

Elizabeth Sheppard, PhD Candidate Sciences Po Paris

Proposition for the 3rd epsNet Workshop and training for first-time university teachers, Budapest Summer 2006

Teaching Europe: The use of simulations to motivate students

Introduction: making Europe more interesting and motivating to students

Teaching Europe as many first time teachers have learned is not an easy feat. For European students and foreign students alike, the processes, institutions and policies of European integration are complex entities. First time and even seasoned teachers are faced with the task of explaining and re-explaining the co decision procedure, the three pillars of the Maastricht Treaty or any other myriad of issues that can be daunting, confusing and complex even for the most jaded insider. Given that the EU is often considered an « unidentified political object within political science » fitting neither into the traditional State category nor that of international organizations such as the UN, and has thus given rise to many specialized concepts and theories, many students in my experience can benefit from a « hands on » approach. This, of course, can be educational visits to the European Institutions in Brussels or Strasbourg and talks with European lawmakers or bureaucrats. But, this is not always possible and can of course be quite costly. Yet, keeping students interested in something so complicated can be trying and original ideas are often in short supply.

Thus, other methods can be adapted to give the hands on feel, including the students in the European Union without even leaving the classroom and in a way which can even be considered fun (from what my students tell me) and thus of course all the more attractive and motivating for the students.

In the program in which I teach, we have adopted a strategy of simulating European Council meetings and negotiations. This form of simulation has been an increasingly popular way of « teaching the EU » in programs in the United States.

What does the simulation entail?

There are two stages of the simulation: the « negotiations » themselves that generally are held over an intensive two to three day period (Thursday afternoon to Saturday evening traditionally); the preparations that precede the actual negotiations. The first preparatory phase is quite important: students are assigned either individually or in groups of 2 a member state. Each member country of the European Union sends a delegation to the Council of the European Union summit. In reality, this delegation is comprised of the head of state/government, the foreign minister, and a team of high-level advisors. In the Model European Union simulation, the head of state/government and the foreign minister represent each country. These two individuals are the member countries' delegations to the Model European Union.

Students are reminded that the job required of the delegation can be quite precarious. The delegation must be prepared to balance the views of their countries with the view of the European Union and delegations must also be able to keep their personal views out of the meetings. Delegates, as with all participants, must stay in character at all times. As part of the delegation position, delegates must write a policy statement/position paper, collect information before and

during the Model EU about their countries, propose resolutions during the simulation, and must have a voice in the on-going debates throughout the Model European Union. To successfully navigate through the Model EU, a strategic mix of attentive listening, voicing opinion, brainstorming, coalition building, and drafting resolutions must be employed.

During the preparatory stages, delegations must write a policy paper stating their countries' views and addressing the agenda that has been set for that Council meeting.. The agenda is set by the « President » of the Council (whichever student is representing the country which is the incoming President of the EU) with the help of faculty and is generally based on the real agenda to come in the forthcoming Council meeting. For example, in our last simulation in December, our students found themselves negotiating the EU budget and British rebate while the real leaders were preparing to do the same and as news that the UK would be willing to put the rebate on the table came out, our students adapted their positions. In the preparatory phase, other countries can attempt to put onto the agenda other issues through the website that is created as an interface between the different students (and different schools) that participate.

The policy papers and the agenda are then put on a website, allowing the students to prepare for negotiations, positioning themselves with regards to their own countries position, but also those of the other Member States. This enables them to learn not only about « their » country but about the relationships between the Member States and the different coalitions that can or can not be formed around certain issues. I generally use this as a tool within the classroom throughout the semester, allowing them to discuss in class the positions of their countries on different policies (i.e. Agriculture, the Euro) and motivating them to find out more about countries and cultures that are often foreign to them and forcing them to attempt to understand and question these positions. Thus, students are equally prepared to form counter proposals and to meet with other delegations in smaller meetings during the simulation. Each delegation prepares a strategy

to optimize successes and minimize the obligation of accepting resolutions that are unfavourable to their interests. To do so, each member of the delegation familiarizes themselves with what issues are considered “critical issues” and which issues have some room to use in bargaining with other delegations.

At the « European Council Meeting » itself, we split into two groups one Council formation dealing with « internal issues » such as budget, agriculture etc. and one « external affairs » council dealing with enlargement, the Common Foreign and Security Policy etc. This allows a larger number of students to take part in debates. We also assign students posts of Commission representatives and Secretariat. And, finally, we also in the past have constituted a press corps that interviews the « heads of government » and each day either creates a Daily Journal or a daily news flash (audiovisual equipment permitting). Teachers oversee the daily roundtables, providing information when necessary.

Conclusion: The advantages of this strategy

This brief description of the simulation does not quite do it justice. The number of times I have overseen the preparations and accompanied my students in the negotiations has been enriching both for the students, according to their own testimonies, and for the professors. For the students, it gives them an opportunity to grasp the issues at hand outside of the typical textbooks, and moreover to understand the very real difficulties associated with deciding big issues with 25 member states sitting around a table, each with their own agenda. It also enables students to go and research policy positions that they would not otherwise do, motivating them and getting them personally involved. Many, from personal experience, get so involved that even after negotiations

end the first night, they spend the evening “negotiating” with their fellow heads of state—investing themselves in their positions as defenders of their country. On another level, beyond learning about Europe, it gives the students a chance to learn finer points in public speaking and get a first hand experience in negotiations. They get practice in dealing with the high pressures of government activities and it is also a great example of what would be expected of you in a real governmental position.