The Teacher

Guided Design Simulations in Introductory Level American Politics and State and Local Politics Courses

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A series of simulations that I have developed, based on the guided design format, can be used in introductory level American politics and state and local politics courses. I use the simulation as the final course project to synthesize theories and concepts addressed in the course by directly involving students in a seven-step, problem-solving exercise. Structured as a group project, students work together as a team for a team grade and are in competition with other groups to have their solution adopted as the best solution.

Each group presents its solution to the class for the final examination. During the presentations, the class plays the role of contracting agent or commissioning authority depending on the problem scenario. Following the conclusion of all presentations, I repeat the project evaluation criterion and instruct the class to vote by secret ballot for the best solution.

Following the vote, I critique each group's performance and note the grade they have earned. Lastly I count the ballots and announce the vote result. I usually present the winning group with a token prize (toy kazoos so the winners can blow their own horn, etc.) to acknowledge their success and close the term on a festive note.

While sharing many features of other simulations, the guided design format is especially attractive because it provides feedback following each step. It incorporates a sequenced validation process (i.e., the "guides"), which enables students to repeatedly evaluate their progress and make adjustments they decide upon with minimal faculty intrusion.

In both my American politics and state and local politics courses, a cur-

rent events emphasis is directly incorporated into course content. In addition to the required text(s), students subscribe to a weekly newspaper, *The Washington Post Weekly Edition.* Classroom instruction is conducted predominantly through a discussion format, with regular use of informal writing exercises and informal debates. Students are expected to apply theory and concepts to current events in classroom discussion, exercises, and essay examinations. The current events emphasis provides the foundation for the guided design project. Course requirements include four examinations and the final guided design project. The examinations and project are graded at equal value.

As the capstone of the course, the guided design project concludes the term and is scheduled for the last week(s) of class. By controlling time allocated to each step, or the number of steps included, the project can be run in as few as three class hours. My experience has been, however, that this abbreviated version combines steps better left distinct and does not permit in-depth deliberations, outside data collection, or the exploration of multiple alternatives. For best possible results, I currently devote the last six class hours of the term and the final examination period to the guided design project.

The Guided Design Project

The guided design projects I have developed derive from concepts employed in Schleicher's *Real-Nation Gaming* (1973), an international relations problem-solving simulation. The nature of the problem I select

for the project varies according to course subject, student interest in a particular topic, and current events (i.e., presidential election year, redistricting, etc.).

In American politics courses, past topics have included the decline of participation in American politics, the decline of voter turnout in off-year elections, and the declining role of political parties in American politics. In a state and local politics course, the problem was to design a political party campaign strategy for Pennsylvania following 1990 redistricting. Possible topics of the problem are limited only by pedagogical considerations.

To conduct the project, students are divided into equal groups. Five students to a group has proven to be the optimum group size, with a maximum of six groups per class. Smaller or larger groups are possible depending on class size, but a greater number of groups tends to become unwieldy, while larger group size discourages full member participation.

I assign students to the groups, balancing each group by talent (test grade scores), sex, and race. Attendance is mandatory during the project, with severe penalty (project grade reduction) for any absence. Every student receives a copy of all project documents. The use of library reference materials and extra-curricular meetings are encouraged. Each group is directed to select two recording secretaries. The groups are instructed to work independently of one another and to avoid incorporating the feedback content into their solution. I am present throughout the project to clarify instructions but not for consultation concerning solution content.

The project documents include the group project guidelines, the problem statement, and a series of seven instructions (Definition of Problem, Information, Constraints, Possible Solutions, Criteria for Evaluation, Ranking the Solutions, Final Proposal) and six feedbacks. The seventh feedback is the final critique and grade. One hour is allotted for completion of each instruction.

For each instruction, the student groups identify the relevant forms, functions, information, or objectives appropriate to the problem assignment. At the conclusion of the hour, upon completion of the instruction, feedback is provided. The feedback contains a brief listing of possible appropriate responses to the instruction and is intended to guide the group toward their own solution to the problem by including an unorthodox alternative.

For the final presentation each group is allotted 30 minutes for presentation and response to questions. The students determine the structure, content, and vehicle of their presentation. The class meets in a media enhanced classroom, giving each group access to a full range of audiovisual aids.

As each group makes their presentation, the other students serve as a critical audience. They are instructed to question and challenge the presenters in preparation for casting their secret ballot to select the best solution.

Conducted at the end of the term, the project provides an excellent vehicle for integrating and synthesizing course content. Combined with the discussions, essay, and objectives tests employed during the term, the final presentation format provides a tool for evaluating another dimension of student skills.

Perhaps most important, the guided design project has an explicitly student centered instructional focus. Through the combination of examination format change (objective to essay), the introduction of informal writing exercises, and increased emphasis on classroom discussion, as the term progresses the instructional focus continually shifts away from the traditional instructor centered model toward a student centered focus. The guided design project reinforces the process of empowering students by affording maximum educational autonomy.

Guided Design Materials

The following documents represent a guided design project recently conducted in an introductory American politics course.

Group Project Guidelines

The purpose of this project is to provide the opportunity for you to apply the theories and concepts of this course to a simulated real-world exercise. You are encouraged to be creative and imaginative, but to remember you are operating within the constraints of the American political system. Each group is to operate *independently* of one another, lest the uniqueness or originality of solutions be compromised.

Attendance. This is a group project. Attendance is mandatory. Your grade will be the grade earned by the group. If you are not present, you are not contributing. Rather than penalize the group, your grade will be reduced for each absence. The only exception will be an absence pre-arranged with group approval and your doing services for the group to make up for the absence, *subject to my prior approval.*

In completing this project, you may, and are encouraged to, use whatever resource materials are necessary. You may arrange additional meetings outside classroom time. For the final presentation, you may use whatever resources, media, or format appropriate to your presentation. Professionalism, realism, comprehensiveness, and quality of presentation will be expected.

Each group will receive the problem assignment. Problem solution will be divided into a series of discrete instructions. The group will have a set time limit within which to complete each instruction. It is important to think comprehensively. Include a broad range of ideas for each instruction. As the group progresses through the instructions, certain ideas and alternatives will be eliminated. It is, therefore, important to begin with numerous ideas.

Do not anticipate. Solve one instruction, completely, at a time. Do not solve the problem before instructed to do so. When an instruction is completed, request feedback. The feedback is intended as a guide to direct your inquiry. It is *not* the answer. While the group's solutions may indeed be identical with or very similar to the feedback, the feedback is not to be substituted for the group's solution. The group is to develop and build upon its own solutions. After evaluating the group's solutions in comparison with the feedback, begin work on the next instruction.

The course instructor may be consulted on questions of procedure, or to clarify terms, but is not available to assist in proper solution.

The Problem

Analysts are increasingly concerned about what they view as the continuing decline in political participation in the United States. As a result of this concern, a prestigious foundation has allocated funds for the study of participation in the United States, with a focus on corrective recommendations intended to reverse the decline.

Your group has been appointed to serve as a blue-ribbon commission concerned with the future of political participation in the United States. The group is expected to research the problem, then propose at least one comprehensive program to solve some aspect of the participation problem as defined by the group.

The foundation has allocated $5 million to fund the program.

Instruction 1: Definition of the Problem

Begin by identifying the forms of political participation and the overriding function each provides to the people and the political system.

Feedback 1: Definition of the Problem

Possible forms of political participation: working for a government agency, volunteer community service, paying taxes, attending a campaign rally, writing to an elected official, voting.

Instruction 2: Information

What information/data sets must be identified/collected in order to evaluate the level of participation in each of the items mentioned in response to Instruction 1.

Feedback 2: Information

The information/data sets to be identified/collected might include: *Statistical Abstract*; U.S. Department of Labor Statistics; Gallup Public Opinion Poll; numbers employed in government; types of people who participate—geography, race, age, education, sex, etc.; public opinion on participating.

Instruction 3: Constraints

Certain constraints would appear to operate with respect to the range of alternatives available to the group in its attempt to increase participation. Con-

straints can operate at the level of political, legal, and constitutional limitations or at the level of individual personal predispositions. Develop a list of all constraints placed on the types of participation you have identified.

Feedback 3: Constraints

Constraints at the political/legal level may include: civil service examinations, campaign finance regulations, voter registration laws, single member districts, age restrictions.

Constraints at the individual level may include: mistrust of politics, low efficacy, lack of awareness, alienation.

Instruction 4: Possible Solutions

Now that you have identified the necessary information and become aware of the various constraints, it is possible to evaluate a range of possible actions the group might recommend to increase participation. The possible solutions may address changes at any or all of the legal, constitutional, and individual levels.

At this point it is highly desirable to be *creative*. Do not reject any idea, even if it initially seems absurd.

Feedback 4: Possible Solutions

Possible solutions might have included: Political/legal change: do nothing, pay people to participate, rewrite the Constitution, select office holders by lottery, initiate referendums on all issues, create ombudsmen positions, hold elections on weekends. Individual level change: do nothing, re-educate the public, hold political career days, televise government, give participation scholarships.

Instruction 5: Criteria for Evaluation

Establish criteria by which to judge the possible solutions. Criteria should be general in form, applicable across the board to all possible solutions. List at least five separate criteria.

Feedback 5: Criteria for Evaluation

Criteria might include: legality, timeliness, compatibility with democratic principles, feasibility, effectiveness, morality, cost (tangible/intangible).

Instruction 6: Ranking the Solutions

Develop a matrix in which you list the solutions down the side column, the valuative criterion across the top. Employ a rating measure (i.e., scale 1 through 5 where 1 = excellent, 5 = terrible or hi/med/lo, etc. that fit the criterion) to fill in each cell in the matrix.

Feedback 6: Ranking the Solutions

The matrix provides a scheme to evaluate solutions in comparison to one another. The completed matrix reveals a ranking of all solutions given the group's valuative criterion. The group now has a clear indication as to which solution it must propose. Adhere to the ranking in the next instruction.

Instruction 7: The Final Proposal

The matrix evaluated solutions in general terms. The group may decide to eliminate the lower ranked at this time. Evaluate those remaining in terms of their compatibility with the original problem objectives. In moving toward a final decision, make certain that incompatible solutions are not included in the final proposal.

Prepare a proposal detailing the group's recommendation(s). The proposal will be presented to the foundation (foundation = class). The foundation will critically evaluate each proposal, then select one as most meritorious.

It is essential to be as professional, competent, comprehensive, and persuasive as possible during the presentation.

A typed report of the proposal will be submitted to the instructor at the time of group presentation. The typed report should include, in outline form: statement of proposal, with selection rationale; constraints identified; and any additional relevant information supporting final proposal.

Reference

Schleicher, D. P. 1973. *Participant's Manual for Real-Nation Gaming*. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.

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Rationally Persuasive Writing Is Like House Painting: It's All in the Preliminaries

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How can we teach undergraduate students the nature of rationally persuasive writing and instruct them on the nature of rational argument? One important suggestion is to express clearly the conclusion of an argument early in the written discussion. Therefore, I will state clearly my goal in this article: to help instructors in all fields of political science communicate effectively to their students the nature of a sound rational argument and how it is composed. I believe this to be the most important contribution of any course within the liberal arts curriculum because, once it is learned, students can apply this knowledge in other contexts.

I hope to inspire others to direct their energies to achieving this objective. As a community of teachers, we need a continuing dialogue addressing ways to achieve understanding of the nature of rational argumentation.

I gladly share an analogy between rationally persuasive writing and house painting—an analogy I have successfully used in my classes for some time. I present the analogy early in the semester, but not during the first few class meetings. Although it is tempting to address the question of how to define and write a rational