“Simulation, an Effective Tool for Teaching IR? A Partial Reflection on the Hitotsubashi-UBC Joint Simulation Project”

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I. Introduction

A conventional wisdom about active learning tools such as discussion, simulation, and role-playing game, tells us that such tools are more effective than a simple lecture in educating students. Active learning makes students more excited and more prone to seek knowledge independently. Students also better retain knowledge gained through their exercises than information obtained through lectures. A few recent attempts to statistically test the validity of this wisdom, however, came up with mixed results (Powner and Allendoerfer 2008; Raymond 2010). While some scholars found somewhat positive effects of active learning, especially over a long period, others found no statistically significant difference between learning through lectures and active learning, especially those that involve some sort of role-playing game or simulation. A study also pointed out that the method incites a relatively low evaluation of the instructor among the students.

While the use of rigorous research methods to assess the effectiveness of active learning tools should be encouraged, it is also important to keep in mind the limitations in these recent studies. These enquiries mostly focus on undergraduate students, especially freshmen and sophomores, as subjects in the classroom. The studies also tend to use relatively simple tests – such as multiple choice – as a way to measure the

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students’ performance when comparing learning through lectures and active learning. While these methods are useful for their own purposes, they do not allow us to assess the arguably more important areas of university education, where active learning may make a significant difference: to improve students’ abilities in applying theories to certain policy areas, to think strategically, and to reflect the practices in the real world to revise theories in international relations. The contributions of active learning can arguably only materialize in the long run, and when applied to the students at higher levels of university education - such as juniors and seniors - and even postgraduate students, who have already gained some familiarity with theories and histories in international relations. Also, these tests do not control for variation in the ways these active learning methods are applied in practice.

In this paper, rather than conducting a rigorous test to assess the effectiveness of active learning methods in comparison to lectures, I address the question of what affects success and failure in active-learning with a reflection on an experience of a joint simulation project between Hitotsubashi University and the University of British Columbia (UBC) in summer 2011. The purpose of this analysis is heuristic. Suggestions in this article, therefore, are only tentative, and in future will hopefully be put to the test in a social scientific manner.

First I will briefly discuss the background of the project. I will then describe how this simulation project was conducted. The fourth section summarizes some of the achievements of the project or the possible advantage of the simulation as an educational tool. In the fifth section, I will discuss some of factors that ‘conditioned’ the arguable success of the project, and some of the pitfalls a project like this could encounter. The paper will conclude with a brief summary of suggestions for the application of similar teaching tools in the future.
II. Background of the Project

The project came into being through an interaction between faculty members in the Department of Law at Hitotsubashi and in the Master of Arts Asia Pacific Policy Studies (MAAPPS) at the UBC. The conditions that fostered faculty members at the two universities to move forward with this collaborative project were similar. The faculty members on both sides of the Pacific have been seeking more cooperation with top tier universities in the Asia-Pacific region. Also, they were increasingly aware of the need for more innovative and effective teaching methods to educate undergraduate and graduate students who seek academic or professional careers. In this circumstance, the idea of focusing on international relations in this collaborative project between the two programs was welcomed by faculty members.

III. Description of the Project

The master plan for the simulation was mostly prepared under the initiative of Professor Julian Dierkes at the UBC and his students. At Hitotsubashi, faculty members advertised to recruit students for the simulation project around June 2011. The list of participants for the project was consolidated in July.

a) Organization of the Simulation Seminar

The simulation seminars took place over four days, August 21-24, 2011, in Niigata, Japan. The seminar involved 21 students, eleven from Hitotsubashi and ten from the UBC. One of the UBC students served as a moderator with four faculty members, and thus did not take part in the simulation. The nine UBC students who were for the Faculty of Law at Hitotsubashi University, a most recent attempt in this line is the Asia-Pacific Three University Network Project, a collaborative project among three universities in the region – Hitotsubashi University, Australian National University (ANU), and Seoul National University (SNU) to develop common education programs at postgraduate level.
included in the simulation were all graduate students at the MAAPPS. Hitotsubashi students consisted of ten seniors and one MA student. Most of the Hitotsubashi students belonged to the Department of Law, where they majored in International Relations. The simulation was played in English. Some of the Japanese students found it difficult to negotiate effectively in English due to their limited language skills.

The assignment for the students was to simulate a negotiation between the Japanese and Canadian governments on bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), holding a series of negotiations and eventually drafting a trade agreement. For this purpose, the students were divided into two ‘teams,’ representing the Japanese and Canadian governments, respectively. Each team was further split into three ‘groups,’ each representing the team in negotiation, on one or two areas of trade negotiation: i) goods, ii) services, and iii) intellectual property rights (IPRs) and labor, environment, and development.

A detailed time schedule for the simulation was given in advance. The four-day schedule involved seven negotiation sessions, during which time three groups from each government held separate and simultaneous negotiations with their counterparts on the areas of trade for which they were responsible. These negotiation sessions were 60 – 105 minutes long. Each session was preceded by preparatory meetings, first at a team level and then a group level, continuing with follow-up sessions at the group level and then at the team level.\(^3\)

In addition to these seven rounds of negotiations, plenary meetings were held at the beginning of each day, and at the end of the last day of simulated negotiations. Also, the students held two consulting meetings with invited professionals over the telephone, which will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

b) Pre- and Post-Simulation Activities

\(^3\) Details of the schedule are shown in the appendix.
The joint program between Hitotsubashi and UBC in summer 2011 involved not only the simulation seminars itself, but also some pre- and post-simulation activities. Canadian students arrived at Tokyo approximately one week prior to the seminar, and held informal organizational meetings with students from Hitotsubashi. In addition, the students from the two universities paid visits to the offices of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Asahi Shimbun Newspaper, and Nagano Prefectural government, for example. After the end of the simulation seminar, they visited Kedanren or the Japan Business Federation. The finale of the entire project was a presentation given by students at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo on August 26, 2013.

c) Preparation in Advance to the Project in Vancouver and Kunitachi

Prior to their arrival in Tokyo, the UBC students took part in a semester-long course on international trade. The course provided students with both theoretical and substantive knowledge on international trade. In addition, the students engaged in preparatory research on Japanese-Canadian negotiations on a bilateral Free Trade Agreement. It should be also noted that, in addition to these exercises, a few students attended an intensive course on simulation in academic learning, held at the University of Ottawa, where they learned the fundamentals of simulation at this level.

At Hitotsubashi, students found it a priority to gain theoretical and substantive knowledge about trade issues in general, due in part to the fact that most of them belonged to the undergraduate program. Some of the Hitotsubashi students, therefore, audited a five-day intensive summer course on international trade at graduate level. The course was offered by the School of International and Public Policy at Hitotsubashi University, and the lecturer was a member of Kedanren. The course involved a good mixture of both theoretical and policy issues in the field of international trade.

Prior to the arrival of the MAAPPS students at Tokyo in mid-August, however, Hitotsubashi students were unable to find an opportunity to organize independent study sessions specifically focused on Japan-Canada trade relations. A tight schedule between the finalization of the participant
list and the beginning of the two-week session with the UBC prevented independent study. Consequently, most of the students started the program with a substantive and theoretical knowledge of trade issues in general, but learned the specifics of the Japan-Canada relationships throughout the course of the collaborative program, through their attendance in meetings with trade-related institutions, discussion with MAAPPS students, and online research.

**IV. Advantages of Simulation?**

From the viewpoint of the students from Hitotsubashi, the project was to some extent a success. The students appear to have learned lessons on multiple fronts, from international collaboration, to working in a team, to the specifics of Japan-Canada FTA negotiations. The evaluation of the project below is primarily based on the survey results from Hitotsubashi participants to the project. Eight out of eleven participants submitted answers to the survey questionnaire.4

The overall success of the project is evident in that all the respondents evaluated the project as “very valuable.” Respondents were asked to rate the project in a five point scale from “very valuable” to “not relevant”. Also, all of the respondents “strongly agreed” to the statement that overall, they enjoyed the project. When asked whether they would recommend that other students take part in a similar project, seven of them answered favorably, and one neutral (five point scale from “strongly recommend it” to “strongly advise against participating”).

The results lead us to question what the students found most valuable or useful about the project. Here, we find more diversity among the students. They were asked to evaluate the importance of the project on four aspects: team work, international collaboration, understanding the trade policies and agreements, and learning applied policy-making. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not ask questions that allowed us to tell the exact nature of what they learned about trade issues, the extent of substantive

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4 The details of the survey results can be found in the appendix.
knowledge on this subject, or theoretical insights. All of the students found the team work aspect of the project favorable, five respondents judging it “very valuable.” Their evaluations of the experience in international collaboration and in learning applied policymaking were more mixed. On international collaboration, four students found themselves very comfortable with the experience, three somewhat comfortable, and one uneasy. With regard to learning applied policy making, only two students strongly agreed that they gained some experience in applied policy-making, four of them somewhat agreed, one was neutral, and one disagreed. Finally, there were more consensuses among the students regarding the value of the experience for understanding trade policies and agreements. Three of the respondents strongly agreed that they gained a deeper understanding of trade policies and international relations, four of them somewhat agreed, and one neither agreed nor disagreed.

Of course, there are some problems with evaluating the educational effectiveness of the project solely based on the students’ responses to the questionnaire. One such problem in this sort of project is the risk of overvaluation. The intensity of the project and a high level of input from the students generated a strong sense of satisfaction among the participants, and may have resulted in unduly high scores given to the project.

What is somewhat striking, therefore, is the relatively low or diverse scores given to the project’s effectiveness in providing an experience for applied policymaking, and in enhancing their understanding of international trade. It is also notable that two students gave relatively low scores in three of the four aspects of the educational effects of the project. It is, however, difficult to ascertain the reason for their relatively low evaluations of the project. It may be because the students were comparatively knowledgeable about international trade (one of the Hitotsubashi students was in a master’s program, while others studied in undergraduate programs), or the relatively low skills at communication
(in English) may have prevented them from learning more from the project. Another consideration is that the participants could also be generally critical in grading.

V. Conditions for Success and Failure

The Hitotsubashi-UBC joint simulation can be generally considered to be a success. However, the project benefited from a few favorable conditions that require serious attention, if the experience is to be replicated successfully at other settings. Here, I discuss three factors: selection of the topic for the simulation; engagement by professionals; and extensive preparation on the part of the students.

a) Selection of the Topic

The selection of the topic for the simulation was arguably the most important element for the success of this project. I believe that the three characteristics of the Japan-Canada bilateral FTA negotiation contributed to the success of this simulation project.

First, the relatively transparent nature of the topic allowed students to conduct solid research and gather data that was needed to carry out the simulation. Both Canada and Japan are highly industrialised and democratic countries, and much of the data needed for simulation was accessible online. As interest groups and government agencies tend to clarify their positions, students could easily identify relevant actors and observe their positions toward the issue. Also, students found documents that were borne out of prior negotiations between the two countries. Data collection would have been much more challenging for participants if they chose topics that involved non-democratic countries or negotiations over security issues, where secrecy and intelligence information tend to play more significant roles.

Second, the relatively well-structured nature of the Canada-Japan FTA negotiation helped students to delimitate the scope of this simulation and identify a common goal to be reached within the given time frame, that is, preparing a FTA agreement between the two countries (although the possibility of the breakup of the negotiation was always in their mind throughout the simulation). As
Canada and Japan previously concluded several FTAs with other countries, students referred to these documents to prepare their own drafts. The consistency across these various FTAs made the task even easier, relieving the students from the frustrating process of finding appropriate structures and diplomatic languages for the document. Consequently, students secured more time to discuss substantive issues rather than technical ones. It was easy for faculty members to imagine the difficulty students would have faced if they had carried out a negotiation on issues where no previous agreement could be referred to. It would have been a very time-consuming process for them to prepare even a single article or a chapter, if they did not find a similar provision in previous agreements. Similarly, it would have been difficult – though certainly not impossible – for students to clearly define their tasks or goals if it was not a part of the exercise to prepare an agreement or other forms of document such as a policy recommendation.

Third, Japan-Canada FTA negotiation was an ongoing arbitration. This point could have affected the project both positively and negatively. On the one hand, the ongoing characteristics of the negotiation could have made it difficult for the students to access information, or make an educated inference about who the relevant stakeholders were, and identify the main impediments to the progress of negotiation. Moreover, few scholarly writings on this topic were available. Hence, the students could not take an advantage of knowledge gained through hindsight.

On the other hand, however, the project benefited from the ongoing characteristics of the real world negotiation at least in three ways. First, the topic did not provide a clear ‘answer’ for students. While it would be useful for students to conduct a simulation on historically importance cases such as the beginning of the World War II, such cases tend to bias students’ discussion as they already have knowledge about the outcome of the negotiation. Although their negotiation may deviate from the actual course of discussion and produce an outcome different from the one observed in history, such a deviation tends to make students feel that their products are ‘unrealistic’. The apparently open-ended nature of the Japan-Canada FTA negotiation at the time of the project allowed the students to maintain an unbiased view of their own negotiation, and seriously conduct the
simulation. Second, the currency of the topic also made the students interested in and excited about the subject matter. The outcome of the negotiation in the real world could have affected their lives, the lives of their families, or of their friends. It helped the students to stay motivated to learn more about the subject matter, and think seriously about how to go about the negotiation. Finally, the ongoing nature of the negotiation also helped the students in that professionals outside the classroom became interested in the simulation. As discussed below, policymakers’ inputs significantly affected the course of the simulation in a positive way.

b) Engagement of Professionals

An advantage of this project was that the students benefited from professionals’ engagement in the project in three ways. Diplomats and former diplomats on both the Japanese and Canadian sides briefed students about the current status of the negotiation, and regarding the positions and concerns of respective governments and stakeholders. The Canadian embassy provided the opportunity for students to give a presentation about their simulation at the end of the project. Finally, the policymakers from both sides of the negotiation spared their precious time to attend consulting meetings with students four times during the course of simulation, advising them on some of the concerns and problems the students encountered. On the Canadian side, the students from the UBC contacted former diplomats with an experience in trade negotiation with Japan, securing their cooperation for the project. On the Japanese side, the students from the UBC and Hitotsubashi requested a diplomat in charge of the Japan-Canada FTA negotiation, which was kindly granted. Therefore, during the course of the four day simulation seminars, students in each team held a phone conversation with the policymakers on their side and gained advice from the positions of the actors on relevant the subject matter, and how they should proceed with the negotiation. These consulting meetings with respective policymakers were held twice a night on the
evenings of the second and third days of the simulation, allowing for intermittent discussion among students.

The benefits of such engagement from professionals on the simulation had two aspects, practical and psychological. On the practical aspect, the advice from the policymakers allowed the students to overcome their lack of knowledge on some of the substantive issues, such as the position of certain stakeholders on certain questions. Given the technicality of the FTA negotiation, students often encountered unfamiliar languages and concepts, which may have hindered negotiations and generated a period of procrastination among students in charge of that particular area. Professionals’ advice helped the students to circumvent such impediments to the progress of the simulation. On the psychological aspect, an interaction with professionals gave the students a good impetus to work hard, encouraging their creativity, and still stay realistic in their overall aims. Although none of the students probably sought to outsmart the professionals, they certainly wanted to avoid looking ‘stupid’ or totally unrealistic in their conducts of negotiation.

c) Extensive Preparation on the Part of the Students

It is also important to note that students spared a significant time in preparation for the simulation seminar. Some of the Hitotsubashi students audited a graduate-level intensive summer seminar on international trade to gain theoretical and substantive knowledge on trade issues. Given the regulations in the university curriculum, these students attended the summer seminar for no credit towards their main studies. The UBC students enrolled in a semester long seminar to study international trade, and also had another course a few months in length, to conduct research on Japan-Canada FTA negotiation. As mentioned above, a few of the UBC students also attended an intensive course on simulation.
These preparations on the part of the students helped them to gain both theoretical and substantive knowledge on trade issues to carry out the simulation. Also, it helped them to advise each other, thus producing a positive cycle of intellectual exchange among them and raising the sense of their 'ownership' of the project. This last point is likely to have contributed to the evaluation of the project by all the respondents, that the extent to which the project was driven by students was “just right.”

Of course, it is not always possible to replicate the positive aspects of this particular seminar in all examples of simulative learning. An instructor may want to employ the simulation in a course on international security. An access to professionals on the issue of interest is difficult to obtain in many settings. It is also not always possible to secure enough time for students to prepare for the simulation in advance, or to send one or two students to an intensive simulation course. When these conditions are not met, it is necessary to seek alternative ways to off-set the absence of those favorable conditions, say, by providing some detailed cases prepared by an instructor to the students in advance. Also, it is sometimes necessary to adjust the expectation with regard to the achievement of the project or the performance on the part of the students. An excessive expectation on the part of the instructors can be a cause of frustration for instructors and place an excessive burden on students, damaging the viability of the entire project.

VI. Potential Pitfalls of Simulation?

Though promising in general, a simulation also has some pitfalls or downsides as a tool for undergraduate- and graduate- level education. It is important to be aware of these potentially negative aspects, and take precautionary measures to mitigate them.

a) Risk of Unequal Involvement

A potential risk of a simulation is that some of the students become more active
and take leadership, while some others are left behind without much opportunity for involvement. This is a predicament in any education method that involves group works. The problem can be either due to the presence of overly active students who seek to control the entire negotiation, or due to the presence of students who lack either confidence or enthusiasm to actively take part in the negotiation.

In case of Hitotsubashi-UBC project, both of these factors were present partly due to the composition of the students in the project. It was somewhat expected in advance that some of the UBC students, who are enrolled in graduate programs, had more time to prepare for the simulation, and being more fluent in English, would naturally lead the negotiation, while some of the Hitotsubashi students - mostly enrolled in undergraduate programs, less familiar with international trade issues, and with less experience at speaking in English - would lag behind, and in some cases become alienated from the negotiation. In fact, this was part of the reason why the students from the two universities were mixed together to create two teams representing the Japanese and Canadian governments. And yet, by the end of the first day of the simulation, the students themselves recognized the extent of the problem, and looked for a solution.

In order to solve the problem, the students decided to split each group further and assign certain negotiation tasks to respective individuals. Hence, each student was practically forced to negotiate on a subject with his or her counterpart, while the scope of negotiation able to be controlled by overly active students was diminished. Another and less formal solution to the problem was for students to secure some opportunity for less involved students to speak up in the group-level or team-level preparatory discussions. Some of the students, especially UBC students, consciously assigned the tasks of reporting the negotiation’s progress to those less involved in the negotiation, or asked for their opinions to encourage participation.
To some extent, these solutions appear to have worked, partly because the main barriers for those less involved in the negotiation was not a lack of enthusiasm but a lack of confidence, or language skills, or both. In fact, the essentially voluntary (and no credit) participation by students in this project appears to have worked as a self-selection mechanism, and we noticed virtually no student who was not enthusiastic about the project. The situation may be quite different had this sort of course been offered as part of the ordinary curriculum. Some of the students, especially during or after job-hunting, may lose enthusiasm for heavily involving themselves in such an intensive project.

b) Risk of Unclear Learning Objectives and Variation in Learning

Another potential pitfall of the simulation is the failure to share a clear learning objective. An important advantage of the tool is that it can enhance learning on multiple fronts: on team working, applied policy making, conducting research, and learning theories of international relations. A possible downside of it is that the students would learn what interests them most, but not other aspects of the subject matter. Even worse, the students may not learn much at all, getting lost in all the potentials to learn diverse lessons from the matter under discussion. In fact, the intensive effort which students put in to the project may generate not only a sense of satisfaction, but one of exhaustion among them, distracting them from a serious reflection on the relationship between their experience in the simulation and the theoretical issues they studied in lectures and ordinary seminar-style class discussions.

What this means is that instructors should not leave the task of learning from the experience with a simulation to individual students. It is necessary for instructors to communicate the purpose of the project to students in a clear manner, actively engaging in a discussion with the students about the relationship between their experience at the simulation and what they learn in the ordinary lectures and classroom discussions, and
encourage them to share their lessons from the project with each other.

c) Work Load for Instructors

The work load for instructors is another issue that requires serious attention, especially for a simulation that involves international collaboration. In the Hitotsubashi-UBC project, Professor Dierkes from the UBC accompanied students throughout the entirety of their nearly two-week trip to Japan. From Hitotsubashi, at least one professor accompanied an office visit by students, and three of them accompanied the students in their four-day simulation session in Niigata. In addition, the instructors from each university spent time seeking project funds, organizing office visits, and coordinating with each other. While Mr. Seitaro Kitahara - one of the staff on the Three University Project - provided valuable support, it still remains the case that the entire project takes a substantial amount of time.

d) Cost of Extra-curricular Activity

Finally, in relations to what have been already discussed, an important lesson to be drawn from the Hitotsubashi-UBC project is the need to place it in an ordinary institutional framework of the university. This is especially true for Hitotsubashi University. As the simulation project was prepared in a relatively short space of time, it was essentially carried out through the voluntary participation by students and faculty members. If a similar project is to succeed in future, it is necessary to make it a part of the official curriculum. Integrating the project into the official curriculum will also help improve the project from a stand-alone simulation seminar to a more comprehensive course, of which the simulation is an integral part. This way, the students who attend the project earn the correct credits for their academic efforts and are able to take full advantage of the exercise, while the faculty members’ work will be duly recognized.
VII. Conclusion

A lesson from the Hitotsubashi-UBC joint simulation project is that a simulation is not a stand-alone learning tool. The tool is hardly complete in itself. It requires additional exercises that prepare students for the project, as well as sessions that facilitate their learning from the experience. When combined with other teaching methods, a simulation can serve as a springboard to enhance students' learning. With the clear goal of successfully performing in a simulation, the students will be more motivated and focused in their studies in lectures, seminars, and possibly in their visits to government institutions and corporations. They will also learn more from post-simulation lectures and seminars, where they can compare their own experiences with theories and share their thoughts with each other.

It is also necessary to prepare a simulation with great care, so that it provides equal learning opportunities for all the participants of the project. Given the nature of the project, it is easy for a few students to lag behind or feel alienated from the progress of the simulation.

From such viewpoints, it was great that the joint project involved not only the simulation but also the visits to offices of the Japanese MOFA, Nagano prefectural offices, Asahi Shimbun, and Keidanren, as well as a presentation at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo. The organization of the simulation was also improved throughout the course of the project to provide equal opportunities to the participants. What we could have done, however, was to organize a discussion seminar or two, which would have required students to compare their experiences from the simulation with theoretical literature on trade issues, or on international relations in general. A future application of the similar teaching tool, moreover, needs to take place in a more planned manner as an integral part of the regular curriculum.
Reference
