Student Engagement and Deep Learning in the First-Year International Relations Classroom: Simulating a UN Security Council Debate on the Syrian Crisis

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Abstract
This paper evaluates a ‘real-time’ simulation where students role-play a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) negotiation over humanitarian intervention in Syria. This simulation is undertaken in a large introductory International Relations (IR) subject. The paper argues that in order to achieve deep learning outcomes across the diverse, contemporary cohort of first-year university students, active learning approaches need to be employed that engage differing learning styles and preferences. Deep learning is assessed across the conceptual and metacognitive knowledge domains with two indicators: (1) students’ understanding of IR concepts by applying them beyond the parameters of the Syria case; and (2) students’ critical reflection on their moral reasoning elicited by the task. We evaluate 821 students across six cohorts and 21 iterations of the simulation during 2016 and 2017 with a survey instrument and formal reflection assignment. The paper finds that the simulation is highly effective at consistently engaging the majority of students’ interest and motivation, while illustrating the acute and sometimes tragic tension between moral and political reasoning in IR. We found that disrupting student’s cognitive structures regarding human rights and justice stimulated not only deeper conceptual understanding, but also emotional reactions that were the catalyst for metacognitive reflection.

Introduction
It is well-established that active learning strategies such as role-play simulations are highly effective in fostering classroom engagement, considered as students’ interest, enthusiasm, motivation and enjoyment in their learning (Kahu 2013: 760-63; Lawson and Lawson 2013: 435-36). Engagement with their studies is an important factor in student retention and completion of degree programs, as well as student identification with their discipline area and satisfaction with their university experience. Student engagement has become a priority for universities with the opening of higher education to large proportions of the population from non-traditional tertiary education backgrounds and pathways. First-year university classes are often very large with great student diversity and fluctuating academic ability.
Research suggests that students entering university with lower educational ‘capital’ will be more engaged and perform best if teaching approaches align with their learning style (Waring and Evans 2015: 102), while students of high traditional academic ability can thrive across a range of learning tasks and settings (Biggs and Tang 2011: 8–11). Much of the newer cohort entering Australian universities, for example, has a preference for a kinaesthetic, or learning-by-doing approach (Crosley and Heagney 2009). Recent studies have found that well-designed simulations in the political science classroom can produce conceptual and metacognitive knowledge outcomes reflective of deep learning approaches across a broad section of the student cohort (Engel, Pallas and Lambert 2017).

Our teaching practice integrates student engagement through role play simulation with deep learning approaches in first-year International Relations (IR). We argue that in order to achieve deep learning outcomes across the contemporary cohort of first-year university students, active learning approaches need to be employed that engage differing learning styles and preferences. We seek to do this through a simulation of a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) debate over humanitarian intervention in the Syrian civil war. A problem-based, role-play simulation of this nature provides introductory learners with a positive first encounter with IR that stimulates their interest and motivation by convincing them of the ‘real-world’ relevance of the discipline. It does this more successfully than traditional lectures and tutorials by immersing students in the content and process of a multidimensional, ‘real-time’ humanitarian and security crisis (Zappile, Beers and Raymond 2017). The interplay between moral and political reasoning inherent in the task illustrates the perennial tension in IR between idealism and realism very effectively for first-year students. The simulation enables a significant proportion of students to abstract from the particulars and dynamics of the classroom activities to higher levels of cognition and to broader contexts.

There are a number of ways to conceptualise deep learning approaches and assess their outcomes. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the United States has produced a Deep Approaches to Learning Scale, which identifies three dimensions: higher-order, integrative and reflective learning (Campbell and Cabrera 2014). Drawing on a number of previous studies, Pettenger, West and Young (2014) advance a set of four knowledge domains to assess deep learning outcomes in simulated negotiations: the factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive domains. These are integrative in that
factual knowledge of the content and procedural knowledge of the task are required for higher-order conceptual knowledge. In both schema, metacognitive outcomes refer to students’ ability to reflect on their learning. Engel, Pallas and Lambert (2017) use this four-part framework to assess deep learning outcomes in their model UN subject, an upper year-level core course in an IR major. The authors found that deep learning was evident across each of the four knowledge domains, with the higher order indicators of conceptual and metacognitive knowledge particularly impressive in terms of their students’ understanding of IR theories and critical reflection on their learning processes.

There are a number of useful studies informing our simulation that address or touch on students’ ethical development in the IR classroom, but they do not directly examine the relationship between student engagement and deep learning outcomes (Lantis 2004; Youde 2008; Oestreich 2012; Stodden 2012). Taylor (2013: 136-37) includes moral reasoning in a discussion of the educational benefits for IR students of well-designed simulations for deep learning. In a major US study of 1457 first-year liberal arts students across 19 institutions, Mayhew et al. (2012) found that students’ moral reasoning can be developed through learning experiences that disrupt ‘existing cognitive structures for understanding justice’, by engaging them with new, more complex and diverse perspectives not ‘easily assimilated into familiar thought patterns’ (Mayhew et al. 2012: 27). The study found that active, student-centred learning environments conducive to deep learning approaches can be ‘mechanisms for moral reasoning development’ in first-year students, but must feature ‘unfamiliar, external stimuli’ relating to ‘justice and fairness’ that force students to re-examine their assumptions about the world (Mayhew et al. 2012: 27-28). Our simulation case study of the Syrian civil war profoundly disrupts many student’s cognitive structures and moral assumptions regarding human rights and justice in this way.

In building on this previous work, our objectives for the present study are to investigate the extent to which our simulation engages first-year students and enables them to abstract knowledge and meaning from the Syria case to understand foundational IR concepts and the inherent and sometimes tragic tension between moral and political reasoning. To this end, we also assess our student knowledge outcomes on the higher-order conceptual and metacognitive domains. We evaluate deep learning across two indicators: (1) understanding IR concepts by applying them beyond the immediate parameters of the case study; and (2) metacognitive knowledge; in this case students’ critical reflection on
their emotional reactions and moral reasoning elicited by the task. The simulation also fosters students’ practical skills in negotiation, problem-solving, policy writing and oral communication, but this is not the focus of this paper.

The evidence in this paper is drawn from the authors’ experience of teaching the introductory subject, 1001GIR International Relations at Griffith University, a large multi-campus public institution with 50,000 students in Southeast Queensland and Australia’s ninth-largest education provider. At the time of writing, the Syria simulation has been undertaken 21 times by 821 students during four teaching semesters during 2016 and 2017. The subject runs with three staff members across two campuses. In workshop classes of 30 to 45, student delegations adopt the positions of the permanent five (P-5) members of the UNSC and a humanitarian International Non-Government Organisation (INGO). The student cohort at Griffith is large and diverse. For example, in Semester 1, 2016, there were 234 students enrolled in Brisbane and 145 students at Gold Coast for a total of 379 students. Of these, 167 were in the International Business program and related double-degrees, and completing the subject as a compulsory first-year requirement. There were 55 other non-degree students taking the subject as an elective, leaving 157, or less than half, completing a political science or related double-degree. The subject featured 18 per cent international students, the majority from China, 33.4 per cent non-English speaking background, 15.3 per cent low socio-economic status, 25.8 per cent mature age (defined as 21 years old or greater), and 4.5 per cent with a disability. Ninety-two per cent of students were 24 years of age or fewer, with 65.4 per cent aged between 16 and 19 years.

The paper proceeds by introducing surface and deep learning approaches in the following section, and shows how our simulation topic and learning environment are conducive to students’ conceptual and metacognitive knowledge development. The second section outlines the design of the Syria simulation exercise, before focusing on its value for engaging the contemporary cohort of first-year students. The third section of the paper analyses the data collected to evaluate the simulation for student engagement and deep learning, and the fourth section reflects on improvements and future directions.

‘Real-Time’ Role Play Simulations and Deep Learning

The Syrian civil war is used as both a real-time and problem-based simulation dealing with current and enduring problems in IR. The nature of the conflict, the involvement of multiple
non-state and external state actors and the subsequent refugee crisis makes it both contemporary and attractive for a first-year IR cohort. The benefit of designing a real-time simulation is that because it operates ‘live’, it ‘represents an ongoing situation’ and ‘helps students engage with unfamiliar concepts in a more personal and immediate way than role-play exercises about events in the distant past’ (Zappile, Beers and Raymond 2017: 195). An important aspect of this is that the Syrian civil war and its consequences are socially-mediated to an unprecedented degree. The changing landscape of civil war, terrorism and human displacement in the Syrian conflict enables students to experience ‘first-hand’ the complex factors and power relations influencing the formation and implementation of policies for humanitarian action. The ‘real-time’ nature of the Syrian simulation reflects the degree of uncertainty in international diplomacy. This setting enables deep learning approaches with higher order learning outcomes that traditional textbook-based lectures and tutorials cannot provide.

The contrast between ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ learning approaches, and the teaching and learning environments that create them, is a major theme in pedagogical theory. Students employing a surface approach perceive learning tasks as an ‘external imposition’ and their primary goal is to adequately complete the requirements in a narrow utilitarian sense. Surface strategies identify ‘signs’ – key words or formulas that are seen as essential to gaining the ‘answer’ to the problem or task. Elements of the task are then treated in an unrelated manner and students ‘engage’ with the material for the purpose of gaining information for assessment items. Surface approaches often fail to differentiate between concepts and examples and therefore are unable to apply theory to practice (Ramsden 2003: 47; Biggs and Tang 2011: 24–26). Students adopting a surface approach can become anxious, frustrated and resentful if learning resources fail to provide these signs in an obvious way. Ramsden (1992: 46) concludes that surface approaches are ‘uniformly disastrous for learning’.

On the other hand, ‘deep’ or ‘holistic’ approaches are intrinsically-motivated with the intention to understand and abstract meaning. Rather than looking for ‘signs’, the focus is on what is ‘signified’, such as the author’s argument or the conceptual themes necessary to understand a phenomenon or solve a problem. Deep approaches relate previous knowledge to the current task and also integrate learning from other subjects. Students can distinguish concepts and arguments from evidence, and are able to meaningfully relate
theory to the empirical world (Ramsden 2003: 47, 52–55; Biggs and Tang 2011: 26–27). Deep learning is more enjoyable and creates a sense of ownership and mastery of the material. Weber (2013: 136) makes the point that ‘deep learning is both intellectual and emotional’, in that strong emotions and feelings can emerge from the ‘self-revelatory feedback’ inherent to this approach. This is crucially important in our study, where student’s emotional reactions to the human suffering in the Syria case prompted their metacognitive reflections on the tensions between moral and political reasoning.

Our initial intention in fostering deeper learning outcomes was to use the simulation to directly illustrate foundational IR concepts and contemporary global themes such as: state sovereignty; anarchy and the international system; the changing nature of war and security; international law and organisation; human rights, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P); identity politics and the religious resurgence; and aid and development, through experiential learning. As our simulation has evolved, the UNSC debate over humanitarian action in Syria has become the centre-piece of the course, with the lecture program and learning resources supporting it. We seek to provide a learning environment where students directly apply concepts to practice through role-play. In doing so they gain a deeper understanding of IR, which serves as a knowledge foundation for upper year level subjects, and also contributes to their personal development as responsible global citizens.

The Syria simulation places students at the centre of decision-making where they must develop and debate foreign policy positions in the context of a rapidly changing real world humanitarian and security crisis. Students have to practice negotiation, problem solving and conflict resolution skills under tight time constraints, which stimulates their creativity, innovation and understanding more effectively than in traditional classroom settings. To reach an agreement on humanitarian action, students bargain with their peers and must be creative in developing potentially successful proposals in order to build consensus for a UNSC Resolution. Students have to understand their state’s foreign policy position, develop humanitarian proposals consistent with this, and advance strategies for how to pass these proposals relative to the positions and policies of other groups and consistent with international law. We argue that this approach is highly beneficial to developing students higher order conceptual knowledge.
At the outset, we did not anticipate the full potential of the simulation to develop students’ ethical awareness and moral reasoning. The Syrian conflict raises many enduring moral dilemmas in IR and international law; for instance, the acute tensions between state sovereignty and humanitarian intervention, national interests and R2P, and cultural relativism and universal human rights. All of these moral dilemmas prompt students to think critically about their ethical position in the world and what they as individuals can, and should do, in the global community. We also came to realise that it was students’ emotional reactions and empathetic responses that prompted their metacognitive reflection.

**Simulation Design**

The entire duration of the 13-week semester is dedicated to the simulation activity. Classes consist of twelve 1.5-hour lectures and eight 1.5-hour workshops. The simulated negotiations occur in workshops six and seven, with a mock press conference in workshop 8 to debrief and discuss the related assessment (Policy Memorandum and Reflection). In the preparatory workshops leading up to the negotiations, students take part in discussions, debate and group activities on the role and structure of the UNSC, debates on UN reform and the veto provision, and the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention and R2P, including when the use of force becomes necessary and justified to protect at-risk populations.

The workshops then shift to focus directly on the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis. Students are tasked with justifying possible humanitarian options, including a small- to large-scale military intervention with a peacekeeping mission; the establishment of no fly zones, humanitarian corridors and/or UN safe zones; and refugee evacuation and/or resettlement. The motivations for, and constraints and consequences of such proposals are analysed and evaluated, with students casting a vote to determine which two proposals their workshop class will take into the negotiations. Position papers are provided to students outlining Syria’s historical and political background and the key foreign policy principles of each UNSC P-5 member. The position papers do not provide the ‘answers’, but serve as resources outlining the determinants of the respective P-5 members’ foreign policy outlook and position on contemporary developments in the Middle East after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

While students choose their potential humanitarian options in advance of the negotiations, the more intricate logistical details and political conditions comprise the bulk
of negotiations during the two simulation classes. Allowing students to actively choose their preferred humanitarian options provides a platform to meaningfully engage with the substance of their proposals; students are challenged to think beyond the perspective of their state as they consider building alliances with others, or conceding to demands placed on them. In the uncertain, fast-paced and often-tense political environment of the simulated negotiations students experience and come to understand the obstacles in creating a UNSC Resolution. In addition to student groups representing the P-5 members of the Security Council, the simulation design also includes a group of INGO representatives. The role of the INGO group is to lobby the P-5 members to intervene in Syria for humanitarian purposes. They are tasked with convincing members of the Security Council that it is necessary to take action to ameliorate the humanitarian and refugee crisis under a collective moral responsibility.

Evaluation and Discussion

Engagement

We assessed student’s responses to the simulation task via a survey instrument, through qualitative comments on anonymous student evaluations of the subject, and in a formal written reflection assignment. Simulations are considered a highly effective pedagogical tool in IR for engaging students (see Shaw 2010; Bridge and Radford 2014: 423; Pallister 2015: 364; Glazier 2015: 266–67). A survey of first-year subject convenors within Australia in 2016 revealed that simulation exercises were seldom undertaken in introductory IR classes. This is due to the large cohort sizes at Australian public universities, associated institutional constraints, and apprehension about how to design and implement an effective simulation for introductory learners. Some institutions tend to adopt simulations in the second and third year, when class sizes are smaller, students are undertaking their specialisation in political science, and it is presumed that foundational knowledge has been gained. The findings from this study strongly support the contention that real-time, role play simulations can be highly effective at engaging students in large introductory subjects. Student feedback on the Syria simulation was overwhelmingly positive and consistent across each cohort with regard to classroom engagement. At the end of each semester, students were asked whether the simulation task was ‘more engaging and interesting compared with other types of classes’ they had experienced. Overall, across our six cohorts to date, 89 percent of
students responded with highly or very highly. A similar percentage of 87.5 percent was reflected in whether the simulation activity was considered to be more fun and enjoyable than other classes.

The simulation sparks more interest and greater motivation than other learning environments and tasks by creating an atmosphere that something more important than usual is happening in the class. The interplay between collaboration and competition in the simulation adds a heightened sense of tension and excitement to the proceedings. These dynamics in-turn foster increased curiosity in the students, who become intensely interested in what other groups or participants are doing with the content relative to them (Mikalayeva 2016: 216-18). In this respect, one student commented, ‘This course was probably the most interesting, exciting and fun out of all four that I have participated in this Semester. The simulation exercise made learning topics much easier and enjoyable’.

Krain (2010: 292) argues that ‘increasing the types of sensory experiences that students have with the material during the learning process ... enables students with different learning styles to access and retain the material’. We found that our simulation design, along with the use of customised learning tools and appropriate preparatory and reflective activities enhanced the learning experience for most students. It does this by creating multiple roles, tasks and responsibilities that are adaptive to variations in student learning styles, preferences and levels of commitment. Students were also able to make friends more easily because of the interactive nature of the task, which engenders a sense of group solidarity. This is very important for first-year students’ transition to university life and building a cohort experience (Vinson et al. 2010: 132). Students commented: ‘I enjoyed the simulation as it was engaging and encouraged everyone to get involved and to participate’; and ‘I thoroughly enjoyed the workshops. They were very intense and inclusive and I found I learnt more than I expected to. I was able to make friends easier and it allowed us to express ourselves ... It allowed students all to collaborate and to enjoy themselves with the content from the lectures’.

The peer-to-peer learning aspect, where students take ownership and initiative in researching and creating content collaboratively, and progressing the simulation activity, also feeds into the sense of enjoyment. Students take greater responsibility for their learning, because the simulation requires them to take risks and make decisions based on real-time feedback, independently of the instructor. In this respect, another student
commented, ‘The simulation was really well done and very engaging and was a very good way of bringing fellow students together as well as showing the real world ramifications of policies and the complexities of negotiating’. We can conclude from the evidence that most students found the simulation enjoyable, meaningful and highly engaging, compared with other learning environments and tasks they had experienced in their studies.

Deep Learning

Our next objective was to assess whether heightened engagement translated into deep learning outcomes in the conceptual and metacognitive knowledge domains. For this purpose, we analysed students’ formal Reflection assignments where they are encouraged to critically reflect on the structure of the simulation as a classroom activity, and on their learning process in relation to it. To facilitate this, students complete an early reflection worksheet at the beginning of the semester about their awareness and knowledge of the UNSC and Syria conflict, and their expectations for the simulation. They can use this resource as a base-line for reflection on their learning process throughout the semester. Students are also provided with a set of general questions to guide their thinking, although there is no mandated structure for the Reflection.

Our analysis found that overall, 41 percent of students across the six cohorts demonstrated deep learning outcomes, as defined above, in their written Reflection assignment. In the survey, 86 per cent of students responded that the simulation enhanced their content learning compared with other modes of instruction, and the majority of students were able to apply IR concepts to practice in their Policy Memorandum assignment within the context of the UNSC and Syria case. More valuable from a deep learning perspective, was that in their Reflection document, 30.6 percent of students abstracted conceptual knowledge from the Syria case and applied it to IR more broadly, demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding.

Evident also was a marked improvement in these deep learning outcomes for the 2017 cohorts compared with 2016. As shown in the below table, 48.0 percent of the 2017 cohort demonstrated these deep learning outcomes compared with 33.9 percent in 2016.
### Table 1: Deep Learning Outcomes, 2016-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge Domains</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals*</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A number of students demonstrated both indicators

We attribute this to improvements made to the pedagogical structure of the subject overall, design of the simulation, guidance provided for students in class and for their assessment, and to our greater experience with facilitating these classes effectively. After the 2016 offerings, students in some instances felt there was a disjuncture between the lecture content and the simulation. For 2017, the simulation was recast as the ‘centrepiece’ of the subject, with the lecture content streamlined and reorganised to provide the necessary historical background, conceptual tools and content knowledge in a more targeted and integrated way. A number of new resources were developed for the 2017 cohort to enhance the learning experience. One of our 2016 simulation classes was filmed and packaged as a learning and teaching exemplar, which was useful in familiarising the 2017 cohort with the task in advance and reducing their uncertainty. A more structured approach was taken with the preparatory classes, with worksheets provided for each. Competitive Kahoot quizzes were employed for revision of the foreign policy position papers, which also served to foster group solidarity and build excitement. A mock Press Conference was introduced in 2017, which made for a more focused debriefing session after the negotiations.

Another perceived weakness in the 2016 simulation structure was the role of the INGO group. This is readily attributable to the simulation prioritising the UNSC as the decision-making apparatus. Members of the INGO group at times felt redundant without voting privileges. For 2017, the INGO groups were given clearer instructions, a greater formal role in proceedings and encouraged to participate more extensively in the unmoderated caucus sessions. In the 2017 classes, the INGO groups played more of a ‘broker’ role between P-5 members – in suggesting potential humanitarian options and the necessary logistics and protection requirements. We suggest that these improvements to the simulation structure and learning environment enabled a greater proportion of students to demonstrate deep learning outcomes.
Deep Learning: Conceptual Knowledge Domain

Introductory IR subjects are most students’ first exposure to theoretical concepts in the social sciences, the dynamics of power in the international system, the complexity of global issues, and the role and limitations of international law and organisations (Taylor 2013: 134). It is crucial in first-year IR classes to engage students by bridging meaningful connections between theoretical concepts and practical topics with which students can identify. We found that the Syria simulation is particularly effective in bridging theory and practice by placing students in the position of decision makers in an international crisis. In this way, they can directly experience the motivations, constraints and emotions of international actors (Shaw 2010; Boyer and Smith 2015: 315).

On the first indicator of applying theory to practice beyond the parameters of the UNSC debate on Syria, three main themes were evident from the qualitative data. One is a greater understanding of non-Western political worldviews in IR. The structure of the simulation forces students to either adopt or understand worldviews foreign to their own country. For instance, it is not often that students in Australia analyse global issues directly from a Chinese or Russian foreign policy perspective. One student commented, ‘The greatest lesson I found in representing Russia was that for the most part I felt their foreign policy reflected a simple self-interest model that is very evident in the Western nations however nowhere nearly as condemned’. Another student commented that:

Roleplaying as China was extremely helpful as it gave me an insight into China’s foreign policy that I had never understood before ... Their foreign policy of ‘non-interference’ and seeking to ensure that sovereignty remains a steadfast principle in international relations made sense to me. I began to realise the implications of the degradation of sovereignty and how China’s foreign policy stems from their own past and 100 years of humiliation. In the way this simulation has broadened my knowledge and changed my view on the world, I would say it has been a rich experience.

The second theme was a deeper appreciation of the complexity of global issues and the difficulties of diplomacy and collective action in IR. By using the UNSC as a field of operation for great power politics, students could relate to the acute tensions between national interests, international law and humanitarian norms, which with conventional teaching methods can be difficult to grasp. For example, one student remarked, ‘The immense difficulty of navigating fundamentally opposing foreign policy positions was brought home to me ... Great power dynamics still govern humanitarian decision making,
and a rules-based international order comes with a range of compromises’. The simulation also encourages students to explore the political, economic and normative rationales that guide actors in foreign policy negotiations and decision-making, and how these positions may synergise or not. On this theme, another student reflected:

Although at times frustrating, I think these negotiations were the most valuable aspect of the simulation. International relations is fundamentally about power and I think this was obvious during the negotiations – trying to compromise without disregarding national interest and reach a mutually agreeable outcome is difficult. I think the simulation was an excellent practical example of these power politics at play and how complex international issues can get.

The third, more general theme was a deeper understanding of IR concepts. From our experience of teaching introductory IR, we observe that many commencing students find the foundational concepts of sovereignty and anarchy abstract, and difficult to understand at first. The simulated UNSC negotiations are very effective in allowing students to directly experience the practical implications of these concepts and hence understand them more deeply. In reflecting on expectations prior to the simulation, the majority of students anticipated learning about UN peacekeeping and the enforcement of international law. Later in the semester, many students commented on the unexpected learning outcomes experienced during the simulation. For example, one student remarked that they were ‘surprised to discover the difficulty of enforcing international law amongst nations that value state sovereignty … [this] was a concept I never expected’. Another observed that the P-5 ‘member state groups were more concerned with what they would get out of it [the negotiations], as shown by the fact that the world lives in a state of anarchy due to no world government. I never fully understood … how much this influences everything’.

The Syrian civil war also allows for a case study that is rich with political, ethnic and religious tensions, therefore providing students with a deeper understanding of the layers of complexity surrounding transnational conflict, civil war and identity politics. One student commented that the ‘Syrian Civil War case was very useful at explaining the multi-level, multi faction conflicts that are becoming more common place in today’s time’, while also recognising the more enduring theme that ‘super power states carry massive influence and often fight ideological battles via the use of smaller weaker states’. Another remarked that the complex geopolitics surrounding the Syrian civil war provided an interesting foundation for exploring the fundamental concepts of international relations. The
large number of regional player allowed me to gain a valuable insight into the
dynamics of power between state and non-state actors and apply my knowledge of
transnationalism, learnt from the lectures.

Prior to the simulation, students generally fail to appreciate the structural and legal
constraints in the international system against humanitarian intervention. We found that
students are often incredulous when it becomes clear that the UNSC, as the institution
charged with maintaining international peace and security and upholding human rights,
consists of states which are deeply implicated in the Syrian civil war. This is compounded
when students come to realise these states are also divided by competing national interests,
making effective humanitarian action extremely difficult, even with widespread acceptance
of the R2P norm. For example:

Being actually able to negotiate with people and running into the difficulties of
sovereignty, R2P, the limitation of international law and how politics for some
countries trumps human life was very effective. It was very eye opening to
experience how difficult it can be to come to an agreement just to provide aid for
civilians, enhancing my understanding and wouldn’t as effective without the
simulation.

These responses to the simulation illustrate student learning transcending the surface level
to deeper understanding. By experiencing in an immediate way the structural constraints on
humanitarian intervention and the limitations of international law, students come to
recognise and appreciate the condition of anarchy in the international system and tension
between state sovereignty and cosmopolitan norms. These ‘light-bulb’ moments are
challenging to produce for most students in a traditional lecture and tutorial environment,
but are critical for generating deeper understanding of foundational IR concepts.

**Deep Learning: Metacognitive Knowledge Domain**

Role-play simulations are effective as they not only stimulate students at a high-level
cognitively, as shown, but also appeal to them emotionally. The below evidence suggests
that students’ emotional reactions are an important catalyst for metacognitive reflection.
We found that the tragic humanitarian consequences of the Syrian civil war made it
challenging and emotionally exhausting for many first-year students. On the second
indicator of metacognitive knowledge, the main theme that emerged from the qualitative
data was students’ critical reflection on the tensions between political and moral reasoning
in IR, which was often spurred by their emotional responses. Few commencing students
enter the simulation classes with any knowledge of the UNSC, Syria crisis or context of the Arab Spring uprisings. Their everyday notions of morality tend to be deontological and reflect a cosmopolitan worldview. Many students are shocked that something like the Syrian civil war could ‘still be going on in this day and age’, and feel that the international community has a moral obligation to alleviate the human suffering. Numerous students mentioned their alarm and frustration that P-5 member-states would prioritise their own interests over those of people who really need help. For example:

It was extremely frustrating that all countries, including the US, were more concerned with the politics of the negotiations and the enactment of their foreign policy objectives, than providing humanitarian aid and protection for the innocent civilians in Syria. It was extremely hard to believe that countries were prioritising their foreign policy agendas over the human rights of the civilians suffering in Syria.

As this comment suggests, political reasoning can seem quite alien to students at first when confronted with a situation of great human suffering. To put it simply, students struggle to ‘think like a state’. Consistent with Youde’s (2008) simulation of the Darfur conflict, we found that our Syria case tempers student idealism about humanitarianism, encouraging a more nuanced and mature approach that balances compassion with political realities. For example, in succinctly addressing these moral tensions, one student reflected: ‘I learnt that it is not so much a matter of doing what is right, it is a matter of doing what serves your country and people’s best interests’. Other student comments illustrated this finding. For example:

This conflict between my own beliefs and others actions, did however assist with developing a sense of resilience to P-5 motives and compassion for the Syrian civilians. Participating in the simulation decreased my naivety … as it forced me to consider all factors when negotiating and appreciating the value of a compromise.

Having experienced the constraints on humanitarian action first-hand, a proportion of students continued to strongly express empathy and compassion towards the situation, but with a deeper understanding of the practical difficulties of taking a cosmopolitan approach. One student captured this sentiment in commenting that ‘states are too self-interested to be “moral” and I don’t believe they will ever intervene for the right reasons’. But ‘people can be driven by compassion and empathy as opposed to self-interest’. ‘Based on the concern I saw in the simulation, I believe that genuine humanitarian intervention can be
implemented through compassionate civilians pressuring their governments to act for the right reasons’.

We observed that students representing P-5 members did not anticipate the extent to which their state’s foreign policy position would be in tension with their personal moral one. We found that this ‘fractured’ students’ idealism, disrupting their assumptions about human rights and justice in the world, thus prompting deep moral reflection. This supports the findings of Mayhew et al. (2012) cited above, and demonstrates the value of a role play environment that can elicit these responses. The simulation design, with its scaffolded week-by-week structure, provides the mechanism for this. After 6 weeks of exposure to the Syrian conflict, those students that start out with little knowledge, or enter the class relatively neutral about the humanitarian consequences, are more invested in proceedings and have a personal stake in the outcomes. We observed that is was the emotional conflict between adopting their state or group’s position, and their level of personal investment in achieving a humanitarian solution, that provided the catalyst for moral reasoning and deep learning outcomes in the metacognitive domain. This is reflected in the following student comment:

I still struggled on an emotional level with states policies to not get involved if it affected state sovereignty or their own interests in the country. However, I did feel that I learnt that there is an important balance to be struck between the politics of a matter and human emotion.

From our experience, reading about the topic and discussing it in tutorials would not produce similar depth in emotional responses and moral reflection for most students. We infer from the data and our observations that being assigned to role play their state or group generates a heightened level of emotional commitment from students, which is reinforced by a sense of group solidarity. This ensures both a personal and collective stake in the proceedings independent of the instructor and instrumental considerations of grades. The design of the simulation activity thus encourages intrinsic-motivation and a learning environment where larger proportions of first-year students across different learning styles can adopt deep learning approaches.
**Reflection and Improvements**

The qualitative data also identified areas of student concern with the simulation design. The most common criticism was that more time was required for the actual simulation sessions: that the two 1.5-hour workshop classes did not allow enough time for effective deliberation and drafting of Resolutions. We have not sought to change this by adding more time or an additional class. Despite their frustration, we are convinced that students’ creativity and innovation is stimulated by negotiating and problem solving under the tight time pressures of the existing simulation design. Another area of concern is uneven student participation in their groups. Students engaged in leadership roles as Ambassadors have more direct involvement in negotiations, public speaking and problem solving compared with other students that are engaged in research, note-taking or advisory tasks. Students are encouraged to rotate the Ambassador role and a number of groups adopt this strategy. Thus far, intra-group negotiations over roles and responsibilities have been left to students to navigate independently. This could be addressed by a more directed allocation of group roles by staff. However, one of our intentions for the simulation, outlined earlier in the paper, is for group roles to align with students’ learning preferences and levels of commitment. We also feel that allowing students to autonomously negotiate intra-group dynamics fosters group solidarity and enhances their ownership of the task.

Approximately 10-15 percent of students across the cohorts rated the simulation as average or less across the survey questions compared with other types of instruction. This finding confirms that active learning of this nature does not suit a minority of students. International students from more traditional educational backgrounds found the simulation classes very difficult and in some cases alienating. This was partly due to their level of English language proficiency, but also the dissonance between their passive, surface learning expectations and the highly active and autonomous nature of the simulation. Some high-achieving upper year level students taking the course as an elective struggled with their formulaic expectations of doing well based on passive teaching approaches applied in other subjects. The simulation also had a large participation weighting, which caused problems for those students unable to attend classes, or less-motivated students unwilling to commit to attending classes. An alternative written assessment was available for these students, but there was little take-up of this (see also Mikalayeva 2016: 220-222 on the negative aspects of active learning).
A more substantive area of concern identified is that the simulation in its current structure does not have a Syrian delegation. We recognise that without a Syrian delegation the simulation misses the opportunity for local ownership of the political process. From an IR perspective, the inclusion of a Syrian delegation would present the opportunity for students to experience the tensions between international and local ownership in humanitarian assistance. Preparatory workshops leading up to the simulation focused on the flawed interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Students came to understand the complexities and consequences of foreign occupations fuelled essentially by a Western-centric worldview. The inclusion of Syrian and regional actors in the negotiation process would provide a platform for local voices. By also including a Syrian, Iranian, Turkish or Arab League delegation students could experience not just great power politics between the P-5 members, but also understand how the Syrian conflict impacts key regional players and foreign relations within the Middle East. We have taken the position that this is prohibitive in terms of logistics and complexity at this time. In the existing simulation format, instructors provide these perspectives where appropriate.

Conclusion
There is a large and developing literature on the merits of active learning simulations in political science. We have sought to demonstrate that appropriately-designed ‘real-time’ role play simulations are not only beneficial for upper year level students, but can be highly effective at engaging first-year students in large introductory subjects across differing learning styles and levels of academic preparedness and commitment. Combined with the nature of the Syria case, this heightened student engagement produced deep learning outcomes across a significant proportion of the cohort. The simulated UNSC negotiations over humanitarian intervention in Syria clearly illustrate to students the acute and sometimes tragic tension between moral and political reasoning in IR. We found that this disrupted many student’s cognitive structures regarding human rights and justice quite profoundly, stimulating not only deeper conceptual understanding, but also emotional reactions that were the catalyst for metacognitive reflection and moral reasoning. Another method of evaluation, such as a focus groups or student interviews would likely elicit further evidence of deep learning outcomes and will be employed in assessing future cohorts. Evidence of deep learning could then be correlated with other variables, such as
students’ learning styles, degree program, gender, socio-economic background, and whether they are an international or domestic student. This would provide a richer and more nuanced assessment to better inform our pedagogical approach for future classes and projects of this nature.

A major theme in the literature on the use of simulations is that they incur greater costs in time and effort than a traditional lecture and tutorial format. With increasing pressures on academics for research performance and external grant income, these costs may be prohibitive. However, for those with a special interest in political science pedagogy, there are intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and rewards. Simulations are powerful learning tools for both staff and students in that much of what occurs is beyond the instructor’s direct control. This allows for the staff-student experience to evolve together in a genuine learning partnership. Orchestrating an environment where students really extend their thinking, skills and capacities, rise to the occasion and take pride in their work is highly rewarding, ‘addictive’ even, from a teaching perspective. There are also valuable professional development and scholarship of learning and teaching opportunities for academics with a teaching focus.

References


