Simulating City Councils: Increasing Student Awareness and Involvement

Sara R. Rinfret, *Hartwick College*

ABSTRACT   As state capitals and city halls influence our daily lives, how can students become active participants in the affairs of their communities (Saffell and Basehart 2009)? For students to explore this question and local policy making in general, I developed a city council simulation for a state and local government course. This article describes the details of this city council simulation so that it can be easily replicated. Moreover, the goal is for students to move beyond classroom lectures and become more informed participants of local policy making.

Political science courses, particularly those at the undergraduate level, expose students to the basic functions of our federal institutions (Congress, president, courts), which can engender participatory learners. Yet, are political science majors being challenged to become more informed participants of local policy making? To invoke students to become more conversant about local government, during the past five semesters I developed a mock city council simulation for a state and local government course. This simulation is an example of experimental learning and encourages students to become active in their communities (Bain 2004).

THE VALUE OF A CITY COUNCIL SIMULATION

One contemporary question for many college professors is, "Where do you start when you think about teaching and learning?" (Gurung and Schwartz 2009, 1). I find it troubling that many students enrolled in my state and local government course do not know who represents them at their local or state level. Maybe this lack of involvement helps to explain why the US electorate can often fall near 10% to 14% for local elections nationwide (Hajnal and Lewis 2003).

Low turnout and engagement may be a function of antiquated teaching. Bain (2004) defines a more traditional teaching approach as the transmission model, where instructors deliver the truths to the students about the field. In response, many college instructors have adopted a wider array of teaching approaches with hands-on learning activities to engage students (see Bain 2004; McKeachie and Svinicki 2006). To captivate contemporary students, I argue that a city council simulation is imperative.

Recently, Pautz (2011) clearly documented the effectiveness of simulations as a teaching strategy in her use of a mock constitutional convention for an introductory American government course. Moreover, Kanner (2007) candidly suggests, "Students put on the skin of another person and participate in the learning process. For the social sciences where there are few absolutes or certainties, students can investigate the major questions of the discipline experimentally" (795). Therefore, I maintain that a city council simulation is needed for political science majors, and even nonmajors, to value the importance of local policy making and encourage their participation in all levels of government.

SETTING THE STAGE

At the beginning of the semester, the students are given three options and vote to determine the scenario. Option one is for a local business to ask the city council for a permit to build a zipline[1] within the city's wildlife sanctuary. Option two is for a local business to build a beach at the nearby amusement park area, which is adjacent to Lake Michigan. Option three is for students to craft their own scenario. Over the last five semesters, students have selected either option one or two. I suggest that professors develop their own scenario(s) to fit their local culture.

Selecting Simulation Roles

The specific roles for the simulation include mayor, alderpersons, a business organization asking for the permit, neighborhood organizations for and against the permit, and local interest groups. Typically, 6 to 12 students emulate local alderpersons. Then, groups of 4 or 5 students represent the business requesting the permit, neighborhood organizations, or interest groups. In any given semester this course enrolls 20 to 35 students. Therefore, the number of students representing alderpersons or groups is flexible.

At the end of the first week of class, I designate 5 to 10 minutes of class time for each student to randomly select their role from a basket. Prior to their selection, I prepare a brief description of the aforementioned roles. For example, the description for the mayor states, "Congratulations! You will serve as this course's mayor for our city council simulation. Our local mayor is elected every four years. Please begin to use course materials and local resources to research your role. More details are to follow throughout the semester." After role selection, students record their names and roles on a sheet of paper that is posted by the instructor on

Sara R. Rinfret *is an assistant professor of political science at Hartwick College. Rinfret teaches in the department of political science and specializes in US environmental regulations and American politics. She can be reached at rinfrets@hartwick.edu.*

Blackboard (online component to our course for students to obtain additional course materials).

Preparation, Schedule, and Grading

The city council simulation contains a variety of components in order for students to reach one of the course's learning objectives: to gain a better understanding of decisionmaking at the local level. Next, this article describes the preparatory work that students complete for the simulation.

Attending a Actual Meeting: As noted, student role selection is early in the semester because students are required to attend a local city council meeting to prepare for our classroom simulation. Typically, local city councils meet twice a month in the evenings, providing ample opportunities for students to attend. In the event that students cannot attend, our local council posts meetings online for students to view.[2] Attending a real-life council meeting is crucial not only for their understanding of local policy making, but allows students to visualize their role for the simulation.

City Council Reflection: After attending a meeting, students are required to turn in a copy of the meeting agenda and write a three-to-four-page reflection paper, detailing the events of the meeting. This reflection must also incorporate materials learned in the course to analyze the policy making processes and structure of the council. Although some students complain about having to attend a meeting, their reflections are nonetheless noteworthy. Recently, one reflection stated, "To be honest, I hated

organization to present their 10 to 15 minute presentation to the council requesting their permit. After this presentation is complete, the council asks the group questions for clarification (I require that each alderperson ask a minimum of one question). Next, the different neighborhood organizations and interest groups present to the council why they are for or against issuing the permit: alderpersons can ask these groups questions as well. At the end of the simulation, the mayor calls for a vote that determines whether the permit fails or passes.

Grading the Simulation: Invariably, grading simulations is a concern from both the student and instructor perspective (Kanner 2007; Oros 2007; Pautz 2011). This simulation is worth 150 points for the course (total points for the course is 400). More specifically, a grading rubric provided to students states that they are graded on staying in character or role-playing for the simulation (75 points) and a written reflection (75 points). The written portion is a three- to five-page paper reflecting on the city council simulation that is due during the final exam period. This paper addresses what students did to prepare for their role and lessons learned. In addition, students who are part of a group turn in evaluations giving their team members a grade based on their preparation efforts.[3]

THE END RESULT

Since 2009, I have conducted the city council simulation five times and each semester students perform remarkably well. For example, students representing the business organization requesting a

> *Recently, one reflection stated, "To be honest, I hated having to give up a Tuesday night to attend a city council meeting, but I loved it! One alderperson spit on another due to a disagreement about roundabouts."*

having to give up a Tuesday night to attend a city council meeting, but I loved it! One alderperson spit on another due to a disagreement about roundabouts." Another student stated, "I selected the role of the mayor, which I was quite nervous about. However, after attending the city council meeting, I now feel confident to lead my classmates in our simulation."

City Council Workday: Two weeks before the simulation, I designate one class period as a workday. During this session, students receive additional instructions for the simulation. For example, the mayor's task is to lay out talking points to structure the meeting based on what he or she visualized during the local meeting attended. The alderpersons work together to determine who they will represent. Also, alderpersons use this time to call or to set up a meeting with the "real" alderperson to properly replicate this person. These meetings help determine how this particular person would vote on the permit at hand and to explore the committee(s) that this person serves on. Lastly, the organizations, such as neighborhood associations, environmental groups, and others, work on preparing 10 to 15 minute presentations, which are presented to the council.

The Simulation: During the final class (three-hour class period, because this is a night course), our classroom simulation comes alive. The mayor begins the meeting with a gavel and proceeds with the pledge of allegiance. Then, the mayor asks alderpersons for their committee updates. Next, the mayor asks the business

permit to build a zipline in the local wildlife sanctuary created maps using geographic information systems to document where the adventure ride would be created. In addition, this group created a video to demonstrate that ziplines are safe.

Moreover, the efforts by the neighborhood organizations have been far-reaching. During one semester, a team of students decided to interview the community that was adjacent to the local amusement park. Notably, this group, "moms against the neighborhood beach" decided to take a note from pop culture and imitate personalities from the television show *The Real Housewives of Orange County* to make their opposition known to the city council. While their presentation was memorable and even persuasive, it reminded students the power of local neighborhood organizations. As a student reflection paper stated, "At first, I felt that the 'real housewives' group was a bit over dramatic, but when they presented, they truly represented the nature of the local neighborhood and why the beach should not be built."

The role of an alderperson is often the most difficult for students to represent. One reason, as a student suggested, "It was hard for me to replicate an old white guy." Yet, when students attend the council meeting and conduct their interviews, these characters come to life. In each simulation, the students "dress for the part," striking strong resemblances to the real-life alderpersons. As one student proclaimed, "I was excited to play an alderperson because our local council is strong and it made me realize

how important they are to local decision making." Furthermore, in one of the first simulations, a student representing the notoriously mischievous alderperson stated to the class, "Since I am a local, I have yearned to play this guy, to know what it is like to impact local decisions in our city."

The role of the mayor has been an exciting position for students. According to one student, "I always wanted to run for local office and this is helping me get my start." Despite this enthusiasm, the preparation to play the mayor is not an easy task. The mayor for the simulation devises the order of the meeting and curbs the behaviors of unruly alderpersons. In addition, one semester the council tied in their decision whether or not to approve a permit. As such, the mayor was the deciding factor and determined that the zipline would not be built in the wildlife sanctuary.

Inevitably, the underlying question is what did students learn from this simulation? One recurring comment from students is that they wished the simulation was longer or that certain group members did not contribute enough. Yet, overwhelmingly students value this learning experience. For example, one student commented, "This was one of the best learning experiences of my college career. I never knew how much impact that local decisions have on the city or the college. Please continue this project." Another student noted, "Thank you. I know I am a political science major, and should attend city council meetings, but now I will due to our simulation."

FUTURE CITY COUNCIL SIMULATIONS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There are challenges to any course assignment or activity. Although this simulation has evolved over five semesters, here I make suggestions for future simulations. First, I suggest encouraging students select the third option (for students to craft their own scenario) for the simulation scenario. In general, students have only selected options one or two. I assume the majority of students select option one or two because the scenario has already been created, with less work for them. Yet, when one of my classes selected option three, they chose whether the city should build more roundabouts. This selection was intriguing because it mirrored what the real-life council was debating. Because of this, many of the students used the research they had gathered to inform our local city council.

In addition, the most successful simulations have been when I teach this course once a week for three hours. If this course is taught twice or three times a week, I strongly suggest breaking the simulation into two days, allowing students the full experience. Also, if a class contains more than 35 students, I suggest convening two simultaneous simulations so that all students participate.

Although my class contains sophomores, juniors, and seniors who are majoring or minoring in political science, I suggest that this simulation be replicated across disciplines or for nonmajors. As one student noted, "This simulation should be a requirement as one of our general education courses. We should all be aware of what is going on around us." Ultimately, it would be interesting to see what nonmajors and other disciplines brought to this simulation.

Arguably, the city council simulation provides a positive learning experience to increase student knowledge and awareness about local decision making. Thus, experimental or active learning provokes student engagement and the value of participating in our local communities. As one former student stated, "I learned how to properly participate, by emulating it."

NOTES

1. Ziplines are typically used in warmer climates when a person is attached to a steel cable and ventures through the treetops.

2. Students are required to attend one meeting three weeks before our city council simulation.

3. Student groups fill out a form that they write their name and group members. Next to each name, including their own, they circle A, B, C, or D to indicate the grade. I average the student input and combine this with their simulation grade.

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