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TEACHING COLLEGE-LEVEL ASIAN POLITICS THROUGH SIMULATIONS IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to new educational modes has been disruptive in a number of ways and has posed significant challenges for college classes centered around active, face-to-face learning. However, disruptive does not mean disqualifying, and rich interaction can still occur in an online context. This chapter will discuss how simulations can be conducted online using synchronous and/or asynchronous technologies. Suggestions for how to implement simulations, including assignments and assessments, will be provided, followed by a discussion of how to utilize online capabilities to carry out simulations. I provide examples of two online platforms, Zoom and Slack, that can be used for simulations to provide practical options for those who have not conducted simulations online. Both platforms have rich user-support networks and relatively low learning curves. Basic features necessary for simulations, such as breakout rooms in Zoom or private channels in Slack, can be learned quite quickly and easily, either through start-up tutorials upon signing up for the service or through a brief exploration of the application.¹ A list of Asia-focused political simulations will be provided, as will resources for the use of simulations in political science classes in general, which include a number of best practices and a wide array of advice for getting the most educational benefit out of the simulations.

Planning Your Simulation

The first step to using a simulation is to decide what event or scenario you want to illustrate further with an active learning experience. The list of Asia-focused political science simulations listed below is one resource for deciding this. All simulations in that list are role-play scenarios, where students take on a particular role, be it a person, a group, or a country. For the purposes of this chapter, I will assume that you have already designed the content of the simulation or are using a ready-made simulation for your class, as designing a simulation from scratch is beyond the scope of this discussion.

Once you know what simulation you will be using, you can begin to plan the accompanying assignments and assessments that will provide structure for the students to help them prepare for the experience. First, students should be provided with an assignment that requires them to contemplate their role and goals for the outcome of the simulation. Position papers and policy memos work well here, as they require students to explicitly consider their role and how they should approach the situation or event being simulated based on that role. In addition to a more conversation-based debriefing after the simulation (more on synchronous and asynchronous discussions below), best practices suggest that students should also write a formal reflection paper considering how the simulation went. This should include discussion of their actions, where they think they succeeded or fell short in accomplishing their goals, and how they interpreted other students' actions, among other things. The real learning associated with simulations occurs during the whole-class debriefing and individual reflection, so real consideration needs to be given to how to implement them. The appendix provides examples of an assignment sheet and rubrics that I have used for simulations I have conducted, including for the pre-simulation paper, participation during the actual simulation, and the post-simulation reflection.

Conducting Your Simulation Online

In considering how to actually implement your simulation online, perhaps the biggest consideration will be whether it should be run synchronously, with everyone participating at the same time, or asynchronously, with students participating at different times. A combination of the two can also be used and may lead to the best student learning outcomes. I will discuss a platform that can be used for each type of implementation, as well as how the two may be integrated. The specific choices an instructor makes will likely depend on the idiosyncratic circumstances and logistical hurdles of their specific classes. For example, synchronous meetings will likely be easier to coordinate for smaller classes over larger ones, as individual schedules would need to be accommodated to find a mutually acceptable time,

while asynchronous implementation could accommodate classes of all sizes and a variety of personal circumstances that might impede synchronous learning.

Synchronous

Perhaps the most prominent piece of software for synchronous interaction among groups of people is Zoom (zoom.us), which played a significant role in many educators' shift to online learning in spring 2020, in part because of its ability to be directly integrated into many learning management systems such as Moodle or Canvas. Although the base-level subscription limits meetings of three or more people to just forty minutes, depending on the specific simulation and the extent to which asynchronous possibilities are utilized, one live session may be sufficient.² For instance, I utilized a simulation of a National Security Council meeting concerning the use of drone warfare in Pakistan in a South Asian Politics class. Because these simulations were designed to take place within a single sixty-minute class period, compressing it into forty minutes was not especially onerous. Alternatively, multiple live sessions can be utilized to recreate the feeling of typical class periods, with the use of breakout rooms or the chat function facilitating both small-group and whole-class interaction in the main conference area. These small-group discussions and negotiations could be between students playing the same role or students playing different roles who want to engage in more private discussions. In order to monitor participation and role adherence, instructors can rotate among discussions and have students complete a log about their "face-to-face" interactions: who they met with, what they discussed, and what the outcome of the interaction was.³ I utilized such a log in a simulation for an International Organization class to great success. I created a worksheet for the students with a table with all the roles and a reminder of what they should record about the meeting (who, topic, outcome). An example of this table is included in the appendix. One trade-off for using breakout rooms is that they actively take away from time spent in whole-group discussion and negotiation. If whole-group discussion is required by the simulation (for instance, multiple countries agreeing on a resolution, or the need to take a straw poll to gauge the popularity of particular proposals and discuss issues with all stakeholders simultaneously), this trade-off should be taken seriously, and perhaps further consideration should be given to asynchronous methods in tandem or as an alternative to synchronous participation.

Asynchronous

A key consideration for any asynchronous simulation platform is the ability to have multiple threads of conversation between a large number of combinations of participants. Features such as the ability to upload files to the platform may also be relevant. The platform I have used for asynchronous simulations is Slack (slack.com). Slack features the ability to create "public" channels of discussion visible to

everyone in the workspace (think of it as a chat room), as well as “private” channels visible only to select participants and direct messages that can accommodate up to eight participants. These possibilities allow for general discussion to which everyone is privy, as well as more private discussions between subsets of participants, probably focused on specific issues. In order for the instructor to monitor participation and role adherence, students must add the instructor to their private channels and include him or her in their messages. This can be remedied after the fact by having students copy and paste their private conversations into a direct message with the instructor, but speaking from experience, it is easiest if the instructor is included in the initial discussion thread.

Once the workspace has been created by the instructor and the students have registered, communication can occur at any time, allowing for additional flexibility in implementing the simulation. Students can also sign into the workspace using both their real name and their role identity so that their classmates know who they are interacting with both inside and outside of the simulation scenario. This may be especially important for classes that are strictly online, to help personalize the experience rather than keeping participants as nameless, faceless role identities.

Slack has additional features that may increase its utility. First, participants can upload files to Slack for other people to review, so if there is something specific that a participant wants others to review, that can easily be accommodated. Further, apps can be added to Slack to enhance its functionality. Zoom can be added, for instance, allowing Zoom meetings to launch from the Slack workspace, and an app called Polly allows for the creation of polls within the Slack interface. The free version of Slack places a limit on the number of apps that can be added, but even the limited number is sufficient for a robust simulation experience.

Combining Synchronous and Asynchronous

Especially with the basic Zoom subscription limiting multiparty meetings to just forty minutes, utilizing both Zoom and Slack may allow for a richer simulation experience than using either platform individually. Moreover, combining them is straightforward—Zoom can be used for whole-group discussions and negotiations that would benefit from a more conversational environment (as opposed to the stilted back and forth of asynchronous chat), while Slack can be used both asynchronously and synchronously for additional dialogue during the Zoom call, allowing for side bargains to be struck in small groups or between individuals while the broader negotiation is taking place. This means that the entirety of the forty-minute Zoom session can be spent resolving whole-group issues rather than trying to coordinate numerous synchronous meetings to accommodate both whole-group and small-group discussions. Moreover, in my experience, students prefer having some face-to-face (even if virtual) interaction with each other during a simulation, so even if the bulk of the simulation occurs asynchronously,

I would encourage instructors to consider at least one synchronous session to deliberate any lingering details and questions related to “solving” the simulation. Alternatively, as happened in one of my South Asian Politics simulations, students can also coordinate synchronous meetings on their own to supplement the asynchronous interactions. If they choose to do so, they can simply record the content and outcome of these discussions in their interaction log, described above.

Asia-Themed Politics/Political Science Simulations

I have discovered three resources that have multiple simulations, each related to political science topics in the context of Asia. Below, I provide a brief overview of each as well as a list of their specific Asia-themed simulations.

United States Institute of Peace (USIP)

Basic details

Available at: usip.org/simulations

Cost: free

Overview: These simulations focus on conflict and governance. They provide “public” information about the simulation scenario and “private” information about each role. Moreover, they provide rich and complex issues that often pit members of the same “team” (such as different factions of an armed ethnic group) against each other to highlight that real-life questions might not have any easy solutions.

Asia-Themed Simulation List

Nepal: Governance, Corruption, and Conflict

The Paris Peace Talks of December 1972–January 1973 (Vietnam)

The Cambodia Peace Settlement

Peacekeeping in Kashmir: An American Choice

Sri Lanka: Setting the Agenda for Peace

Model Diplomacy

Basic details

Available at: modeldiplomacy.cfr.org

Cost: free

Overview: These simulations deal with US foreign policy and national security. Each simulation takes the form of a National Security Council meeting, with the specific actors depending on the details of the simulation. Moreover, students can be assigned specific roles, such as secretary of state, or be given the general role of “advisor to the president.” Simulations provide both “public” information about the scenario and “private” information specific to a student’s role.

Asia-Themed Simulation List

Dispute in the East China Sea
Cyber Clash with China
Drones in Pakistan
Korean War in 1950
North Korean Nuclear Threat

International Communications and Negotiations Simulations (ICONS) Project

Basic details

Available at: icons.umd.edu

Cost: fee-based

Overview: The ICONS Project provides simulations dealing with a variety of international issues. Simulations provide both “public” information about the scenario and “private” information specific to a student’s role. ICONS simulations also come with their own native messaging system and are designed to facilitate entirely asynchronous participation.

Asia-Themed Simulation List

Border Dispute: The Temple of Preah Vihear (Thailand and Cambodia)
Crisis in North Korea
India-Pakistan Crisis
International Relations of Southeast Asia

Resources for Successful Simulations

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- McKee, Lauren. 2017. “Modeling Asia: An East China Sea Simulation.” *Education about Asia* 22(1): online supplement. Available from: <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/modeling-asia-an-east-china-sea-simulation/> (accessed August 26, 2020).
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Notes

¹For instance, if a user has the Zoom open in full-screen, icons for things like polling and breakout rooms appear at the bottom of the Zoom screen, making it easy to utilize these tools.

²In light of the continued possibility of remote instruction, many institutions that had previously used the base version of Zoom have upgraded to the professional version, which eliminates the forty-minute limit and adds additional features like polling.

³Zoom also allows participants to chat with each other and the host, and enables the host to record the meeting, which would provide another avenue for instructors to observe student participation.

Appendix: Assignment Sheet with Rubrics

Simulation Guidelines

Purpose: These simulations will provide you with the opportunity to experience firsthand the difficulties of international cooperation and the strengths and limitations of specific organizational bodies. In each simulation, you will take on the role of a country and advance that country's interest within the body being illustrated during the specific simulation—either the UN Security Council or the International Whaling Commission. You will see how realistic particular options are and the challenges of fostering agreement on and support of various proposals that may involve competing interests between other members of the organization.

This assignment will help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course, your academic career, and life beyond college:

- Clear communication skills
- Interest articulation and compatibility assessment
- Taking on particular points of view and operating from those perspectives
- Tying simulation activities back to core course themes and concepts

Tasks: For each simulation, you will complete the following assignments:

1. Position paper (10% of final grade total; 5% of final grade each). In these 900–1,500 word papers, you will identify your country's role in the world and in the organization, as well as discussing your country's interests and how you will try to see that those interests are met.
2. Participation in simulation (10% of final grade total; 5% of final grade each). During the simulations, you will utilize a variety of communication methods to try to meet your country's interests and goals during the simulation. You will keep track of what other countries you meet with, your goals, and the extent to which the meeting was successful.
3. Reflection paper (10% of final grade total; 5% of final grade each). In these 900–1,500 word papers, you will critically analyze your performance in the simulation and how the simulation relates to course material. You will discuss your strategy as well as the extent to which that strategy was successful and why. You will also discuss how various aspects of the simulation relate to course material.

Criteria for Success

Simulation Position Paper Rubric

Criteria	Description	Score
Country's role in world	Paper discusses country's general position in the international system. Discussion of state's power and its general ability to exert influence in the world and why.	/5
Country's role in organization	Paper discusses country's historical and contemporary role in the organization. Discussion of country's interests in the organization and its continued participation.	/10
Country's stance on issues	Paper articulates country's specific stances on the issues/resolutions to be considered. In cases where state interests are not fully met by proposals on each issue, discussion of what would be required for approval/agreement. In cases where proposals do conform to country's interests, discussion of how other countries' approval/agreement will be encouraged.	/20
		/35 (%)

Simulation Position Paper Rubric

Criteria	Description	Score
General participation	Student is present in class each day of simulation, makes active use of online platform, and is active in face-to-face interactions.	/5
Substantive participation	Student adheres to role identity and meaningfully interacts with classmates. In interactions, student is advancing role's interests. Student uses a variety of modes of communication to reach bargains and compromises.	/15
Daily participation/ contact log	Student provides record of interactions with other members of the class on provided handout. Student details who they interacted with, what they interacted about, and the outcome of the interaction.	/10
		/30 (%)

Simulation Position Paper Rubric

Criteria	Description	Score
Strategy	Paper discusses approach to playing role. Discussion of country's goals and how the country worked to achieve its goals.	/10
Outcome	Paper discusses extent to which outcomes aligned with the country's goals, discussing both own strategy and that of others and the response of others to own strategy. When aligned, discussion of how the outcome was obtained. When not aligned, discussion of why the country was unsuccessful in advancing its interests. Paper discusses what student would do to produce more desirable outcomes if simulation were attempted again.	/15
Course content/ themes	Paper contains sophisticated discussion of how the simulation illustrates course material. Attention is paid to class discussion and readings of specific organizations and/or issues. Sophisticated discussion of the extent to which the theories were highlighted and the ways in which they were highlighted.	/30
		/55 (%)

Individual Interactions Participation Log

Country interacted with	Topic of interaction	Outcome of interaction
Role 1		
Role 2		