

Teaching Students to Write for “Real Life”: Policy Paper Writing in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT During their time at university, political science students frequently only learn to write for the academic setting. However, not all students will come to work in academia, nor do they want to. When entering the job market, they often do not have the writing skills that are demanded by potential employers and have to learn them “on the fly.” Simulating cooperative policy-writing processes in the classroom not only gives students the opportunity to acquire these skills, but also helps them make important connections between the theory taught in the classroom and the “real-life” policy-making process. Using the practical example of a policy paper-writing simulation, this article illustrates how posing a policy-writing challenge from the field of foreign policy making can equip students with a grasp on theories of policy making, their practical application, and policy writing as a practical skill.

Teaching foreign policy making and negotiation in undergraduate courses often focuses on giving students a theoretical understanding of these processes. This article argues that students’ classroom experience can be enriched in several ways through introducing a simulation element into foreign policy courses. By accompanying theoretical sessions with a policy-writing assignment to be completed during the semester, students not only gain practical insights into foreign policy decision making and negotiation that helps deepen their understanding of the theoretical components covered in the course. It also introduces them to valuable policy-writing skills, which are highly demanded by many political science graduates’ potential employers but seldom taught in the classroom.

WHY INCORPORATE A SIMULATION EXERCISE?

It is widely known that most undergraduate political science majors will not go on to work in academia. According to the US Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 60% of political scientists work for the US federal government (US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Others may want to work for international organizations, think tanks, political consultation firms and lobby groups, or local and regional public administration. In all these areas, writing skills are required

that differ from the type of academic writing students are usually taught during their years of study. In addition, not all students complete internships at institutions of their choice during their studies, especially as many positions are unpaid. In the context of teaching students these sought-after writing skills, authors such as Pennock (2011) have argued for using policy-paper assignments in class.

What is more, as a result of not being able to gain personal insights into the workings of public institutions, many students are exposed only to theories of policy making and negotiation, never to their practice. Even for those students who do not want to pursue a career that demands the aforementioned skills, experiencing a policy-making and negotiation process first-hand bears considerable benefits concerning their deep understanding of these processes and their ability to connect theory with practice. Calls for simulating policy decision-making processes, especially in foreign policy and international politics, have a long-standing tradition in the literature on academic teaching [for a “seasoned” publication in the field see Louscher and Van Steenburg (1977), for a more recent one see, for example, Loggins (2009)].

In the following text, I outline how the two types of simulation—policy writing, on the one hand, and foreign policy decision making, on the other—can be combined within an undergraduate course by having students write a policy strategy paper on a current foreign policy issue. Students benefit from such an exercise in a three-fold way. First, they obtain an understanding of the theoretical toolbox necessary to analyse processes of negotiation. Second, they see the theories covered in the course play out in practice. Third, they acquire practical skills of policy

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writing as well as an appreciation of the collaborative-writing process (Janssen and van der Mast 2001). This article introduces the simulation of the writing process, as well as the surrounding negotiations, of a government-wide strategy paper on policy toward the emerging countries. The class was taught within the German context, but the concept can be easily adapted to strategy papers both on different policy issues and on different domestic contexts in Europe as well

as the United States. Didactically, the course is based on the “Project Method” first advocated by Kilpatrick (1918). It is based on a “real world”-type problem to be solved by students and intercalates project phases in which the students work on their own with feedback from the instructor, thus raising students’ interest and equipping them with valuable problem-solving skills.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Given the previous discussion, these learning objectives were defined for the course:

- Introducing students to an issue of current affairs: the rise of emerging powers
- Familiarizing students with theories of foreign policy making and analysis
- Introducing students to theories of bargaining, negotiation, and bureaucratic politics
- Familiarizing students with theories of collaborative policy writing
- Strengthening the class’s grasp of theories through the simulation sessions
- Introducing students to techniques of policy writing and providing them with first-hand experience of these skills

FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY PAPERS

Foreign policy strategy papers outline a public agency’s or a government’s position and strategy on a certain issue. These can focus on a policy field, such as development policy, defense policy, or economic policy. The US Department of Defense’s National Security Space Strategy (US Department of Defense and Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2011) is one example. Others are geographic in nature, focusing on policy toward a particular region. For example, the German Government recently published a policy strategy paper on Latin America (Auswärtiges Amt 2010). Papers might also be mixed, combining specific policy fields with geographical policy targets. Furthermore, these can either be public or confidential.¹ Depending on the issue to be covered and the confidentiality of the document, policy makers must take into account different audiences and implementation strategies (Dulek 1991). Additionally, the more agencies or departments are involved, the more complex the process becomes. Not only do the agencies have to negotiate a common position that will inform the content of the policy paper, but they also face the challenge of a collaborative writing process among poten-

Table 1

Time Plan Example Course “Policy Paper Writing”

TERM WEEKS	SESSION	DEADLINES
1–4	Weekly 90-minute sessions	Week 4: Departmental position papers
5	First 3-hour interdepartmental meeting	
6	Project phase—no session	
7–10	Weekly 90-minute sessions	Week 8: Departmental policy paper contributions Week 10: First draft of policy paper
11	Second 3-hour interdepartmental meeting	
12	Project phase—no session	
13–14	Weekly 90-minute sessions	Week 15: Final version of policy paper

tially noncooperative actors (Janssen and van der Mast 2001). Therefore, policy strategy papers are an ideal basis for teaching students about both processes of bargaining and negotiation as well as writing for the policy process.

Before embarking on the project, the instructor chooses a suitable issue for the policy paper. It is important that the paper be *hypothetical* or in the process of development at the official level to prevent students from simply copying existing documents. The existence of *similar* documents, as examples, however, is helpful to familiarize the class with the concept of policy strategy papers. In addition, the instructor should choose a topic of political relevance to capture and maintain students’ interest, thus increasing the likelihood of the simulation’s success. In the example case, a public strategy paper on German policy toward emerging countries was chosen.² Emerging countries, including states such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China—the so-called BRIC states—but also others, such as Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, or Argentina, are gaining increasing global importance (Stewart 2010). They are emerging from the global financial and economic crisis with high economic growth rates, while the United States and Europe struggle. Multilateral formats that include rising powers, such as the G20, are increasingly significant. They are more and more self-confident in forums like the United Nations, where they are indispensable partners for the “old powers” to see their projects realized. In this context, the industrialized countries of the global North have to reconfigure their own approaches to these budding economic and political powers. How to handle the rise of China? How to deal with Brazil’s growing confidence on the international stage? Strategy papers dealing with these issues are very much a topic of current affairs.

COURSE SET-UP

To best make use of the potential provided by this type of simulation it is recommended for the class to run over the course of a term. The class met for ten 90-minute sessions once a week. Two sessions took place as simulations of interdepartmental meetings of three hours each, the first one month and the second two months into the course. No class was held in each week following the simulation sessions to give students time to work on the writing assignments. Table 1 shows the set-up of the example course, which ran 14 weeks.

At the beginning of the course, the 15 students taking the class were randomly assigned to a number of selected government departments: the Federal Foreign Office and the Ministries of

Defense, Economy, Development, Environment, and Agriculture. The choice of departments should depend on the topic of the strategy paper to be produced as well as on the number of students in the class. The groups comprised between two and four students each, depending on the workload and bargaining power of the department in question. For example, the Federal Foreign Office, which coordinates cross-governmental foreign policy strategy, was the largest group with four students, while the Ministries for the Environment and for Agriculture, whose role is smaller, consisted only of two students. Throughout the term, the students thus had to adopt the role of “their” department in writing the policy paper. One student volunteered to design a brochure in addition to her “departmental” duties. The production of a brochure is common for public-policy strategy papers and provides students with a tangible result of their project work. To facilitate the exchange of information, students were provided with department-specific forums on the University’s e-learning platform, invisible to the students in other groups, but monitored by the instructor.³

Part of each session following the simulations was dedicated to an evaluation of the respective simulation in the light of the theories previously covered. In addition, parts of the weekly sessions were occasionally set aside for group work on the departmental contributions to the paper. The sessions during which no simulation took place were used to introduce the students to these subjects:

- The fundamentals of national foreign policy
- Emerging powers in the global context (Stewart 2010; Castañeda 2010)⁴
- Writing for the policy process (Dulek 1991; Janssen and Neutelings 2001)
- The bureaucratic process of policy paper writing in Germany
- Foreign policy analysis (FPA) (Hudson 2005)
- Bargaining theory (Muthoo 2000) and negotiation analysis (Sebenius 1992)
- The Organizational Process and Bureaucratic Politics Models (Welch 1992)
- Interaction of bureaucracy and politics in foreign policy (Aberbach, Mezger, and Rockman 1991).

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

During the term, students completed three written assignments, two as part of group work and one individually. The first group assignment, due a week before the first simulation session, was a two-page position paper outlining the respective department’s position and priorities in policy toward the emerging powers, thus obliging students to familiarize themselves with both their department and the class topic.⁵ These papers were “confidential,” meaning that they were not available to the other groups. Students received a grade as well as feedback from the instructor on both content and style. The second group assignment was due two weeks after the first simulation session and consisted of the respective department’s text contributions to the eventual strategy paper, based on the results of the first simulation session and the previous position papers. This time, the papers were circulated to the entire class. Again, students received a grade as well as feedback on content and style.

The individual assignment consisted of a two-page debriefing paper due on the last day of class. Students were to consider the following guiding questions:

- Which factors, in your experience, influenced the process of creating the paper and the negotiations? Why?
- Which elements of the theories of policy writing discussed in class do you recognize in the policy strategy paper?

Students received a grade and feedback on the debriefing paper. In addition, their oral participation both in class and in simulation sessions was evaluated.

The feedback on position papers and text contributions motivated students to reconsider both aspects of content and style, thus honing their policy-writing skills through repeated exercise. Ideally, the instructor should have personal policy-writing experience. Instructors who do not have this previous experience need to carefully familiarize themselves with the style and content of different types of government documents.

SIMULATION AND TEXT PRODUCTION

To expose students to both the writing and the negotiation process, the simulation falls into two parts. The first is the writing process, during which the agency groups involved progressively produce the final strategy paper. The departmental position papers as well as the subsequent text contributions to the paper form part of this exercise. For the purposes of the writing process, the instructor assumes the role of a central authority that has to approve the various drafts of the text and can demand adjustments. In the example course outlined here, this authority was the German Federal Chancellery. In the US context, depending on the issue in question, such an authority might be the Office of the Secretary of State or the pertinent authorities in the White House.

The second part of the simulation is several interdepartmental meetings to discuss certain aspects of the policy paper. In this context, students gain first-hand experience of a negotiation process and come to appreciate the mechanisms covered in the theoretical sessions. Continuous work on the text between the simulation sessions links the two elements and approximates the real-life elaboration process of policy strategy papers, which often takes months to complete.

To maximize students’ engagement with the simulation, they should dress appropriately for the meetings (business attire). Moreover, an appropriate meeting room should be selected to remove the simulation as far away as possible from the classroom setting. A conference room with a round table is a suitable option and available at most institutions. For the coordinating agency to better structure the meeting, a projector and laptop should be available.

In the context of the course design discussed here, the first session took place one month into the term. By this time, students had produced their departmental position papers and had been familiarized with the topic of emerging economies in the global context as well as the German foreign policy-making background. They had also attended a session on foreign policy analysis as an analytical framework. However, no further theory had been covered. Therefore, most students came to the first round of negotiations as “blank slates,” giving them the opportunity to negotiate without being aware of negotiation tactics and mechanisms. This later produced a desired “aha” effect when students were introduced to the theory as they recognized having unconsciously implemented these techniques.

The first session covered the following aspects:

- An introduction to the policy challenge by the coordinating agency (here: Federal Foreign Office)
- Central issues to be contained in the strategy paper
- Structure of the policy strategy paper

These issues were designed for the departmental groups to familiarize one another with each agency’s respective decisions and to provoke discussions. The meeting’s agenda was prepared by the Federal Foreign Office group under the instructor’s supervision and circulated to the class a week before the session. The Federal Foreign Office group was also responsible for chairing the meeting and taking minutes—giving it agenda-setting powers it could use to its advantage, which was duly noted by the students in the evaluation of the session. The instructor guided the Foreign Office group to cover issues that would lead to controversy, such as the question of which countries to include in the group of emerging powers to be addressed in the policy paper. Moreover, agencies had to delineate the issues they wanted to see included and where they saw their responsibilities. Because of competency overlaps between the agencies, students had to negotiate which group would take the lead on issues such as external environmental policy, where the Foreign Office and the Ministries for Development, and for the Environment each hold competencies. During the session, students gradually began to “own” their ministerial positions and engaged in controversial discussion by using negotiation and bargaining techniques such as “claiming value” (Sebenius 1992),⁶ increasing bargaining power by tying their own hands (e.g., Fearon 1997) with arguments such as “our minister wants this point included, it is not within our power to leave it out.”

After the first simulation session, a first outline of the paper and a distribution of tasks emerged that led to the individual agency groups’ contributions to the paper. Then, these were compiled and edited by the Foreign Office group to produce the first draft of the paper, due a week before the second simulation session. The paper was circulated to the class for discussion during the second simulation session. The Foreign Office group received comprehensive feedback from the instructor.

The second simulation session took place two months into the term. Preparations and setup were the same as for the first simulation. The agenda items for the session included:

- An introduction to the first draft by the Foreign Office
- An opportunity for each department to give additional comments on its text contributions
- A discussion of the first draft to eliminate overlaps and make improvements to the text
- A discussion of the introductory and concluding paragraphs, to be compiled by the Foreign Office group and approved by all departments
- A discussion of the layout of the text, prepared by the student responsible for this task

Because the second session was designed to exhibit aspects of the collaborative writing process, students experienced aspects of the theories on policy writing that had been covered in class. The in-depth discussion of the draft created additional synergies, as different students remembered different aspects to be considered in the writing process. After the second simulation session, the

first draft was amended by the Foreign Office and submitted to the other departments for further amendments, before being handed in to the instructor, in the role of the Federal Chancellery, for comments and approval of the final version.

ANALYSIS OF THE SIMULATION SESSIONS

After each simulation session, the next class was partially dedicated to evaluating the simulation. Under the guidance of the instructor, these evaluations allow students to reflect on the negotiation techniques used both by themselves and by their peers, as well as on the structural setting of the meetings. How well did the coordinating agency use its agenda-setting power? What happened when competencies overlapped? What were the initial positions of the various agencies, and how did they change over the course of the meeting? What were the reasons for such change? By considering these questions, students could connect their own behavior with the theories covered in the class. Furthermore, during the following theoretical sessions, the instructor referred back to certain instances of the simulation sessions to illustrate the theory with examples, enabling closer connections between the class’s real-life experiences and the theory than would have been possible with abstract examples.

CONCLUSIONS

The course was well received by the students, who felt that they had acquired usable skills and a more in-depth understanding of the foreign policy-making process, as well as a grasp of the theories covered that would allow them to come back to these theories and use them in academic analyses of bargaining and decision-making processes. In general, the course evaluation revealed that the learning objectives specified in the beginning of the term were successfully met.

Through connecting theoretical sessions with two forms of simulation—interdepartmental negotiations and writing a policy strategy paper—instructors can not only provide undergraduate students with a better understanding of theories required for the analysis of negotiation processes, but can equip them with skills required by potential employers that are not usually taught in the classroom. ■

NOTES

1. Confidentiality can have different levels of strength, although from the viewpoint of the policy writer this is not overly relevant—what usually matters is whether the general public and the relevant partner countries can access a document or not.
2. One of the reasons for this decision was that the German Federal Government was actually working on such a paper at the time the course was taught. Initially, it was hoped that the official paper would be completed by the end of the course to facilitate a comparison between the two documents. Unfortunately, this was not the case. However, in principle this design provides great opportunities for further learning effects. Note that the German government’s strategy paper is now published (Auswärtiges Amt 2012).
3. Groups’ use of this service varied. The platform was used more actively by the larger groups, where personal communication was more complex.
4. Where the issue covered was not limited to the German national context, example readings are given. Any issue and country-specific literature, of course, has to be chosen as appropriate.
5. They were also obliged to hand in a list of references listing the documents consulted in the elaboration of the position papers.
6. ‘Claiming value’ refers to a negotiation strategy in which one negotiating party is highly intent on claiming the benefits of the negotiation outcome for itself (Sebenius 1992, 30f). In the foreign policy-making context, for instance, departments have a tendency to want to claim and retain full competence on

issues they are concerned with. For example, both the Ministry for Development and the Ministry for Education may claim foreign education policy for themselves.

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