**What’s the EU? Achieving learning outcomes and preparing U.S. students for EuroSim**

**Rebecca Jones, Widener University**

Creating simulations and preparing students for participation in political or social science focused simulations is both challenging and time-consuming. Preparing U.S. students for effective and beneficial participation in a simulation of the European Union increases the challenge. Most U.S. students are unfamiliar with the European Union at best and completely unaware of its existence at worst. How does one go about not only introducing the EU, but helping students arrive at a point where they are effective and engaged policy-makers within the EU simulation? And, given the potential difficulties in preparation, why would one choose to engage students in such a simulation? While preparing students to successfully participate in an EU simulation presents challenges both in terms of understanding and time constraints, the results can be eye-opening and are beneficial not only for content knowledge but are valuable for gaining practice and experience with life-skills such as leadership, negotiation, and group work. Previous research (Jones 2008; Jones and Bursens 2015) utilizing pre- and post-simulation surveys has examined capacity of EuroSim, a simulation of the EU, to provide a venue for affective learning as defined by Greenblat (1973, 1975) and Szafran and Mandolini (1980). This chapter will explore the challenges inherent in preparing U.S. students for EuroSim, the extra-curricular benefits for students that come from participation in such a simulation, and the improved achievement of learning goals through the inclusion of a simulation into the curriculum as a high impact practice.

**High Impact Practices (HIPs)**

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on student learning outcomes and high impact practices, as a means of achieving those learning outcome goals, in mission statements and within the institutional goals and outcomes of colleges and universities. In the United States, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has created a list of high impact practices which includes writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, and diversity/global learning (experiential) among others (AAC&U 2008). In general, learning outcomes of such high impact practices have centered on effective oral and written communication, critical thinking, understanding and appreciating diversity, and quantitative reasoning in addition to the cognitive, discipline-based knowledge that is expected within any given major field of study. Colleges and universities are refocusing their institutional goals around these learning outcomes and the use of high impact practices to achieve those goals, and accreditation bodies expect to see them outlined and assessed as a part of the accreditation process.

Simulations, both in class and as co-curricular or extra-curricular activities, are a high impact practice that encompass a number of these learning goals within one activity. Simulations are also viewed as a more effective means of teaching facts and theories than traditional lectures because, as Shellman notes, students are required “to analyze specific situations, reflect on their observations, confront problems, and develop their own ideas” (Shellman 2001: 827). Dougherty agrees, pointing out that simulations comprise “a number of broad practical and pedagogical goals” (Dougherty 2003: 240). Simulations in use in political science classes cover many of the functions of Congress, state and local-level policy making, parliamentary government, and the EU’s legislative process (see for example Ciliotta-Rubery and Levy 2000; Woodworth et al 2005; Zeff 2003). As Watson noted over forty years ago, simulations and games “serve as vehicles through which the individual can practice communication skills, and experiment with strategies and tactics of social interaction. In games the individual is able to learn about and try out new or potential social roles” (Watson 1975: 43). Figueroa sums it up best stating “…simulations are effective pedagogical tools for teaching both course content and transportable practical/analytical skills that successful active leaders require today” (Figueroa 2014: 113).

Disciplines such as nursing and business management have used simulations in order to prepare their students for life after university and give them exposure to specific situations they are likely to encounter once they enter their chosen profession. However, there are some differences between simulations in these professional schools and simulations conducted within or alongside of courses in social and political science.

In nursing and other medical simulations, students are able to repeat the simulation multiple times both to increase cognitive knowledge as well as to improve their practical and physical skills and become familiar with the appropriate response to a specific situation (see for example McGaghie et al 2006; Scherer et al 2016). Additionally, nursing and medical students engage in experiential learning in the form of clinicals where they perform tasks alongside doctors and nurses and deal with real patients. Gore et al (2015) found that the use of a simulation versus experience in clinicals did not show a statistically significant difference in perceived learning between the simulation and the clinical experience. However, this finding boosts the argument that practicing skills, whether in a simulation or in a real-world context is valuable in building cognitive knowledge as well as expertise in other areas such as leadership.

In a business school environment, simulations are often used to demonstrate problems and practices that students are likely to encounter once they finish school and move into the work place (Swansbrough 2003). As with simulations in nursing and medical programs, many business simulations allow students to repeat the simulation multiple times until desired outcomes are reached. Gurley and Wilson found that repeated attempts in a self-paced, on line simulation did provide “…an excellent opportunity to couple both conceptual learning with practice that is self-paced in [a] safe environment” (Gurley and Wilson 2011: 10). Repeat participation in a simulation, on line, in class, or in a hospital setting, clearly provides students with necessary hands-on practice that will be invaluable when they move into the “real world.” Given these findings, it can be argued that the use of simulations is even more necessary in political science classes; real world contexts in government or policy making are extremely malleable and have many potential outcomes that cannot necessarily be anticipated. Additionally, it is unlikely that the same policy outcome will be reached twice, therefore repeating a simulation is not necessarily going to lead to the same outcome. However, repeated practice in negotiation, working in groups, leadership, etc. will lead to increased ability for students in those skillsets.

Simulations in political science are usually based on government creation of, or response to, a policy. In these simulations, the outcome could be the same as real life or it could be different; unlike a simulation in a nursing class, there is no “right” answer. Additionally, political science simulations usually ask students to inhabit another role, whether real or fictional, and to respond as that person would, rather than as the student themselves would in a similar situation. In these situations, it is not possible for the student to repeat the simulation exactly. Political/social science simulations require less specific preparation in terms of distinct tasks or actions, rather more general preparation is required regarding negotiation, communication, leadership, and diplomatic skills, the use of which varies depending on the situation at hand.

In-class simulations tend to require less pre-simulation preparation on the part of the students. The goal of many of these simulations is to have students immediately use knowledge and theories they have been studying in class up to that point in time (Arnold 1998). Co-curricular simulations (those which run concurrently with the class, but outside of class time, and utilize class information and materials) usually include preparation within the context of the simulation itself (e.g. as topics are covered in class, that information comes into play in the simulation). Extra-curricular simulations, like EuroSim, usually take place off-campus for a limited amount of time and allow students to become fully immersed in the simulation. EuroSim and other simulations like it (e.g. Model UN) require more pre-simulation preparation for the students than do in-class or co-curricular simulations. Taken together, all of the aspects just discussed regarding simulations clearly identify them as a high impact practice and place them within two of the AAC&U categories – collaborative assignments and projects, and diversity/global learning (experiential learning).

**Learning Outcomes and HIPs**

Depending on the course topic, a single simulation can encompass at least three of the ten high impact practices listed by the AAC&U; writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, and diversity/global learning (experiential learning) are all almost naturally occurring high impact practices that take place within a simulation. The AAC&U has found that there are statistically significant relationships between the groupings of high impact practices they have identified and deep learning, as well as self-reported personal and practical gains by students. The organization also found statistically significant relationships between the high impact practices and the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, and a supportive campus environment (AAC&U 2008, 2013). These findings speak to the highly beneficial nature of such practices in general, and it stands to reason that simulations which encompass two or more of these practices would also generate these results.

*Writing-intensive courses*

On its website, the AAC&U describes writing intensive courses as courses which include not only a greater amount of writing than perhaps the average course, but where that writing process involves actionable feedback from the instructor with the expectation that the student will include the feedback into later iterations of the essay/research paper. “Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences in different disciplines” (AAC&U 2008).

Courses incorporating simulations in any format, when done well, require an increased level and amount of writing. For those simulations where prior preparation is necessary, position papers are usually a necessary component requiring students to understand the topic. In EuroSim, in addition to a paper on the simulation topic, students take on as an alter ego a real government minister or member of parliament. Short papers describing the personal and political background of the alter ego are another writing component within EuroSim preparation. Finally, post-simulation debriefing papers, as noted by several authors (Arnold 1998; Wills and Clerkin 2009), provide an important means of reflecting on and retaining the broader lessons and implications learned from the simulation outside of the basic cognitive knowledge gained. Students participating in EuroSim write a reflective debriefing paper when they return to campus.

*Collaborative assignments and projects*

Collaborative assignments include things such as team-based assignments, study groups, cooperative projects and research, and group or team writing. According to the AAC&U, collaborative assignments and learning combine two goals, “... learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one’s own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences” (AAC&U 2008). Participation in simulations generally means that students work in groups; in EuroSim in particular, students work with others from both their own university as well as students from all of the other participating universities, either as members of a country delegation, or as members of parliamentary party groups and committees. Within these member state, ministerial, and parliamentary working groups, students collaborate to put together reports, position papers, and responses to policy proposals.

Policy-based or political simulations require collaborative work almost by default. Negotiation, compromise, and group work are core elements in the policy making and governmental world. In EuroSim, students work together formally and informally as part of a Member State delegation, in ministerial councils with members of delegations from other Member States, and as members of different party groups in the European Parliament. Cooperative work between Member States, and between party groups within the European Parliament means that students experience and practice negotiation and the creation of compromises that are essential to achieving their goals. They also gain experience with the necessity of working with individuals who approach issues from different cultural and experiential contexts.

*Diversity/global learning*

As described by AAC&U, diversity and global learning courses expose students to different cultures, life experiences, and world views and help them explore those different perspectives. Among many topics, students study racial and ethnic differences and inequalities, efforts to ensure respect for human rights, gender inequality, and struggles for freedom and political power. Such classroom studies and discussions are often augmented by service learning and/or study abroad and experiential learning (AAC&U 2008).

As noted previously, EuroSim includes U.S. and European universities. In addition, the venue and host university for EuroSim rotates among the participating schools; in odd-numbered years an American university acts as host and the simulation takes place in the U.S. In even-numbered years, the host is a European university and the simulation takes place in Europe. While the trips abroad, whether to the U.S. or Europe, are not the traditional study abroad terms, students do experience different cultures, and meet others with different backgrounds and life experiences. Additionally, the policy negotiations that take place within EuroSim require that students work with individuals from a variety of backgrounds and experiences while working on policies. On a practical level, EuroSim is a simulation that brings together students from U.S. and European universities. Other than individual Member State delegations (which are teams of three made up of students from the same university), students will always be working with other students from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds.

All of the high impact practices discussed above are present within the EuroSim simulation. The preparation courses include student learning outcomes that focus on critical thinking, written and oral communication skills, and collaborative projects. In addition to the structures and policy issues that make up the simulation, EuroSim, once underway, is also a student-run and managed simulation, presenting the additional challenge of pushing students to work together without faculty involvement to solve potential problems and issues that may arise throughout the duration of the simulation. The next section of this chapter will discuss the challenges of preparing U.S. students, many of whom are unfamiliar with the EU, for successful participation in a simulation of the governing processes of the EU.

**Challenges**

U.S. students are at best, vaguely familiar with the European Union. Older students, those who are further along in their university careers, are better acquainted with it, however, they have very little knowledge of the actual functions, division of competencies, and relationships between the EU and the Member States. At Widener University, a major metropolitan university outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, many students are first-generation university students, and the large majority of them live within one to two hours from campus. A good proportion are commuter students, living at home and coming in only for classes. Thus, preparation involves overcoming some logistical hurdles as well as preparing them to convincingly play the role of a legislator or policy expert in what amounts to an alien political structure.

The venue for EuroSim alternates every other year between a U.S. university host and a European university host. This cross-continent aspect of EuroSim also presents a challenge, although smaller than most, in that parents are occasionally reluctant to allow their student to travel so far from home essentially on their own. Most traditional U.S. college students have not traveled outside of the U.S. prior to participating in EuroSim (and, in the Widener student body, a good number have not traveled more than two hours away from home). As mentioned, at Widener University, many students are first-generation college students who are coping with the stresses and pressure of family expectations along with the pressures of university. The challenge for faculty is in providing the student with persuasive arguments and information to allay concerns and at the same time emphasize the unique opportunity presented by participation in EuroSim.

Another challenge is found in the range of academic levels and age among students taking part in EuroSim. Participants (both U.S. and European) vary in age and experience from freshmen/ first year students (approximately 18 years of age) to master’s level law and EU policy students (about 23 years of age and older). The wide range of age and experience presents a challenge in preparation for those faculty members with younger students. When they learn that graduate students will also be participating, younger students and first-time participants tend to measure themselves against the perceived achievements of those graduate students and find themselves to be lacking. Topping (1998) suggests that as students gain experience they also gain accuracy in assessing their own level of work and their progress and one of the learning objectives for students participating in EuroSim is to become more accurate in self-assessment.

Logistical challenges aside, preparing traditional undergraduate students also presents academic challenges. First year students do not have the experience and practice of writing and speaking at the high level required and expected for EuroSim. Pushing them to reach those levels means challenging them to do what they view as almost impossible. The first challenge appears in the classroom where critical thinking and written communication are emphasized through the writing and revising of topic papers, alter-ego papers, and, after the simulation, debriefing papers. In addition, short oral presentations, and mini-simulations designed to improve oral communication are utilized. The second challenge is found in the simulation itself. There, students will begin self-assessment regarding their level of preparation, critical thinking skills, and acquiring a deeper level of knowledge on the topic of the simulation.

Once at the venue and the simulation is underway, faculty are no longer involved in any of the processes, so addressing these challenges must occur prior to departure. The overall challenge here is insuring a high level of preparation that provides a strong base for success. At Widener University, two courses, one full three-credit course, POLS 228, Politics of European Integration, and one half semester, one and a half credit course, POLS 229, EuroSim, are used to prepare students for EuroSim. POLS 228 is offered approximately every other year as students repeat their participation in EuroSim; POLS 229 is offered every year and is required for every student participating in EuroSim.[[1]](#footnote-1) POLS 228 is included in the regular offerings of the Political Science department at Widener. While EuroSim students are not required to take this class prior to participation in EuroSim, they are strongly encouraged to do so when it is offered. Fostering effective communication and critical thinking skills are learning goals for both courses and both require students to write and present a research paper to the class.

Getting students to an understanding of the complexities of EU structures presents yet another challenge. The political structure of the EU and Member States is very different from anything with which they are familiar. The use of a research paper on a topic of their choosing has been a useful tool in achieving this goal. The success of this learning strategy is illustrated by an engineering student enrolled in POLS 228 in the Fall 2016 semester. This student examined EU policy regarding the free movement of labor and the impact of that policy on soccer/football players vis á vis the policies of the international and European governing bodies of soccer, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations). By the end of the semester, the student had gained a greater understanding of the processes and political compromises involved in moving soccer players from team to team and the intricacies of the interactions between EU law and Member States’ laws.

The one and a half credit class, POLS 229, is offered in the same semester as EuroSim, or immediately prior depending on the dates of the simulation[[2]](#footnote-2), and is treated as a topic-specific and alter-ego preparation course. The objective is to bring students up to speed on the rules and procedures of EU institutions (councils, parliamentary committees, Commission, etc.), the details of the topic, and the specifics of their alter-egos. Again, critical thinking, oral and written communication, leadership and negotiation skills, and collaboration are all found in the expected learning outcomes and course goals. The main goals for students in POLS 229 are a high level of familiarity with the topic, a general understanding of parliamentary and council rules and procedures, and a broad understanding of the overall structures and interactions of EU institutions.

The primary challenge in POLS 229 is two-fold. First there is a much shorter time frame for the course (eight weeks vs. 16 weeks for a full course). Second, some students have not yet taken the POLS 228 course and thus faculty need to fill that knowledge gap in a very short period of time. However, a great deal of this challenge is mitigated by the fact that these students are self-selected and thus have the motivation required to complete the necessary work. For POLS 229, the learning goals and course objectives are not only discussed at the beginning of the module, but referred back to frequently throughout the eight weeks.

Learning goals, and the means for achieving those goals, are specified for students in the syllabus for the class and discussed at the beginning of the semester. Explicitly outlining the learning goals, and the means to accomplish those goals, gives students the specific parameters they need to feel that they have prepared sufficiently for the simulation. However, Chavez and Napiere note that even explicitly stating learning goals for students does not mean students will *learn* critical thinking skills. They conclude that “[m]ore exposures to instructional strategies facilitative of critical thinking also have a direct link to the students’ beliefs on their capacity for critical thinking and their dispositions” (Chavez and Napier 2014, 126). Some authors have suggested that using the Socratic method and “thinking exercises” promotes learning critical thinking skills (Tallent and Barnes 2015). This potential hurdle is overcome by the nature of simulations themselves; students put those skills into practice multiple times throughout the duration of the simulation.

The final challenge in a simulation is ensuring that students do indeed absorb the lessons learned, both in terms of cognitive and affective learning. Reflective writing has been shown to aid in retaining information as well as in learning critical thinking skills. Wills and Clerkin note that “[r]eflective writing has helped learners connect theory to practices across disciplines and between academic instruction and workplace realities. Students retain a record of their learning path and learning outcomes, both errors and innovations” (Wills and Clerkin 2009: 224). And, as Arnold (1998) notes, debriefing, or reflection papers are a key part to a successful simulation. Reflective writing is included at least twice within the time frame of POLS 229; students are asked to write short reflection papers on a topic presentation and a presentation which provides an overview of their Member States’ position.

On the path to achieving learning goals in critical thinking and effective communication, students submit a debriefing paper on the simulation itself about a week after their return. This assignment asks students to reflect critically on the preparation provided by the instructor, their own efforts at preparation, and a self-evaluation of their performance during the simulation. Students who are first-time participants have indicated that while they were more prepared than they initially believed, they also recognize that there was more they could have done themselves. This self-assessment is borne out by post-simulation surveys which show that students do recognize when they have not adequately prepared (Jones 2008; Jones and Bursens 2015). Comments from recent debriefing papers and open-ended questions in surveys (Jones 2008; Jones and Bursens 2015) support the achievement of the critical thinking goal in EuroSim:

*“EuroSim was definitely a new experience that demanded a new way of thinking.”*

*“…I think I honestly could have done a better job. I should have trusted myself more and not second-guessed what I knew.”*

*“Observing both my committee meetings and the other branches of the European Union and watching the back and forth that took place helped vastly improve my critical thinking skills and gave me insight on how to construct stronger arguments, both on the spot and within my writing.”*

**Conclusion**

In their discussions of affective learning, Greenblat (1973, 1975) and Szafran and Mandolini (1980) argued that connections with their peers, an improved, less hierarchical relationship with their professor, and the experience of successfully pushing their own boundaries or comfort zones are some of the unnoticed but powerful and positive side-effects of participation in simulations. These side-effects are also associated with enhanced negotiation skills, increased ability to work with groups of individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and improved leadership skills. Previous research (Jones 2008; Jones and Bursens 2015) presented results that supported the arguments and findings of Greenblat and Szafran and Mandolini. How well does EuroSim work as a source of high impact practices?

The high impact practices described and recommended by AAC&U are incorporated throughout the process of preparing for and participating in EuroSim. Courses that allow students to “explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own” are a part of AAC&Us “Diversity/Global Learning” high impact practice (AAC&U 2008). Participation in EuroSim opens up a broader understanding of the world and how it works for U.S. students, many of whom have not traveled beyond a two-hour radius of their hometown. The revision and resubmission of a research paper insures that students pay close and constant attention to the topic and provides a writing intensive experience for the students. While preparing students to successfully participate in EuroSim presents challenges both in terms of understanding and time constraints, the results can be eye-opening and are beneficial for content knowledge as well as gaining practice and experience with life-skills such as negotiation and group work. Over the course of thirteen years of Widener University participation in EuroSim, student responses to debriefing questions have shown a great deal of similarity; they understand the workings of the EU far more clearly than they did prior to participating in the simulation, and they realize that complicated topics can become understandable. Students have stated that they enjoyed the opportunity to practice leadership and negotiation skills in the simulation and recognized that they are able to successfully complete a seemingly impossible research project. In addition, the previously hierarchical, and to some students slightly nerve-wracking, relationship with their professor is broken down through the informalities of travel and working collaboratively together with faculty before and during the simulation (Jones 2008).

When carefully crafted, simulations, whether in-class, co-curricular, or extra-curricular provide a high impact learning experience for students. Most importantly, perhaps, and not covered in the definitions of high impact practices or affective learning, most of the students who participate in EuroSim find that, while difficult and requiring a great deal of work, learning about such a seemingly distant topic and entity as the EU, can be enjoyable. Faculty members also benefit (perhaps encounter their own high impact learning experience) through enjoying more peer-like relationships with students and seeing students grow in ways they had not anticipated.

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1. Students may enroll in POLS 229 a maximum of four times as it is the course that prepares them for that year’s EuroSim. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. When EuroSim takes place at a European University, it is held in early January; when in the US, the dates usually fall at the end of March or beginning of April. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)