

Model Arab League in the Classroom: Incorporating a National Roleplaying Competition into a Political Science Course

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Introduction

There is a large and varied literature on the pedagogical value of simulations for communicating core concepts in Political Science.¹ In this essay, I discuss how I integrated a roleplaying event we hosted on our campus – the Florida Regional Model Arab League – into one of my spring 2023 classes. I will first describe how Florida Southern College decided to host the conference; then, I will outline how I integrated student participation in the event into one of my upper-level classes. My aim here is to provide a template that other instructors can utilize if students in one of their classes have the opportunity to participate in a regional or national competitive simulation. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the value of the event for both students and instructors.

Deciding to Host the Florida Regional Model Arab League

I began as an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Florida Southern College in the fall of 2011, specializing in International Relations. In my first semester, a student approached me about starting a Model United Nations (MUN) Club on the campus. I had prior experience with MUN; I taught a MUN class as a graduate student instructor and incorporated a week-long MUN simulation into my Introduction to International Relations class. During my initial years at FSC, the Political Science program hosted a handful of small events on-campus, inviting students from nearby colleges and universities to participate. Students from FSC also regularly participated in local roleplaying competitions, including the annual Model Senate at Stetson University, the annual Florida Regional Model Arab League (MAL), and several Florida-based MUN competitions.

In recent years, however, the club had been moribund; although I continued to utilize simulations in my classes, our students did not regularly participate in external MUN competitions. In the fall of 2022, one of our Political Science majors asked if we could explore participation in the Florida Regional Model Arab League; after contacting the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations (NCUSAR), which hosts the MAL program, we discovered that the Florida regional event had not been held for several years, since the NCUSAR lacked a local partner to host it. I offered to hold the event on the Florida Southern College campus, albeit on a small scale. Representatives from the national organization responded enthusiastically to the idea, and we set the conference date for a Saturday in late April of 2023.

¹ See, for example, Michael K. Baranowski & Kimberly A. Weir, “Political Simulations: What We Know, What We Think We Know, and What We Still Need to Know,” *Journal of Political Science Education*, 11, 4 (2015): 391-403, DOI: 10.1080/15512169.2015.1065748.

Integrating MAL into an Existing Course

In the spring of 2023, I taught POS 3323: Conflict and War, a class I offer every two years. This course explores the key types of interstate and intrastate conflict (conventional war, great power conflicts, nuclear war, insurgencies, and terrorism) while grounding it in a discussion of U.S. national security policy since the end of WWII. For each iteration of the course, I adjust some of the assignments and materials to focus on contemporary global developments; this time, I focused on the history and politics of the Arab world. I had 20 students enrolled in my class, and the NCUSAR assigned us four countries to represent. Each country team of five students would need to be well versed in the history and politics of their country and also be prepared to address the specialized topics covered by the four councils slated to meet at the event (Joint Defense Council, Council on Economic Affairs, Council on Palestinian Affairs, Council on Political Affairs).

Although I have used simulations in my classes for over a decade, I still struggle with how to grade student participation. I typically use both quantitative and qualitative measures to grade each student. Ultimately, I decided not to give students a letter grade for participation in the MAL event; I reasoned that I would be unable to observe all of the councils simultaneously and thus could not accurately measure the degree of preparation and engagement of each participating student. Instead, I made participation in the event five percent of the course grade, treating it as a pass-fail assignment.

In the weeks leading up to the event, I devoted several class periods to preparation. First, I set aside a day to discuss the history of the Arab League and showed students a film about various identities in the Middle East, including the importance of pan-Arab identity in the region's history. I also set aside several research days. First, each student had to complete an assignment where they researched the basic demographic and political background of their country and summarized two current events. Then, I used two additional class periods for country-team meetings, where groups of students used Google Docs to create briefing books on the policy issues covered at the MAL conference.

Learning Outcomes from Participation in MAL

The literature on simulations delineates the various learning outcomes that students can achieve by participating in roleplaying activities. While preparing for the activity, students acquire content-based knowledge related to the course. In this case, my students demonstrated an awareness of the politics of the Arab world through the in-class assignments used to prepare them for the simulation. Another overlooked but equally important skill students acquire at the preparation stage is “empathy.” As Shinefeld, Surbrook, and Harvey note, roleplaying games not only foster critical thinking but also allow students to “understand the motivations of actors who may be quite different from them.”² In fact, the NCUSAR makes cross-cultural understanding an explicit goal of its MAL program. The website notes that for American students, “Grappling with

² Jennifer Shinefeld, Michael Surbrook, and Mark Harvey, “‘I am Che Guevara!’: The Value of Roleplaying in Educational Experiences,” in *Simulations in the Political Science Classroom: Games without Frontiers*, ed. Mark Harvey, James Fielder, Ryan Gibb (New York: Routledge, 2023), 30-41.

the international challenges of representing the needs, concerns, interests, and foreign policy objectives of a government other than their own, and especially that of an Arab country, has obvious merit in and of itself.”³

A second set of learning outcomes are demonstrated during the simulation when students must effectively “perform” their assigned roles. Attaining knowledge about the background of your country and understating the nuances of the policy issues under consideration are necessary -- but not sufficient -- conditions for success. To succeed, each student must be able to demonstrate “problem-solving” and “active listening” so they can effectively collaborate with participants to devise solutions to the types of multidimensional, open-ended problems that feature in political simulations.⁴

Hosting the Event on Campus

The NCUASR’s staff was enormously helpful in facilitating a successful event. During the planning stages, they contacted other colleges and universities to solicit participation and handled the delegate registration. In addition, the organization offers a uniform set of policy topics discussed at every MAL event in a given year. As such, all participating students could refer to the online background guides to find out what issues their council would be discussing at the event. In addition to the roleplaying aspect of the conference, the MAL program also seeks to foster a cultural appreciation of the Arab world. To this end, I arranged for a local Mediterranean restaurant to cater the lunch, allowing students to sample regional food. In addition, the organization requests that the host institution arrange a speaker to discuss a relevant topic at lunch. I invited one of our faculty members in the History program to speak about her current research on the history of Islamophobia in the United States.

Overall, hosting the event on campus required relatively little preparation on my end. The NCUSAR sent a representative from the national organization to help run the event, and they provided us with the necessary materials for the councils, including programs, name tags, and gavels. The organization also provides a stipend to the host institution; in our case, the stipend was sufficient to cover the full costs of the event, which included the catered lunch and printing of signage.

Reflection

Initially, some of my students were nervous about participating, while others were unhappy about giving up a Saturday for an educational event; by the end of the day, however, all of the students seemed to be enjoying the experience. As I noted, I have long used roleplaying activities in my classes, with students replicating debates in the European Union, the U.S. National Security Council, and the United Nations. Across my classes, students report that they enjoy

³ National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, “About the Program,” <https://ncusar.org/modelarableague/about-model-arab-league/about/>.

⁴ Shinefeld, Surbrook, and Harvey, “I am Che Guevara!”

these activities; simulations do, however, require the instructor to make a significant investment of time to design the parameters of the activity and align it with course content. In contrast, using the MAL simulation drastically reduced the amount of preparatory work for me since the NCUSAR already delineated the topics to be covered, as well as the member countries that would be represented. Both the students and I would be willing to participate in the event next year, and I would also be open to hosting it on our campus again, as well.

From my end, I would make a few minor changes before the next event. First, I would devote more class time to practicing parliamentary procedures. Most of my students were first-time participants in a roleplaying competition; they were a bit intimidated by the dexterity with which delegates from other institutions used Robert's Rules of Order. Second, were we to host again, I would host the event earlier in the semester. Due to scheduling constraints on our end, we held it near the spring semester's conclusion; unfortunately, this caused scheduling conflicts for several other schools interested in participating. Other than these minor issues, however, I perceived the event as a total success. As such, I would recommend other faculty incorporate participation in MAL or similar roleplaying competitions into their courses.



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