From Poughkeepsie to Peoria to the Persian Gulf: A Novice's ICONS Odyssey

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The Problem

Although events in the last few years in Moscow, Baghdad, Berlin, Beijing, and Panama City have clearly demonstrated to me the importance of world politics, I sometimes have been frustrated that my students did not always feel the same. Thus, like the surfer searching for the perfect wave, I embarked on a journey to seek a better way of teaching courses in international politics. Many others had ventured before me (Walcott 1980). I didn't really know exactly what I was looking for, but I was nevertheless undaunted. I'd recognize my destination once I got there!

The Odyssey

Enter serendipity. My colleague, Joseph L. Belanger, professor of French, had visited a school noted for excellence in global studies. He was thus introduced to International Communication and Negotiation Simulations (ICONS), administered by the department of government and politics at the University of Maryland.[1] My French-speaking colleague was so impressed that upon his return he implored me to help establish the program at our institution, Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. With perhaps a bit of reluctance, I agreed, and we both traveled to College Park, Maryland, for a three-day ICONS Workshop. When I drove home, I was tired, but I too was impressed.

The workshop was well constructed. We met most of the members of the ICONS team including the originators, Jonathan Wilkenfeld (political science) and Richard D. Brecht (foreign language), who had labored for years putting the program together. All were helpful, honest, and hospitable. We were taught about as much as could reasonably be absorbed in a short time. Included was a mini-demonstration of ICONS (a simulation simulation!) which, although helpful, could not convey the power of the real thing. Participants were given a long, well written, and organized users' manual, which later proved to be vital (Wilkenfeld 1988).

ICONS is a high tech version of a "Model United Nations," which can be thoughtfully integrated into the classroom. As in a Model UN, college teams are assigned by a central authority (University of Maryland) to

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role play a particular foreign country. Unlike a Model UN, however, the country teams in ICONS do not travel to some central location to conduct their negotiations. They stay on their respective campuses and correspond with other delegations via computers and telecommunications. The major disadvantages to the ICONS approach are that students miss face to face exchanges and the experience of visiting new locales. However, ICONS has the advantage of allowing greater numbers of students from literally all over the world to participate for greater lengths of time. Instead of sending a half dozen students to a distant university to bargain for a weekend, ICONS permits two dozen students to become actively engaged in diplomacy for over a month.

Moreover, unlike the typical Model UN, participants in ICONS can avail themselves of a foreign language option. This interdisciplinary aspect is extremely appealing. Our school was eventually assigned to play Belgium. We chose to both send and receive simulation messages in French.[2] Students in my class, Comparative Politics of Western Europe,[3] worked closely with advanced French majors in Belanger's class. The latter translated for the former who concentrated on political content. As was required, Belanger would certify that each outgoing message was in native-quality French. Hence, students taking part in the simulation at Marist or elsewhere were learning the language properly. Meanwhile, participants in other institutions were simultaneously practicing Spanish or German.

Wilkenfeld and the other workshop leaders had stressed that a course incorporating ICONS should be divided into three distinct parts.

Phase One

Early in the semester students were given a pre-simulation questionnaire available to those associated with the ICONS Project.[4] During this first phase students studied a "scenario," supplied by the University of Maryland, which details fundamental assumptions about the international system as well as basic issues to be later negotiated. In our case the scenario was a 25-page white paper that projected the real world into the future by about six months. The idea is to encourage students to have some freedom in ensuing negotiations to develop their own policies, but at the same time to role play in character with their assigned countries.

Our simulation, supporting 24 country teams, was broken down into a set of interlocking "subgames": the European Community (especially Project '92), Global Environment (focus on global warming), International Economic Problems (including trade and debt

issues), Human Rights, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Drug Trafficking and Production, as well as the Persian Gulf.[5]

Throughout the first portion of the semester my students listened to several lectures in which I conveyed some of the essentials of European politics. Students were also during this time busily viewing the scenario, not through the eyes of North Americans, but rather through Belgian lenses. The major assignment before midterm examinations was for the class to assemble a group "position paper." This turned out to be a formidable task. A good position paper should include *inter alia*: background material on the assigned country's national goals and policies, problems facing the nation, evaluation of alternative policies, and recommendations.

My class of 30 students—probably too large to be ideal—was broken into groups with several students concentrating on each of the sub-games. Two students were chosen by me to shape the work of the clusters into a meaningful whole. Two others were assigned to be "domestic authenticity checkers." Their function was to ensure that what was written in the document was consistent with real life Belgian political constraints. The position paper (which is sent to the University of Maryland, but not shared with other country teams) is crucial. In no small measure it ensures the academic integrity of the simulation. By establishing the framework in which students will subsequently negotiate, it serves to prevent their simply sending "knee-jerk" communications.

One of our earliest classes took place in the library. Students, under the direction of a trained librarian, were exposed to bibliographic instruction specifically designed to assist them with their position paper. This introduction helped the class to jump-start their project and make the most out of those precious initial weeks of the semester. In the future this information literacy training will become even more valuable as more and more data bases are available in nontraditional formats.

Phase One also entailed logistical preparations as well as having the students acquire the necessary computer skills for the simulation. Hardware requirements are modest. Participating schools need access to a computer terminal, modem, printer, and an outgoing telephone line.[6] The ICONS software is called POLNET II. It is sophisticated, yet user friendly; high schoolers can and do handle it with ease. POLNET II is accessed via Telenet or NSFNET. Charges vary according to which service is selected. I was fortunate in that my class was already computer literate. A substantial portion of class time was, nevertheless, devoted to teaching proper sign on/sign off procedures as well as the mechanics of uploading text messages (some of which may be pre-formulated off line) to

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the University of Maryland mainframe. It is highly desirable to have at least one local computer center resource person available to help out with any technical problems.

By trial and error a successful method evolved whereby my political science majors would write a message by creating a file on a floppy disk and generating a printed copy.[7] Belanger's students would then create another file on the same disk with the French translation. Later the appropriate file would be uploaded to country teams designated to receive in either language.

The first phase of approximately six weeks entailed a great deal of work for both students and professors, but the entire month-long actual simulation period made it worthwhile.

Phase Two

Once the signal for the simulation to begin is sent by SIMCON (Simulation Control), students are finally free to send substantive communica-tions. Messages may be sent to one, all, or selected delegations in "the regular mail." Twice weekly, students are required to send communiques—official public policy statements on specific issues—to all other country teams. The instructor's job at this point is to monitor message flow for both quality and quantity. The faculty member takes on the role of a facilitator who acts as a coordinator and resource person for the class. In what is surely somewhat unnatural for many of us in academe, the professor refrains from being an active participant. However, resisting the temptation to interfere and allowing students to make their own mistakes does encourage learning from the logical consequences of decision making.

By far, the most interesting form of communication takes place during real-time conferences in which perhaps a dozen country teams negotiate in English on predetermined agenda items. Nothing quite prepared me for the thrill of the first such conference. It was a wonderful experience to see my class hooked up electronically with their peers around the world. Our simulation included students who spanned not only all four U.S. time zones, but also the globe (e.g., Finland, South Korea, U.K., Japan, Venezuela).

The pace of message exchange can be hectic. Fortunately, the printer saves a paper trail of the frenzied hour's events. Deluged students must learn to separate out the most important messages for their attention. They must also agree ahead of time to class rules that determine how they will respond in case of internal disagreements. Students have a limited time to discuss among themselves, for example, what would be the official Belgian position relating to the matter at hand.

Ideally students should have their own ICONS room so that they do not disturb others. Decorations, posters, maps, flags, films, and guest speakers can greatly add to the spirit of the simulation. Following a tip picked up during the workshop, we set our ICONS room clock to Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). To avoid ethnocentrism all conferences are scheduled and all messages tagged with GMT.

Phase Three

Debriefing is conducted during the waning weeks of the semester. A key advantage of ICONS is the computer's vast archival capabilities. After Phase Two is completed, the entire archives of the simulation are opened for all. Students obtain access to messages sent by the other delegations that had heretofore been secret. Thus, students may retro-actively immerse themselves in the data to bolster their learning. They may attempt to find out what went right or wrong during a particular negotiation to answer a research question or test a hypothesis. A foreign language professor may retrieve several translations of the same document for the class to determine which is best and why.

Students during Phase Three are administered a post-simulation questionnaire whose data can be compared to pre-simulation information for purposes of outcomes assessment.

Upon the strong recommendation of the University of Maryland staff, I required my students at the end of the course to evaluate those peers with whom they had frequent contact during the simulation. This was a first for me. I had never allowed my students to have a say in grading each other before. But, this was a nontraditional course that did require some different techniques of evaluation. Peer judgments indeed became a portion of each student's final grade. As was predicted by the ICONS personnel, students on the whole did in fact take this process seriously and acted responsibly.

Conclusion

ICONS is labor intensive for students and professors, with a large learning curve for both. Participation requires financial resources, time, space, and some equipment. It also requires close collaboration of political science and foreign language faculty. Being a facilitator, instead of a conventional teacher, can be difficult. Not all students will respond to this unusual approach.

Nevertheless, if ICONS is not the perfect wave, it certainly is a robust one. Some of its benefits are obvious and were anticipated.

ICONS:

1. lets students experience "real" foreign relations,
2. promotes high levels of student participation in an active learning process,
3. provides excellent training for foreign language students and fosters appreciation of nuances of diplomatic language for political scientists,
4. supports computer skills,
5. allows for an interdisciplinary approach to international politics.

Perhaps not so obvious are its unanticipated advantages.

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ICONS:

1. encourages students to think for themselves and to work with others in complicated group dynamics,
2. fosters student responsibility,
3. entices students to conduct research on their own,
4. is a form of "writing across the curriculum" enabling students to practice skills in written communication in an enjoyable manner,
5. demands that faculty learn more about vital global issues.

In summary, I'm glad I stumbled into the ICONS Project. It makes a wonderful "practical" complement to more standard theoretical courses. Formal student evaluations of the experience are uniformly positive. I am particularly surprised, but pleased, to see some individuals "take off" from the simulation and demonstrate an interest in international affairs that does not appear to be temporary. ICONS is an inter-disciplinary approach to international understanding that is an extremely appropriate use of modern technology for better pedagogy. It works in no small measure because it is fun.

Notes

1. Those interested in more information about ICONS should contact Professors Jonathan Wilkenfeld and Richard D. Brecht or Ms. Patty Landis (ICONS Simulation Director), Department of Government and Politics, 2148 Lefrak Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; (301) 405-4172.
2. College teams may elect to send, receive, or do both in a foreign language. They may also rely solely on English.
3. ICONS is most often an integral part of university or secondary courses (e.g., comparative foreign policy, world politics, social science). Occasionally groups of volunteers operate country teams.
4. Much work in constructing proper evaluation instruments for ICONS has been done by Judith V. Torney-Purta, Professor of Human Development, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.
5. Scenarios and subgames may change. For instance, a recent simulation has concentrated entirely on various aspects of global ecology.
6. Our equipment happened to be IBM, but the system accepts virtually all types.
7. We used $Q \& A$ for word processing, but any similar package will do.

References

Walcott, Charles (ed.). 1980. *Simple Simulations II: A Collection of Simulation/Games for Political Scientists*. Washington, DC: APSA.

Wilkenfeld, Jonathan, and Richard D. Brecht et al. 1988. *ICONS User Manual*. College Park, MD: ICONS.

About the Author

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