

Model United Nations and Experiential Learning: An Assessment of Changes in Knowledge and Attitudes

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Abstract

Despite the popularity of Model United Nations, no effort has been made to directly assess student learning since 1984. Accordingly, we developed and administered a pre- and post-conference survey to participants in the 2007 American Model United Nations (AMUN). We assessed whether participating in the simulation affected students' general knowledge of the UN; their attitudes towards the UN and the most important member states; and their understanding of diplomatic strategies. We find that first-time participants increased their general knowledge, developed a more realist orientation towards international relations, and placed more emphasis on the importance of individual agency in world affairs.

Key words: *international relations; Model United Nations; realism; simulations; student assessment; deep learning.*

Introduction

Experiential learning is essentially 'learning from experience or learning by doing' that 'encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking' (Lewis and Williams, 1994, p.5). Within the social sciences, one of the most popular methods of promoting experiential learning has historically been Model United Nations, as the latest estimates show that roughly 400,000 students at all educational levels participate in simulations of the United Nations in more than 400 conferences held in 35 countries around the world (Crossley-Frolick, 2013, p. 187). Despite the popularity of these academic competitions, little effort has been made to directly assess student learning through use of participant surveys since 1986 (Hazleton and Mahurin, 1986). See also Hazelton and Jacobs, 1982-1983). Nonetheless, a good deal of research has been undertaken, including a focus beyond the Model

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UN to include other simulations and related types of active learning that have become much more common within international relations and political science curricula (see e.g., Galatas, 2006; Shellman and Turan, 2006; Wheeler, 2006; Ambrosio, 2004; Newmann and Twigg, 2000; Lantis, 1998). This more recent research, however, is often based on a small number of observations, consisting of a class or two of students in a particular college or university (see, for example, Engel et al., 2017; Pettenger et al., 2014; Crossley-Frollick, 2013). Others offer a survey of course syllabi (Haack, 2008) or an analysis of different categories of simulations, such as whether it is credit bearing or not (Taylor, 2013). Though limited in their generalizability, this research on simulations and experiential learning, including Model UN, has generated a number of important tentative findings that merit further examination. While we have no intention to review systematically this large body of pedagogical research, the essential question is the extent to which participation in simulations of the UN promotes positive, measurable learning outcomes.

Review of the Literature

Chief among the more recent findings within the scholarship of teaching and learning is the notion that while simulations such as Model UN promote ‘surface learning,’ they fail to impart ‘deep learning,’ thus raising questions about whether these exercises are worth the effort and, especially in cases where students attend conferences in other cities, expense (Taylor, 2013, p. 136). As Haack (2008, p. 398) concludes, ‘Model UN operates within a ‘standard’ curriculum that does not, or only weekly [sic] supports deep learning. At the heart of this weakness are the conventions and accepted practices of UN teaching (and research), which support surface learning.’ Using the SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) taxonomy, deep learning is defined as ‘an increased ability to connect, synthesize, and abstract knowledge, while surface learning is evident where students merely pick up one or two aspects of a task... In other words, surface learners learn by memorizing facts, while deep learners learn through understanding’ (Haack, 2008, p. 396). Put another way, *deep learning* is ‘premised on a belief that higher education is about students undergoing conceptual change’ while *surface learning* simply involves ‘reproduction of content’ (Donnison and Penn-Edwards, 2012, p. 10).

This rather negative conclusion of what many have interpreted as limited learning outcomes associated with Model UN participation is not new. In their early study, Hazleton and Mahurin noted that while simulations of the UN generally led to positive learning outcomes, they could not ‘transmit large amounts of information, provide the depth of understanding necessary

to deal with the substantive issues and procedures involved, nor have a major affect [sic] on student attitudes' (1986, p. 152. See also McIntosh, 2001). Observing simulations of the UN at various conferences around the world, Muldoon (1995, p. 31) lamented the 'command of process, but little substance' displayed by the participants. In short, initial research on the results of participating in Model UN simulations for student learning suggested that the intense experience provided surface learning, but yielded little in the area of deeper learning.

Other recent scholarship, however, comes to somewhat more optimistic conclusions with respect to Model UN learning outcomes. Taylor (2013, p.134), for example, suggests 'active learning activities' like Model UN 'have great potential...to produce deeper learning of international affairs and IR theories.' Categorizing simulations into five different types, she asserts that 'theoretical learning is most likely to occur in...credit-bearing MUN and extended in-class simulations' (Taylor, 2013, p. 146). In a similar comparative case study of two classroom simulations she designed, Crossley-Frolick (2013, p. 195) found that the 'simulation worked very well in clarifying the more abstract and theoretical components of the course.'

In another study that uses a pre- and post-test survey design, Pettenger et al. (2014, p. 499) discovered that although 'not statistically significant, detectable shifts in attitudes in several key values were observed,' which indicates that students 'demonstrated conceptual knowledge.' Furthermore, in their debriefing of students, they note that the majority of students observed that the simulation 'involved 'deeper learning'' (Pettenger et al., 2014, p. 502). These conclusions were based on classroom simulations of political science classes at two universities, one in the US and the other in Canada.

Finally, in a recent study Engel et al. (2017) directly test Haack's (2008) notion that participating in the Model UN fails to promote deep learning. To do so, they apply Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) four distinct areas of knowledge involved in deep learning: factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive. They conclude that while 'deep learning had occurred across all four levels of knowledge,' two areas of learning were especially prominent: 'conceptual knowledge around IR theories...and metacognitive knowledge around students' learning journey' (Engel et al., 2017, p. 172). In short, they find that participants in Model UN 'demonstrated deep learning in IR theories' (2017, p. 181).

As noted previously, the major weakness of all of these recent studies is that they do not base their conclusions on systematic quantitative efforts to assess student learning outcomes. The

most recent published finding from a survey of Model UN participants that we were able to find was Hazleton and Mahurin's contribution in 1986 (using data from 1984), which found, among other things, that such simulations have somewhat limited learning outcomes and are not associated with attitudinal changes among students. In order to address this limitation within this literature, this study follows their general research strategy. Specifically, after describing our basic research design, we take advantage of the pre- and post-survey design to explore whether the simulation is associated with any changes in students' knowledge and attitudes. We argue that the former questions assess surface learning. 'Deep learning,' however, can be measured by questions gauging changes in attitudes, including changes in students' theoretical orientation and increased understanding of diplomacy, including diplomatic strategies and procedures.

Method

Research design

Our survey questionnaire included questions measuring students' interest, attitudes, experience and knowledge concerning the United Nations, key member states, and issues on the agenda of the UN in September 2007. This allowed us to capture their responses before they begin their preparations for the 2007 conference. After they participated in the American Model United Nations (AMUN) conference, held November 17-20, 2007, we asked students to complete a similar survey, including many of the same questions. The questions assessing general knowledge were drawn from test banks and the authors' own exams used in introductory courses. Their responses to the general knowledge questions capture surface or rote learning. Attitudes were measured using a five-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. As has been described, attitudinal changes suggest that a process of deep learning has occurred. In addition to these substantive questions, we included questions assessing logistical and organizational aspects of Model UN preparation. This is especially important since we limit our analysis in this article to first-time participants, which enables us to isolate the effects of the simulation in an experimental design.

Data Collection

The survey was hosted on the Internet using the software 'Survey Monkey.' Faculty advisors and student leaders whose colleges or universities were registered to participate in the 2007 AMUN conference were asked to invite their students to complete the survey. After the

conference in November, we asked students to complete the post-conference survey. In order to encourage participation in the survey, we offered \$25 gift certificates, determined by a raffle, to four respondents who participated in both surveys. A total of 236 students responded to the survey administered prior to the conference, while 125 participated in the one conducted after the conference. Unfortunately, only 56 first-time model UN participants completed both the pre- and post-simulation surveys.³ Nonetheless, as we will see, this sample is of sufficient size to allow us to perform some basic statistical analyses, such as cross-tabulations and paired difference tests.⁴

Findings

Table 1 reports changes in students' knowledge and attitudes as a result of participating in the UN simulation in Chicago. There were a total of ten general UN knowledge questions included in the pre- and post-surveys. As shown in the table, students had substantial knowledge of the UN even prior to participating in the simulation. For example, on the pre-test knowledge questions a majority of students selected the correct response on all but two of the ten questions (46.4% answered correctly concerning the US share of the UN budget while only 16 percent were aware of the procedure for creating a peacekeeping force). Even given this rather substantial knowledge, when comparing pre- and post-simulation responses we can see that, with the exception of two questions, students' general knowledge of the UN increased after the Model UN conference.

The most impressive gain was seen in their knowledge of UN peacekeeping as an additional 14.3% of students correctly replied that the 'UN has no standing army.' Next, 10.7% more participants correctly stated the size of the Security Council and identified Ban Ki-Moon as the then-current Secretary-General while awareness that the World Bank is not one of the principal organs of the UN increased by 5.3%. Small increases in percentages of correct

³ We repeated the survey again in 2014. Unfortunately, only 14 students responded to both the pre- and post-conference surveys in that year. Thus, a comparison to the 2007 study is not possible.

⁴ A common rule of thumb based on the Central Limit Theorem is that a sample of 30 is usually sufficient to ensure a normal distribution and representativeness of the underlying population (Ott and Longnecker, 2010, p. 189).

Table 1*Frequency Table of Pre- and Post-simulation Changes in UN Knowledge*

Which of the following is not a principal organ of the United Nations?					
	Pre		Post		%
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Change
General Assembly	1	1.8	1	1.8	0.0
Economic and Social Council	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
International Court of Justice	4	7.1	1	1.8	-5.3
<i>World Bank</i>	51	91.1	54	96.4	5.3
How many countries are represented on the UN Security Council?					
5	11	19.6	5	8.9	-10.7
10	6	10.7	5	8.9	-1.8
15	37	66.1	43	76.8	10.7
20	2	3.6	3	5.4	1.8
What can the permanent members of the UN Security Council do that nonpermanent members cannot?					
Abstain on resolutions.	1	1.8	0	0.0	-1.8
<i>Veto resolutions.</i>	48	85.7	48	85.7	0.0
Request a meeting of the Security Council.	6	10.7	7	12.5	1.8
Ignore the content of a resolution.	1	1.8	1	1.8	0.0
The current Secretary-General of the UN is					
Boutros Boutros-Ghali.	4	7.1	2	3.6	-3.5
<i>Ban Ki-moon.</i>	38	67.9	44	78.6	10.7
Kofi Annan.	12	21.4	9	16.1	-5.3
Chan Ho-Park.	2	3.6	1	1.8	-1.8
What year was the United Nations founded?					
1918	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
1960	0	0.0	1	1.8	1.8
1945	56	100.0	55	98.2	-1.8
1896	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
Which of the following is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council?					
United States	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
Russia	5	8.9	4	7.1	-1.8
<i>Japan</i>	50	89.3	51	91.1	1.8
United Kingdom	1	1.8	1	1.8	0.0
	56	100	56	100.0	
The United States' share of the UN's regular budget is:					
12%	7	12.5	7	12.5	0
16%	8	14.3	8	14.3	0
22%	26	46.4	23	41.1	-5.3
25%	15	26.8	18	32.1	5.3

Table 1 (continued)

Frequency Table of Pre- and Post-simulation Changes in UN Knowledge

To assist in peace keeping operations, the UN has a standing army of:					
5,000 troops	1	1.8	1	1.8	0
12,000 troops	9	16.1	3	5.4	-10.7
25,000 troops	6	10.7	4	7.1	-3.6
<i>The UN has no standing army</i>	40	71.4	48	85.7	14.3
UN sponsored peace keeping operations are created and approved by:					
The General Assembly	14	25.0	12	21.4	-3.6
The Trusteeship Council	0	0.0	0	0.0	0
The Security Council	33	58.9	33	58.9	0
<i>Created by the Secretary-General & approved by the Security Council</i>	9	16.1	11	19.6	3.5
About how many countries are currently members of the UN?					
125-150	4	7.1	4	7.1	0.0
150-175	11	19.6	14	25.0	5.4
<i>175-200</i>	33	58.9	35	62.5	3.6
200+	8	14.3	3	5.4	-8.9
Total	56	100	56	100	

Note. Correct responses are shown in italics.

responses (3.6%) were reported with respect to the procedures for creating a peacekeeping force and the number of countries belonging to the UN while only an additional 1.8% (one respondent in this case) recognized that Japan was not a Permanent Member of the Security Council.

Finally, there was no change in the number of correct responses concerning the veto powers of the P5 and there were two questions on which the number of incorrect responses increased: the year in which the UN was founded and the USA's share of the regular UN budget. On the former question one student stated the wrong year (although 100% answered correctly in the pre-conference survey) while 5.3% more students incorrectly replied that the US share of the budget equals 25%.

Table 2 reports the results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test on changes in attitudes toward the UN in the pre-and post-conference surveys. These attitudinal changes imply 'conceptual change,' which is an aspect of deep learning. In other words, if students' attitudes become more clearly aligned with theories of international relations such as realism, we can infer that some level of deep learning has been accomplished. As we can see, of these 21 pairs of questions,

there are five statistically significant changes in students' attitudes.⁵ We report these questions in more detail in Table 3.

Table 2*Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test of Pre- and Post-simulation Attitudes*

	Z	Sig.
The UN helps promote peace.	-.962a	0.336
The UN is necessary.	-1.762a	0.078
The UN is effective.	-1.055a	0.291
The UN should have more authority.	-.430a	0.667
The UN should have greater resources.	-.235b	0.814
The USA should withdraw from the UN.	-1.000b	0.317
The USA should use the UN more as a tool of foreign policy.	-2.355a	0.019
A member state's military power in the international system affects its ability to further its national objectives within the UN.	-.972a	0.331
A member state's economic power in the international system affects its ability to further its national objectives within the UN.	-.016a	0.987
The UN is more responsive to the concerns of less developed countries (LDCs) than to the concerns of the developed countries.	-1.452b	0.146
Most member states usually promote their own national interests above the mission and values of the UN.	-.393b	0.694
The five permanent members of the Security Council usually promote their own national interests above the mission and values of the UN.	-2.342b	0.019
The USA usually promotes its own national interests above the mission and values of the UN.	-2.675b	0.007
The UN Security Council (UNSC) should be reformed to include more permanent members.	-.336a	0.737
The UNSC should be reformed to remove the veto power of the permanent members.	-1.288b	0.198
No significant reforms, such as those above, of the UNSC will be undertaken in my lifetime.	-2.559b	0.010
The UN should become more involved in solving issues of poverty.	-.198a	0.843
The UN needs to be more effective when confronting poverty.	-.688a	0.491
The UN should become more involved in solving issues of global health care.	-.434a	0.664
The UN needs to be more effective when confronting global health care.	-.809b	0.419
The UN should be given more funding in order to accomplish its work.	-1.110b	0.267

Note. a. Based on positive ranks, b. Based on negative ranks. n=56

⁵ When we included all the survey respondents we found rather similar results. The main exception is that changes in attitudes were evident in eight of the 21 questions. This is most likely due to the larger sample size.

The frequency tables reported in table 3 all tend to show that students have become more oriented toward political realism after participating in the UN simulation. According to a

Table 3

Frequency Table of Pre- and Post-simulation Attitudinal Changes

	Pre		Post		% Change
	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent	
<i>The UN is necessary.</i>					
Strongly disagree	2	3.6	1	1.8	
Disagree	3	5.4	5	8.9	10.7
Neutral	8	14.3	10	17.9	17.9
Agree	20	35.7	21	37.5	71.4
Strongly agree	23	41.1	19	33.9	76.8
<i>The five permanent members of the Security Council usually promote their own national interests above the mission and</i>					
Strongly disagree	1	1.8	0	0.0	1.8
Disagree	7	12.5	1	1.8	14.3
Neutral	16	28.6	16	28.6	28.6
Agree	22	39.3	26	46.4	57.1
Strongly agree	10	17.9	13	23.2	69.6
<i>The USA usually promotes its own national interests above the mission and values of the UN.</i>					
Strongly disagree	1	1.8	0	0.0	1.8
Disagree	9	16.1	3	5.4	17.9
Neutral	5	8.9	5	8.9	8.9
Agree	21	37.5	23	41.1	73.2
Strongly agree	20	35.7	25	44.6	85.7
<i>The USA should use the UN more as a tool of foreign policy.</i>					
Strongly disagree	5	8.9	8	14.3	19.6
Disagree	6	10.7	11	19.6	33.9
Neutral	16	28.6	13	23.2	22.0
Agree	16	28.6	18	32.1	51.8
Strongly agree	13	23.2	6	10.7	42.9
<i>No significant reforms, such as those above, of the UNSC will be undertaken in my lifetime.</i>					
Strongly disagree	1	1.8	0	0.0	1.8
Disagree	16	28.6	10	17.9	30.4
Neutral	16	28.6	17	30.4	30.4
Agree	19	33.9	20	35.7	51.8
Strongly agree	4	7.1	9	16.1	41.1
Total	56	100	56	100	

Note. Only the statistically significant pairs identified in table 2 are included.

mainstream textbook in our discipline of international relations, realists ‘tend to hold a rather pessimistic view, emphasizing the struggle for power and influence among political units acting

in a rational, unitary manner in pursuit of objectives grounded in their separate, often divergent interests' (Viotti and Kauppi, 2001, p. 509). Thus, the finding that an additional 12.5% of students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the 'permanent members of the Security Council usually promote their own national interests above the mission and values of the UN' and that the 'USA usually promotes its own national interests above the mission and values of the UN' are both consistent with the concept of realism. Moreover, students not only perceived that the great powers, especially the USA, act according to realist principles; their opinions changed such that the slight majority that advocated a liberal policy of engagement with the UN prior to the conference was lost after participating in the simulation. More specifically, support for the statement that the 'USA should use the UN more as a tool of foreign policy' fell to 42.9% from 51.8%. After the simulation one-third of students strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement, which was an increase of 14.3%.

Finally, students became much more skeptical about the prospect of reforming the UN during their lifetimes and even the necessity of the UN at all. Indeed, a slight majority (51.8%) believed that no 'significant reforms' such as including more permanent members on the Security Council or removing their veto powers 'will be undertaken in my lifetime.' This was an increase of 8.3%. Those disagreeing with this statement fell by 9.2%. The percentage of students who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the UN is 'necessary' fell slightly by 5.4%. (Nonetheless, just over 70% of participants still believed that the organization is necessary).

In sum, the evidence suggests that students gained more than surface knowledge by participating in Model United Nations. The simulation changed their attitudes about the motivations nation-states have in international relations. In particular, the more idealistic views held by students of the United Nations and its role in international relations shifted, and more realist views were observed after participation in the simulation. While we recognize that this finding should be considered rather tentative, it is consistent with one of the main conclusions in a recent study completed by Engel et al. (2017). One of their subjects wrote the following in their Student Reflective Journal entry: 'The theory and procedural aspects of the subject led me to question several of my assumptions and preconceived ideas of the United Nations...I finish the semester with a far more realist understanding of current world politics (Engel et al., 2017, p. 178).

Tables 4 and 5 represent our final pre- and post-simulation analyses, focusing on diplomatic strategies. Just as in the previous series of questions, we first report the results of Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. Statistically significant changes in participant attitudes towards

Table 4
Diplomatic Strategies

	Z	Sig. (2-tail)
The Rules and Procedures of the UN frequently hinder diplomatic compromises.	-2.052a	0.040
The individual personalities of delegates play a large role in determining outcomes.	-2.605b	0.009
Regional blocs are more important in determining the positions of Member States than they should be.	-1.812b	0.070
Effective public speaking during formal sessions is most important.	-.958a	0.338
Effective behind the scenes caucusing is most important.	-1.857b	0.063
Being the loudest and/or most forceful person in a caucus is important to diplomatic success.	-.079b	0.937
A person must be forceful in presenting their country's perspectives on an issue in order to effectively represent that country.	-.228b	0.820
Passing a resolution is the ultimate mark of success at the UN or a MUN conference.	-3.365a	0.001
Diplomats spend significant amounts of time focusing on the points of agreement between their countries on most issues.	-.635a	0.525

Note. a. Based on positive ranks, b. Based on negative ranks. n=56

diplomatic strategies were evident in 5 of the 9 questions included in the survey. These changes are detailed in the frequency tables reported in table 5. In general, they once again support the notion that experiential learning such as the Model UN promotes some deeper learning, as it fosters a greater appreciation for the role that diplomacy and individuals play in shaping international relations.

The most substantial shifts in pre- and post-participation attitudes were witnessed in this area, where it seems that students had the least amount of knowledge prior to the simulation. For example, the largest reported shift in attitudes has to do with the relevance of regional blocs. Here it is most evident that students had little awareness of such coalitions since nearly two-thirds were ‘neutral’ before the conference. After students experienced the simulation, this neutrality was reduced by 41.1%, with an additional 24.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing that regional blocs are ‘more important in determining the positions of Member States than they should be’ and 16.0% adopting the opposite view. Another interesting result concerns the role of

parliamentary procedures. A plurality of students (32.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that parliamentary rules and procedures ‘frequently hinder diplomatic compromises’ before the simulation while afterwards a larger plurality (41.1%), representing a change of 19.7%, disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Table 5*Frequency Table of Pre- and Post-simulation Diplomatic Strategies**

The Rules and Procedures of the UN frequently hinder diplomatic compromises.							
	Freq.	%		Freq.	%		
Strongly disagree	0	0.0		1	1.8		
Disagree	12	21.4	21.4	22	39.3	41.1	19.7
Neutral	26	46.4	46.4	19	33.9	33.9	-12.5
Agree	15	26.8		11	19.6		
Strongly agree	3	5.4	32.2	3	5.4	25	-7.2
The individual personalities of delegates play a large role in determining outcomes.							
Strongly disagree	1	1.8		0	0.0		
Disagree	2	3.6	5.4	2	3.6	3.6	-1.8
Neutral	12	21.4	21.4	5	8.9	8.9	-12.5
Agree	27	48.2		25	44.6		
Strongly agree	14	25	73.2	24	42.9	87.5	14.3
Regional blocs are more important in determining the positions of Member States than they should be.							
Strongly disagree	0	0.0		0	0.0		
Disagree	3	5.4	5.4	12	21.4	21.4	16.0
Neutral	36	64.3	64.3	13	23.2	23.2	-41.1
Agree	15	26.8		20	35.7		
Strongly agree	2	3.6	30.4	11	19.6	55.3	24.9
Effective behind the scenes caucusing is most important.							
Strongly disagree	0	0.0		0	0.0		
Disagree	0	0.0	0.0	2	3.6	3.6	3.6
Neutral	11	19.6	19.6	5	8.9	8.9	-10.7
Agree	31	55.4		25	44.6		
Strongly agree	14	25	80.4	24	42.9	87.5	7.1
Passing a resolution is the ultimate mark of success at the UN or a MUN conference.							
Strongly disagree	4	7.1		13	23.2		
Disagree	22	39.3	46.4	22	39.3	62.5	16.1
Neutral	10	17.9	17.9	12	21.4	21.4	3.5
Agree	13	23.2		8	14.3		
Strongly agree	7	12.5	35.7	1	1.8	16.1	-19.6
Total	56	100		56	100		

Note. Only the statistically significant pairs identified in table 4 are included.

Finally, there were substantial changes to the way in which students viewed individual actors in the simulation and how they defined success in the UN. First, after the simulation an additional 14.3% of students, for a total equal to 87.5%, agreed or strongly agreed that ‘individual personalities of delegates play a large role in determining outcomes.’ Nearly 20% more of these students strongly agreed with this statement post-simulation, indicating that this attitude intensified. This suggests that experiential learning increases students’ awareness of the importance of individuals in shaping policy outcomes, even on the world stage. It is likely that John Rourke, author of one leading texts in international relations, *International Politics on the World Stage*, would applaud this finding, as it supports his emphasis on the importance of individual actors in shaping international outcomes in the ‘Global Drama’ (2008). Our findings also address a frequent concern of Model UN instructors that students are only there to pass resolutions, and don’t really focus on negotiations and content. In this area, the percentage of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that passing resolutions ‘is the ultimate mark of success at the UN or a MUN conference’ decreased by nearly 20% and that an additional 7.1% agreed or strongly agreed that ‘effective behind the scenes caucusing is most important’ in determining outcomes after the simulation. These are aspects that suggest that students focus more on learning than on competing (often measured by passing resolutions), which is what many advisors emphasize.

Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

Despite the popularity of the Model United Nations, there has been a somewhat surprising lack of systematic assessment of the learning outcomes associated with these simulations within the growing literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Our pre- and post-simulation survey of student participants has, we hope, begun to overcome this deficiency. The more ambitious goal of this study was to address recent findings that simulations in general, and the Model UN in particular, do not contribute to what has been characterized as deep learning, which is what most agree higher education aspires to accomplish. While such evidence may be somewhat limited, there are some findings that suggest that students are engaged in deeper learning. We return to this point shortly. Regardless, there is little doubt that the simulation does advance surface learning, as students’ performance on the UN general knowledge questions increased on eight of the ten questions we included. This finding is consistent with earlier research and not inconsequential, especially since there is evidence to

suggest that such learning can be a ‘precursor to deeper learning’ (Donnison and Penn-Edwards, 2012, p. 11).

The UN is a negotiating body and a place where the foreign policies of its members plays out. There are certainly some aspects of institutionalism in gathering to find solutions, and this is absolutely a part of the learning process. That being said, more often than not students experience frustration a number of times during their Model UN experience. This typically comes when they are negotiating with other states, and realize that the solution that is preferred by the state a student represents is not necessarily the one preferred by other nations. Or more commonly, they realize that much of the world agrees on a solution, but a few states stand in the way. In practical terms, this may look like the United States taking the side of Israel and blocking action when many other states take the side of Palestine. Alternately, it might look like the Russian Federation backing Syria, or China backing North Korea, while most states take the opposite side. Thus, students often come to a deeper understanding of how the UN works through the Model UN experience. Institutionalism does work on some issues, but it often takes a great deal of time for the varied states of the world to come to agreement. And more often than not, a very realist sense of state power drives decision making, and leads some powerful states to block or demand actions that may not be popular with the rest of the international community. Thus, our finding that students’ attitudes shifted toward political realism is not surprising and is indicative of conceptual change in those attitudes, countering the claim that Model UN provides only surface learning. Additionally, students tend to adopt a more accurate perspective of international diplomacy through participating in these simulations, as they come to understand both the importance of regional blocs and individuals in shaping outcomes at the UN. In sum, Model United Nations provides students with meaningful opportunities to engage in both surface and deep learning about international relations. As such, it is a learning activity that colleges and universities should continue to promote and enlarge.

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