but it would also appear that how that research is conducted, and its goal is equally critical to building group cohesion. It is therefore proposed to assign, in the beginning of the semester, a one-page paper where each student introduces their role and position within the government, which they upload onto the group discussion forum. This would be done well before the first regional meeting and require that students acquire their roles and divide up research duties according to those roles before they have their first simulation interaction. Intervention early on with nonparticipating students and group monitoring can also be done to facilitate group interaction and cohesion.

Other minor adjustments are suggested, as well, such as moving the final summit meeting to an earlier deadline in the semester to avoid it coinciding with other final semester requirements. A blog feature, new last year to our online course software, was also used for this semester, where students were assigned to post five blogs at various time throughout the course stating their countries' interests on a topic of their choice. The concept behind the assignment was to provide an open forum where other country representatives could gain access to each other's positions, but it did not seem to add value. In fact, it might have led some students on a more individual path in representing their countries.

Finally, the debriefing phase needs to be better designed and incorporated into the simulation. This first attempt followed the design that had been suggested by Crookall (2010) as among the least desirable, that is, "game + minimal debriefing," which, while it does include debriefing consigns it to a minor role. The effort with this first simulation focused on its implementation the first time around, but the author concurs with Crookall and others that the debriefing phase is potentially where the most learning occurs. As students must reflect on how they felt playing their roles, they can realize past assumptions, experience increased empathy, and view other actors in the real-life scenario differently. In this simulation, some informal debriefing occurred while the simulation was taking place, which was interesting, and could lead to the formulation of a way to debrief periodically, perhaps after each meeting, to increase student reflection. The final debrief, in the form of the post-simulation survey, can also be implemented earlier, since the final summit will be enacted sooner, giving students the opportunity to interact with each other and not just the facilitator during de-briefing. Some de-briefing scenarios have included open sessions where students write their reactions and share as a class (Oertig 2010). A final recommendation would be to use the classic simulation de-briefing format, where the facilitator asks students to first describe what happened during the simulation (outcomes, interactions, etc.), overall conclusions, and then to describe how they felt about the experience.

Following this experiment, several mini-simulations were conducted in a similar class focusing on the Middle East during the spring semester of 2011. The author had used smaller role plays and short simulations in physical classrooms with positive learning outcomes, and it was decided to take the basic design outlined above and implement a smaller simulated activity. The reason for this is the overall higher levels of volatility in classroom discussion when studying this region online. For the class on the Middle East, the students were already working well in country groups; some early intervention and deadline setting helped enhance participation. The students were given an assignment to represent selected and specific members of each government and make policy statements on the current unrest in North Africa and other parts of the region. They then shared these perspectives in the class discussion forum for the week, the goal being the understanding of each country's political context during this time of

upheaval; each student, representing their country, responded to one of the statements, still in their role as a country representative. Assigning the students-specific leadership roles in this class worked well and corroborates the analysis above that the students should be given real roles.

In the Middle East class, students had less time to prepare and less interaction time, but nevertheless seemed to gain a new appreciation for the countries they were studying. Ten students responded to a post-simulation debriefing survey. One commented that it was “difficult... trying to form a response as the representative of a Middle East country. I had to wrap my head around someone whom I did not agree with the way they handle foreign or domestic policy. But it was a great experience. I had to ignore my own biases and give answers that reflected the country’s opinion, while trying to make it sound rational.” And another noted “Initially when I was first reading over the first assignment where we were assigned to release a statement as a response from our country—I wasn’t sure whether to be excited or to dread it. I actually became consumed with the assignment after my initial research because it pushed me to think about things critically in a way that I hadn’t before.” At the same time, there was again negative feedback about working in groups, particularly in an online class. In running simulations, it must be decided whether the benefits of group role playing, rather than individual, outweigh the negative aspects.

In conclusion, online simulations can be structured in a very similar manner to successful classroom simulations, utilizing the basic teaching software that so many of us now utilize in our online teaching. While the online format poses certain challenges, it also presents certain advantages. Creating an online sense of community is perhaps not as immediate as it can be in a face-to-face setting; however, it is certainly achievable, requiring the facilitator to take special care in this aspect of the design and the simulation management. The advantages are myriad, including an extended time frame, an abundance of instantly accessible online resources, the possibility of creatively setting up a unique simulation environment, and the potential of gaining contributions from every participant. At the very least, it seems to be a teaching tool that is as effective and fun online as it is in the physical classroom and one that can be modified to fit many different objectives and time frames in teaching international studies, and areas studies courses in particular.

### **Appendix A: Simulation Handout**

#### **Regional Simulation: Meeting 1**

It is time to begin our first Simulation activity!

*Context:* We will meet on the Discussion Board this week, and instead of a topic related to the weekly material, the posts will be about your country’s position on the topics. Use the Forum created for the meeting. You can post as many times as you like (for the points, everyone must post at least once and respond once, as usual). You should decide in your group who will post on what topic – or, you can make one long group post (just be sure to sign all of your names). What I recommend is to review the posts, and see which ones your country agrees or doesn’t agree with—try and persuade another country to see it your way!

*Goal:* The main objective is to build a regional consensus, if possible, on these topics in order to counter the power of the U.S. It may be that sub regional blocs are possible, i.e., certain countries agreeing on certain things. The quest for agreement is in preparation for the final Summit Meeting, which takes place within the OAS and will include the U.S. (I will represent the U.S.). I recommend perusing the OAS website, as well as the CELAC—Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (alternative to OAS)—remember, some coun-

tries in the region have proposed this as a forum for building regional strength and solidarity.

*Outcomes:* It is expected that there will be some agreement and some disagreement, which is what we are interested in discovering. The final outcome will be a recorded discussion within the region, which can be referred back to in preparation for the second meeting.

*Topics:*

- Free trade—as in free trade agreements, lessening restrictions on imports, etc.
- Economic liberalization—related to free trade, but also privatizing industries and government deregulation
- Democracy and human rights—democracy had been advancing in the region, but there are some perceived setbacks...
- Illegal drug trade—very relevant for some of your countries!
- Economic development—Latin America has the highest gap between the rich and the poor in the world – what is the best way to address poverty?
- Environment—many have been concerned about depletion of the rain forest, oil spills, chemicals leaching from mining, etc.

You do not need to address all of these questions in the first meeting – remember, you have another meeting before the summit. You also do not know which issues the U.S. will raise at the summit, so you want to be prepared for everything. Before posting you should read through the blogs to have a heads-up on what some of the countries' issues are.

## References

- ASAL, VICTOR. (2005) Playing Games with International Relations. *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (3): 359–373.
- ASAL, VICTOR, AND ELIZABETH L. BLAKE. (2006) Creating Simulations for Political Science Education. *Journal of Political Science Education* 2 (1): 1–18.
- CROOKALL, DAVID. (2010) Serious Games, Debriefing, and Simulation/Gaming as a Discipline. *Simulation & Gaming* 41 (6): 898–920.
- DOLAN, KATHLEEN. (2008) Comparing Modes of Instruction: The Relative Efficacy of On-Line and In-Person Teaching for Student Learning. *PSOnline*. Available at [www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org), doi: 10.1017/S1049096508080608.
- FOWLER, SANDRA M., AND MARGARET D. PUSCH. (2010) Intercultural Simulation Games: A Review (of the United States and Beyond). *Simulation & Gaming* 41 (1): 94–115.
- HAMANN, KERSTIN, PHILIP H. POLLOCK, AND BRUCE M. WILSON. (2009) Learning from “Listening” to Peers in Online Political Science Classes. *Journal of Political Science Education* 5 (1): 1–11.
- ICONS PROJECT. (2011). University of Maryland. Available at <http://www.icons.umd.edu>. (Accessed January 31, 2011.)
- KRAIN, MATTHEW, AND JEFFREY S. LANTIS. (2006) Building Knowledge? Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Global Problems Summit Simulation. *International Studies Perspectives* 7: 395–407.
- LANTIS, JEFFREY S. (1998) Simulations and Experiential Learning in the International Relations Classroom. *International Negotiation* 3 (1): 39–57.
- LOU, YIPING. (2004) Learning to Solve Complex Problems through Between-Group Collaboration in Project-Based Online Courses. *Distance Education* 25 (1): 49–66.
- MAIER, HOLGER, AND JUDI BARON. (2005) Developing Online Roleplay Simulations for Preparing Engineering Students for Multidisciplinary and International Practice. *Proceedings of the 2005 ASEE/AaeE 4th Global Colloquium on Engineering Education*.
- MARTIN, ANDREW. (2003) Adding Value to Simulation/Games through Internet Mediation: The Medium and the Message. *Simulation & Gaming* 34 (1): 23–38.
- MCINTOSH, DANIEL. (2005) The Uses and Limits of the Model United Nations in an International Relations Classroom. *International Studies Perspectives* 2: 269–280.
- OERTIG, MARGARET. (2010) Debriefing in Moodle: Written Feedback on Trust and Knowledge Sharing in a Social Dilemma Game. *Simulation & Gaming* 4 (3): 374–389.
- ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES. (2010). Available at <http://oas.org>. (Accessed Fall 2010.)

- RAYMOND, CHAD. (2010) Do Role-Playing Simulations Generate Measurable and Meaningful Outcomes? A Simulation's Effect on Exam Scores and Teaching Evaluations. *International Studies Perspectives* 11: 51–60.
- ROFE, J. SIMON. (2011) The 'IR' Model: A Schema for Pedagogic Design and Development in International Relations Distance Learning Programmes. *European Political Science* 10 (1): 103–117.
- SALMON, GILLY. (2005) Flying not Flapping: A Strategic Framework for E-Learning and Pedagogical Innovation in Higher Education Institutions. *Research in Learning Technology* 13 (3): 201–218.
- SALMON, GILLY. (2009) The Future for (Second) Life Learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 40 (3): 526–538.
- SHELLMAN, STEPHEN M., AND KURSAD TURAN. (2006) Do Simulations Enhance Student Learning? An Empirical Evaluation of an IR Simulation. *Journal of Political Science Education* 2 (1): 19–32.
- SLAGTER VAN TRYON, PATRICIA J., AND M. J. BISHOP. (2009) Theoretical Foundations for Enhancing Social Connectedness in Online Learning Environments. *Distance Education* 30 (3): 291–315.
- SMITH, M. CECIL, AND AMY WINKING-DIAZ. (2004) Increasing Students' Interactivity in an Online Class. *The Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 2 (3): ISSN: 1541-4914, Available at [www.ncolr.org](http://www.ncolr.org).
- STARKEY, BRIGID A., AND ELIZABETH L. BLAKE. (2001) Simulation in International Relations. *Education Simulation & Gaming* 32 (4): 537–551.
- STATECRAFT, K.. (2011). Digital World Construction. Available at <http://www.statecraftsim.com/>. (Accessed September 12, 2011.)
- STOVER, WILLIAM JAMES. (2005) Teaching and Learning Empathy: An Interactive, Online Diplomatic Simulation of Middle East Conflict. *Journal of Political Science Education* 1 (2): 207–219.
- SWAN, KAREN. (2002) Building Learning Communities in Online Courses: The Importance of Interaction. *Education, Communication and Information* 2 (1): 23–49.
- VINCENT, ANDREW, AND JOHN SHEPHERD. (1998) Experiences in Teaching Middle East Politics via Internet-Based Role Play Simulation. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* 98 (11), Available at <http://www.jime.open.ac.uk/>. (Accessed May 22, 2010.)
- WILSON, BRUCE M., PHILIP H. POLLOCK, AND KERSTIN HAMANN. (2007) Does Active Learning Enhance Learner Outcomes? Evidence from Discussion Participation in Online Classes. *Journal of Political Science Education* 3 (2): 131–142.