

Book Review

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SIMULATIONS OF DECISION-MAKING AS ACTIVE LEARNING TOOLS. DESIGN AND EFFECTS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE SIMULATIONS

Editors: Peter Bursens, Vincent Donche, David Gijbels and Pieter Sporen

Abstract

This edited volume provides practical guidance for and presents academic research on the design, implementation and effects of various types of simulations in different contexts, ranging from classroom teaching to policy design. It brings together academics and practitioners whose complementary insights illustrate the multiple facets of simulations.

Keywords

Simulations; Active teaching methods; Simulation design; Simulation effects

Many university professors and school teachers are preoccupied with the challenge of preparing their students well for their future careers in a complex and rapidly changing world. Skills and attitudes such as critical thinking, inter-personal interaction and multi-disciplinarity have become ever more important in future-orientated teaching. Simulations can be a promising tool in this regard, complementing traditional teaching methods by placing students in quasi-real-life scenarios in which they 'experience' the teaching material rather than merely reading about it. The book *Simulations of Decision-Making as Active Learning Tools* can be a useful resource for those who wish to delve into the use of simulations. It provides practical guidance for and academic research on the design, implementation and effects of various types of simulations in diverse contexts. Through its comprehensive scope, covering multiple aspects of simulation, the edited volume offers an excellent entry point to readers who are new to the topic, as well as thorough analysis to readers who wish to deepen their knowledge.

The book consists of two parts: the first describes various elements of simulation design and includes a range of useful and practical considerations for planning and implementing one's own

simulation. The second part presents the results of a number of surveys analysing the learning effects of simulations. Scholars from Europe and the United States shed light on a multiplicity of aspects pertaining to the use of simulations. They illustrate the plurality of simulation designs and their uses in settings as diverse as classroom teaching and policy design by public administrations. The book focuses on the European Union. All simulations that are used as examples or subjects of analysis are concerned with the EU and its policy-making processes.

The volume highlights some under-researched elements, especially the challenge of reflecting reality in simulations (chapter 6) and blended approaches that combine online and person-to-person interaction within the same simulation (chapter 7). Most notably, chapter 8 breaks ground by introducing an assessment method that had not been applied to simulations before the authors' experiment: the comparative judgment method. The book also makes a major contribution by discussing the challenge of measuring the impact of simulations. Most teachers intuitively assume that simulations have a beneficial learning effect but, in the majority of cases, they do not necessarily know what effects exactly and how they materialise. Bringing various impact studies together, the book's editors gathered insightful findings that help bridge this knowledge gap. The book differentiates between and sheds light on various types of effects, ranging from heightened student interest and increased factual knowledge, to changed student perceptions, attitudes and skills.

The book mainly speaks to scholars of political science and school teachers but also contains some insights for readers who wish to simulate different policy implementation options before taking final decisions. Chapter 4 by John T. Ryan provides an interesting account of a capital markets union simulation that served the purpose of identifying and testing policy solutions that could possibly be implemented in real life. The other chapters describe simulations that serve educational purposes. While chapters 3 and 5 are detailed descriptions of individual simulations in their entirety, chapters 6-9 delve into specific design and implementation aspects. Andreas Sobisch et al. (chapter 3) describe their Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation Consortium and find that it predominantly stimulates student engagement, more so than fostering knowledge acquisition. Rebecca Jones (chapter 5) outlines the EuroSim EU simulation and confirms the finding that simulations stimulate affective learning. Pierpaolo Settembri and Marco Brunazzo (chapter 6) discuss in great detail the challenge of verisimilitude, which is a simulation's resemblance to reality. This aspect is crucial for any simulation design but has received scant academic attention so far. The authors recommend a number of useful design features to achieve verisimilitude. Simon Raiser et al. (chapter 7) venture on another under-researched area: blended simulation formats, which can combine the strengths of online and offline interaction. Pierpaolo Settembri et al. (chapter 8) outline a systematic and rigorous method to assess students' performance through team-based comparative judgment that aims to increase the reliability and lack of bias in evaluation. Simon Usherwood (chapter 9) discusses a number of other ways in which assessment can be included in simulations to evaluate knowledge acquisition, skills development and critical reflection.

Part two then turns to measuring the effects and learning outcomes of simulations. While they all pursue a similar aim of measuring effects, each of the chapters follows a slightly different research design, including qualitative and quantitative approaches. Sophie Wulk (chapter 11) finds that, through their activating and experiential dimensions, simulations have the potential to increase students' ownership of political issues. Monika Oberle et al. (chapter 12) demonstrate that simulations can help overcome pupils' lack of interest in politics. By reducing prejudices, the studied simulations changed pupils' perceptions that EU policy lacks relevance to their everyday lives and that the European Union is hyper-complex. Morten Kallestrup (chapter 13) finds a motivational effect of simulations whereas he detects only a limited objectively measurable learning effect. Dorothy Duchatelet (chapter 14) focuses on the unfolding of learning during a simulation, showing

some differences between male and female participants as well as fluctuating learning curves over time.

The bipartite structure of the book allows it to serve the double purpose of providing practical advice on how to design and implement simulations as well as presenting insights from impact studies that critically analyse the learning outcomes of simulations. This is a major strength since the edited volume offers a comprehensive account of multiple aspects of using simulations as active learning tools. At the same time, this structure somewhat fragments the book since it contains two conceptual frameworks at the beginning of each part (chapters 2 and 10). Those chapters, however, do not present a straitjacket for the individual chapters, which explore a variety of complementary aspects. This diversity greatly enriches the book while also resulting in some repetition pertaining to discussions of the benefits of simulations in various chapters. In chapter 10, the editors propose a schematic consisting of four building blocks that can offer a systematic framework guiding not only part two of the book but also future research on the use of simulations as an active learning tool.

Simulations of Decision-Making as Active Learning Tools demonstrates that crafting a simulation is a strategic exercise that needs to be tailored to the respective target group and the desired learning outcome. It provides valuable guidance and research results in this regard. The edited volume's comprehensive account from a European and North American perspective and the analytical framework that it proposes could be explored in the context of using EU simulations in other geographical regions such as Asia and Africa. This could be an interesting next step, building on the book's solid and enriching analysis.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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