

THE GAME OF PEACE MODEL: PLAYING WITH CONFLICT RESOLUTION DYNAMICS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COURSES

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The teaching-learning challenge

As a professor of International Relations, I have always struggled to convince students that war, peace and negotiation are tangible problems that affect our daily lives rather than immaterial phenomena. My students have been multinational individuals from different countries with varied cultural and educational backgrounds. This diversity has both added a richness to and placed a constraint on their learning. They have typically lacked background knowledge about international conflicts, perhaps except for those who have experienced such in their region, and have been unable to assess the regional or global impact conflicts can have. Further, they have struggled to identify various internal and external actors involved in these conflicts. The theories and concepts of international relations were too abstract for the learners and they did not know how to apply them to explain the conflicts. Their personal values and previous educational and life experiences acted as barriers for understanding controversial concepts like fanaticism, religion or ideology, especially when they came from the conflict areas under study. These could even sometimes be sources of division among them.

Pedagogical method

To address these challenges, I have developed Game of Peace, a role-based learning method that requires students to employ conflict resolution and negotiation dynamics to manage a conflict. In terms of roles, it includes all the factions involved in a civil war: actors that may have a stake in a resolution or territorial and political settlements, and a third party (mediator) who is entrusted with the task of facilitating negotiations and helping the actors to come to a political agreement to be signed by all parties.

Game of Peace goes through a series of well-defined phases and strictly adheres to the four essential components of effective simulations (Irrera 2020) inspired by Ben-Yehuda et al. (2015: 13): 1) *platform*, the setting where students interact; 2) *boundaries*, the set of spatial and temporal elements that make the contents more vivid; 3) *interactions*, the simulation developments and their scheduled and unintended outcomes; and 4) *study efficiency*, preparation so that the core functions can be replicated in different contexts. Game of Peace uses a traditional face-to-face platform. Students interact in the classroom, in separate groups or during collective sessions where they draft documents, supported by videos, pictures or other materials. In principle, they do not need to meet or communicate in a virtual space. Virtual simulations can, however, allow wider participation, enable the participation of students who cannot physically join a course

(including international students) and may be used to involve groups from different universities and countries.

The identification of clear boundaries is an essential preliminary step that allows students to set the context for their work. Game of Peace refers to a specific and real conflict and requires that the geographical setting, the timeline of the crisis and the local, regional and international actors are well defined in the initial scenario. All interactions happen in a pre-determined number of sessions, even though a certain level of self-regulation is possible during the simulation, which is necessary to stimulate students' initiative. The students are observed and their performance, ability to properly play the assigned roles and their capacity to smoothly interact are evaluated. The achievement of learning outcomes is mainly assured through the debriefing and follow-up phases at the end of the planned sessions. Debriefing allows students to reflect deeper on their experiences and to evaluate their performance critically. It helps the instructor to evaluate the impact of the simulation on students' learning and to think about how to revise the simulation in the future.

While designing Game of Peace rounds, I employed various contemporary conflicts, such as those in Darfur, Syria, Donbass and Afghanistan, depending on the group of students involved, on their level of preparation, and their cultural background, and political, religious or social sensitivity. The design of the initial scenario is the first step and it usually follows the real timeline and developments of the conflict. Whatever crisis has been chosen, the policy objective is always to achieve a sustainable peace settlement and a power-sharing agreement. This is to be reached by negotiation facilitated by an external mediator who chairs a formal peace conference to end the violence. This is usually an actor representing the European Union or the United Nations, depending on the conflict; however, a diplomat or other neutral party can perform this role, too. After the scenario is defined, roles need to be assigned. Students are split into groups corresponding to major political actors and are asked to play leading roles within them, such as the head of state, the opposition leader, minister of defense or foreign affairs. Then, each group starts preparing its policy plan which will drive its performance during the simulation. Those students who play the role of diplomatic mediators have a particularly delicate part to play. Given that they should hold dialogues with all parties and convince them to negotiate, they receive special instructions and are subject to fewer constraints. As mediators, they are expected to be creative and interact with everyone. Following receipt of the instructions, each group starts collecting information on the position of each faction to identify those conditions that will allow negotiations and facilitate common aims. Then, specific details of a settlement, such as division of the contested territory, the structure of a new government, the management of side issues (human rights violations, refugees, decommissioning, etc.) are drawn up. Finally, and having verified the commitment to sign an agreement, the mediator prepares the final peace conference.

The course, the students, and the teacher

As Erasmus coordinator in my department, I highly value the exchange of students and faculty members. I am responsible for Erasmus mobility exchanges and try to benefit from staff mobility each year, to contribute to the learning of students from other universities and to improve my skills. The Game of Peace was developed primarily for students enrolled in my global civil society course within the MA programme in Global Politics and Euromediterranean Relations (GLOPEM) at the University of Catania. The first attempts, using fictional conflicts and employing a small group of participants (15–20), later developed into more sophisticated versions, benefiting from student feedback.

Table 1. Game of Peace schedule

Time	Instructor	Students
One week prior to the simulation	Prepares the political scenario, list of groups and roles, instructions, readings and websites for students to consult are distributed.	Groups study the background of the conflict, analyse the scenario and the assigned roles, identify their values and goals and prepare a policy plan accordingly.
First day of simulation (2 hours)	Makes room arrangements. Observes all interactions without interfering.	Groups interact informally; the mediator can informally approach all groups.
Second day of simulation (2 hours)	Moves around all rooms to check that students follow the rules and instructions.	Groups interact more frequently, both formally and informally; the mediator can informally approach all groups.
Third day of simulation (2 hours)	Prepares the official conference. Attends the conference without interfering.	Representatives of all groups are invited to join a formal conference chaired by the mediator, to present the initial positions and to interact. The conference ends with the signing of an official agreement or without an agreement.

I replicated the method in the following years and even started to include it in my International Relations course within the BA programme in history, politics and international relations, where students numbers are higher (usually about 50). I have met different student populations and become acquainted with cultural, political and religious differences. Scenarios have been

changed, according to student suggestions, to reduce conflicts among the students (which have sometimes occurred) and valorise multicultural exchanges. Fictional conflicts have been replaced by real contemporary conflicts. As presented in Table 1, the model is now regularly used in my undergraduate and postgraduate courses at the University of Catania, but I have also started to export it through my teaching experiences abroad. In 2017, I taught a global civil society course at the Institute of International Studies in Barcelona as part of the Erasmus Mundus Programme, and since 2017, I have regularly taught political violence and terrorism as a visiting professor at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. Students who have experienced Game of Peace so far have come from different continents and have been enrolled on both BA and MA programmes, although they all share a common background in international relations.

Collected sources of data and methods

I assess the outcomes of the simulation as a method using the survey results, which involve all the students who have joined the simulations listed in Table 2, including the last virtual sessions in the academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. One week after the collective sessions, I usually email an anonymous questionnaire to everyone and collect answers on Google Drive. Questions allow respondents to express opinions and make suggestions, and students usually do not miss the chance to share their ideas and experiences. The questionnaire is moderately long and includes questions about various aspects of the simulation, the roles the students played, the perception of the other party, etc. Here, I have only selected two specific factors common to all rounds and useful for understanding learning advancement: 1) sensitivity to fanaticism and to what extent it represents a constraint, and 2) student perception of their learning experience through Game of Peace.

Table 2. Game of Peace as used in various courses

Course	University	Level	Topic	No. of Students	% of international students
Global Civil Society	University of Catania	MA	Conflict in Syria	19	40
Global Civil Society	University of Catania	MA	Conflict in Donbass	13	40
International Politics	University of Catania	BA	Conflict in Darfur	50	10
International Politics	University of Catania	BA	Conflict in Syria	21	15

Global Civil Society	Institute of International Studies in Barcelona	MA	Conflict in Syria	18	60
Political Violence and Terrorism	OSCE Academy, Bishkek	MA	Fighting against ISIS	30	80

Findings

One of the positive effects of simulations is that they help students to better understand controversial aspects of international relations conflicts, such as fanaticism. When it comes to the role they have been assigned, the immediate reaction of students is trying to reduce the impact of political fanaticism. Consequently, as displayed in Table 3, the majority of students reduced it to neutral (40.6%). In terms of their opponents, the perception is different, particularly for actors that are considered highly fanatical (40.6%), such as the pro-Russia parties in Donbass, the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the official government in Syria. In contrast, actors that are usually depicted as weaker in the eyes of the public, such as the Ukrainian government or the Kurdish movement, are perceived as neutral (40.6%) or less fanatical (9.3%). Students, even if they understood their actor as fanatic, did not want to act that fanatically as real actors probably behave.

Table 3. Perception of fanaticism

Question	1 (very low) %	2 (low) %	3 (neutral) %	4 (high) %	5 (very high) %
How do you rank the actor you represented in terms of fanaticism?	6.25	15.6	40.6	15.6	18.7
How do you rank your adversary in terms of fanaticism?	-	9.3	40.6	40.6	12.5

After simulations, students realize that IR theories and concepts are 'real' tools that can contribute to the management of most urgent problems affecting the daily lives of millions of people. This is useful to them beyond the academic environment. IR students need to prepare themselves to act as the leaders of tomorrow. Until I involved them in Game of Peace, only a few students had experienced a simulation in the classroom or on a virtual platform, as can be seen from Table 5 (9.3%). Therefore, their expectations and levels of excitement were relatively high and this in-

fluenced their satisfaction. The majority enjoyed the simulation and were very happy (46.8%) or quite happy (34.3%) with their own performance during the sessions. Almost everyone said that they had experienced some kind of frustration, mainly because of a limited capacity to embody the assigned actor or a lack of leadership (18.5%). Percentages increased when it came to the evaluation of their learning outcomes. The majority of participants (79%) believed that Game of Peace was a good example of a ‘learning by doing’ process and that it helped them to improve their international relations knowledge, as well as their negotiating skills. A few respondents, however, were not fully satisfied, due to friction with other participants or difficulties during interactions (9.3%)

Table 4. Perceptions of student performance, their ability to negotiate and to properly apply international relations theories

Question	1 (Strongly disagree) %	2 (Disagree) %	3 (Neutral) %	4 (Agree) %	5 (Strongly agree) %
I have previously experienced a simulation	71.8	6.2	12.5	9.3	
I am satisfied with my own performance	-	-	18.5	34.3	46.8
The simulation has been a learning experience	-	-	9.3	12.5	79.0

Table 5. Perceived likelihood of joining another simulation and recommending it to fellow students

Question	Yes %	Maybe %	No %
Are you interested in joining another simulation?	81.2	3.2	15.6
Would you recommend this experience to other students?	96.8	3.2	0.0

Whereas the majority of students considered Game of Peace a useful tool that could be repeated (81.2%) and recommended to other students enrolled in an international relations course (96.8%), a small group was cautious and preferred traditional front-led lectures (3.2%). These students tended to be shy, lacking experience with working in teams, and less ready to widely interact with others. In some cases, these students did not want to express their political or reli-

gious opinions or their ideas about some specific conflicts.

My observations of student learning suggest that Game of Peace achieves its planned outcomes. It has proved to be a very useful tool in all my international studies courses and has allowed students from all levels and contexts to benefit. Selecting the theory that is best suited to the initial scenario, preparing a policy plan, adhering to the actors' approaches and playing that role provide students with robust knowledge of international relations concepts. By playing Game of Peace at the end of the course, students can more easily apply what they have already learnt. All simulated conflicts include several non-state actors, such as terrorists, self-determination movements, insurgents, and local civil society organisations, NGOs or private companies that may be part of the resolution, which allows students to understand the conflict in its complexity. Although the outcomes depend on the number of students and the course goals, differences in their backgrounds and preferences are not perceived as a constraint, but rather as a source of richness.

In the classroom or a virtual environment, involving few or many international students, Game of Peace is a challenging and exciting experience, one which has been positively evaluated by students from different cultures and backgrounds. Although students are aware they are playing a game, as soon as the simulation starts, they take it very seriously and are completely committed to the goal. Additionally, the time for negotiation is never enough and the most common complaint is that even a week would not be enough. In the end, students feel more confident, skilled and ready to act. Being engaged in this simulation, students learn to recognise that negotiating with counterparts, mitigating the effects of fanaticism, and achieving an agreement are extremely difficult.

Replicability in a different context

By focusing on the necessary modifications, Game of Peace can be employed in almost any BA or MA course in international studies, whether in Europe or overseas. The model can be applied to different policy fields, involving a combination of various methodologies and approaches. It does not necessarily require technological resources and can easily be used in a virtual environment, requiring a higher level of sophistication. After using it in different courses, countries and student populations, and gathering feedback and suggestions, I maintain that the challenge of teaching lies in stimulating students' curiosity, their learning abilities and soft skills.

Conclusions

Game of Peace is a learning method based on negotiation and conflict resolution and, therefore, specifically designed for students enrolled in international studies courses. I have developed the simulation as a traditional face-to-face, theory-driven and role-based model. However, the same method can be easily adapted to a virtual platform or, depending on the circumstances, can also

be conducted in a blended format. The results of several rounds of Game of Peace, tested on different multicultural groups of students in different countries and using various contemporary civil conflicts, demonstrate that it can be used in all BA and MA international relations programmes, with larger or smaller numbers of participants, and produce good results. In pushing students to interact, although this may challenge them, this simulation has so far contributed to reducing the impact of differences among the students.

As with similar active learning tools, Game of Peace creates the right combination of study, empirical experiments, individual reflections and teamwork. From the study of the initial scenario to the final peace conference, students become more committed to recognising the empirical relevance of international relations theories, identifying and developing soft skills they previously were not aware of. I can, therefore, only recommend simulation as an essential tool for teaching and learning international relations in the 21st century.

References

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Summary

This chapter discusses the use of simulations as an active learning tool and is based on an assessment of Game of Peace, a negotiation model I developed for students of my BA and MA courses on international relations and global civil society at the University of Catania. In this simulation, students take on the roles of different factions involved in a civil war or of the international mediator that has intervened to bring peace and stability to the country. The initial scenario involves actors and conflict dynamics with reference to real contemporary conflicts. The Game of Peace method is presented with its main steps, roles the actors undertake and expectations for how they should act. The different phases as well as the materials used, the requirements and the expected outcomes are described. Students' feedback is assessed to show the potential use of Game of Peace in various international studies courses and with different student populations.

Keywords

conflicts, international relations, mediation, negotiation, power-sharing, simulation, states



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