

GAMIFICATION AS AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN TEACHING DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

The paper contributes to understanding how innovations in teaching International Relations are critical for building competencies to students. Modern diplomacy challenges require a bunch of competencies that have to be developed even before joining the diplomatic service. The paper explores the interactions between real policy, diplomacy and international relations and students' capabilities, and to what extent the knowledge is transferable through a role-play game developed by the author to simulate a part of the activities of a Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The data were collected between 2016 and 2021, using a voluntary, anonymous questionnaire from 68 respondents and focus group discussions. The paper is a continuation to our previous study and confirms that the role play simulation helped students acquire or enhance skills related to diplomatic practices, and that they are using those skills in their professional life. These findings can enrich the best practices for effective learning and competencies development. Data shows that experiential learning is able to form or to enhance a series of competencies specific to the field of International Relations and Diplomacy. The transfer of knowledge is effective in terms of professional and social competencies. Implications are discussed for enhancing the learning process in International Relations and Diplomacy master programs.

Keywords:

International Relations; modern diplomacy challenges; innovations in learning experience; role play design; transfer knowledge; competencies development.

What is already known about this topic:

- *Experiential learning strategies using collaborative working are effective in students' knowledge transfer;*
- *Building students' skills in Diplomacy is always difficult due to a restrained access to practice;*
- *Feedback from students was collected through quantitative online assessments and qualitative assessments during focus groups.*

What this paper adds:

- *Proposes a new simulation game, easy to replicate in universities, based on the author's diplomatic practice.*
- *Identifies key skills related to diplomatic tasks that are enhanced due to the simulation game.*

Implications for practice and/or policy:

- *Assessment marks that the motivation of students tends to increase by collaborative work;*
- *Indicates that the simulation proposed in this article is effective in terms of knowledge transfer;*
- *The role play tends to diminish the heterogeneity of students from different master's programs.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Diplomacy needs to deal with challenges that never existed 50 years ago, but also involves an adaptation of the ministries of foreign affairs to the digital revolution. Teaching diplomacy should follow this trend and in this respect innovations in the learning process are critical for building new competencies or enhancing the competencies already acquired during university studies. More specifically, developing learning programs in Diplomacy, at university level, is a tangible problem. Diplomacy is an applied art built on contributions from a number of disciplines, from Public Law and International Relations up to History, Psychology and Communication. Diplomatic skills are difficult to acquire exclusively from a theoretical point of view, while practicing diplomacy is almost impossible without being a career diplomat because the largest part of the diplomatic activity is based on confidential information, unavailable to students. Therefore, the challenge when setting up the master in Diplomacy and International Negotiations consists of creating learning experiences for students as close to reality as possible. Thus, we designed an innovative simulation game to offer learning experiences as close as possible to real life situations. This article aims to answer a number of questions: Is the experiential learning exercise developed by us able to transfer to the students some of the skills requested by diplomatic activity? Simulations games in Diplomacy studies do enhance or form some requested capabilities for a smooth insertion in the professional life? Are they measurable?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The learning design in International Relations courses always includes diplomatic simulations to ensure a cyclical experiential learning as described by the Kolb's Learning Cycle. Such simulations in real-life are deficient because the students learned the evolution of the simulated situation and will try to adopt the same approach (Brynen 2010, Chasek 2005, Dougherty 2003). Despite the abundant literature on the learning aspects of game simulations, there is little

research regarding the capacity of role play simulations in International Relations to generate measurable and meaningful outcomes in developing specific skills (Cercel 2022, Blum 2007, Raymond 2010, Stover 2005). Kim (2016) proposes to include gamification concepts to enhance the understanding of political science concepts.

Using game based learning to support the development of different competences is not a new educational method, but it is a powerful tool in developing real competences by challenging the students' creativity (Cercel 2022, Michael D. și Chen 2005, Mustata, Alexe și Alexe 2017, Pivec 2007). According to Dadhech „students won't be able to gain any information and skills out of dull learning process but they understand the application of skills and knowledge to solve real-life problems with help of effective learning process. The knowledge and skills acquired through game-based learning are retained longer than information from other learning methods.” (Dadhech, <https://theknowledgereview.com/importance-game-based-learning-modern-education/>)

Chen et al. (2015) argue the importance of enhancing the educational process by designing and including gamification learning strategies. Researches show that game simulation learning increases the students' motivation and their achievements (Chen 2015, Giannakas, și alții 2018). O'Donnell, Hmelo-Silver and Erkens (2013) argue that there are three key elements that strengthen students' learning experience: common team experience, team-collaboration, and communication. These elements develop students' social skills such as: teamwork, dialogue and cooperation, and critical thinking (Giannakas, și alții 2018). Through learning experiences, individuals change perspectives, learn something, and transfer the acquired competencies elsewhere. Is this transfer a fact? Some authors consider that the transferable knowledge is „unrealistic because this learning is mediated by culturally, societally and situationally derived facts and personal factors” (Bilett 2013, 5).

3. THE ROLE PLAY MODEL

The role play game developed by us and that we called MAEDRI simulates the interactions between diplomacy tasks and students' capabilities, and is appropriate for students in Diplomacy, International Relations and Political Sciences.

MAEDRI offers a pedagogical instrument to demonstrate not only a small part of what diplomacy is in a day-to-day activity, but also to experience teamwork, coordination within a hierarchical organization, work accuracy, change management, or time management. Wilcox considers that situated praxis „encourages the design and development of games that guide players to discover knowledge inside a range of communities, domains, and experiences“ (Wilcox 2019, 157). MAEDRI game simulation responds to the elements identified by Wilcox: the context (the students learn easier because they recognize the situation), the practice (the exercise allows them to experiment in a safe manner the theoretical concepts learned during their college studies), and the experience (the students discover themselves what are the diplomatic day-to-day tasks) (Cercel 2022). The skills acquired during simulation games can be separated into two categories: professional and social.

Table 1
Transferable skills through MAEDRI game simulation

Professional skills	Social skills
Searching and filtering information in virtual space	Ability to dialogue and be persuasive
Problem solving	Building relations within the team
Task partitioning	Team coordination
Assertiveness	Self-control and confidence
Attention to details	Flexibility
Giving and receiving feedback	Team motivation
Decision making based on	Initiative and creativity

data received	
Analysis capacity	Care for order, quality of work, and accuracy
Change management	Emotional intelligence
Planning and organizing the work	Conflict management
Writing reports using a diplomatic language	Stress management
Fluency and concision	
Procedures compliance	

Source: adapted from Cercel (2022, e32996)

3.1. Conducting the Role play

The role play is organized annually since 2016. The participants are enrolled in different Masters Programs such as Diplomacy and International Negotiations, Security and Diplomacy, Conflict Analysis, and European and International Relations at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest, Romania which simulate the activity of diplomatic missions abroad. In this respect, the MAEDRI organization reproduces on a small scale the structure of a typical Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their diplomatic service. Based on their interest and knowledge of a specific topic or a geographic space, the students embody different roles.

The role play consists in simulating a part of the activity of real diplomats, that part of which does not involve confidential data – obtaining relevant information from Internet open sources. The exercise requires daily remote work for one to two weeks in a simulated structure of a diplomatic organization. In practice, the students are simulating the Press and Communication activity as foreign diplomats in various countries around the globe. The objective of the simulation is to give students a real experience of the diplomatic tasks. The participants have to apply their theoretical knowledge acquired during their studies, develop their ability to work in teams and to coordinate their work with other teams, test their skills in finding relevant information in a given time

frame, analyze the information and compile all into a report that meet the criteria in terms of diplomatic language and concision.

3.1.1. Preparation

The simulation game proposes different roles (see Figure 1) and different responsibilities that the students can fulfil: diplomats at a Simulated diplomatic mission abroad, Simulated chain of command at the headquarter (Simulated Directorates organized by functions or by geographical criteria, and the Simulated Spokesperson Cabinet responsible for providing final revision and publishing the reports on the Facebook page) Before starting the simulation, the participants will identify all the relevant local media in their „host country” and select a relevant and balanced portfolio of sources.

Table 2
MAEDRI simulation game preparation checklist

Stages	Activities of the students in management roles (Simulated Spokesperson Cabinet & Simulated Directorates)	Activities of the students (in Simulated Diplomatic Missions)	Teacher activity
Preparation	Advertising and promoting the simulation game within the university in order to have a large selection base	Applying for the simulation play game on a voluntary basis	Supervision and coordination
	Selecting the students based on the application forms received		

Kickoff meeting	Creating the structure of MAEDRI organizations and setting up the communication system	Assuming the role in the "host country" based on their interests by exploring and identifying the relevant media in the selected country.	Supervision and feedback
	Taking over all credential for the MAEDRI Facebook page	Training sessions offered by professors and alumni	Supervision and feedback
Simulation	Coordinating their team Reading and summarizing the reports. Publishing the selected reports on the MAEDRI Facebook page on a daily basis. Giving and receiving feedback	Reading every day the selected media from the „simulated country“. Drafting the report and sending it to the respective General Directorate. Sending feedback to the management team	Supervision
Debriefing	Collecting feedback from participants, analyzing data furnished by Facebook analytics and preparing the report for the exercise		Individual and group feedback

Source: adapted from Cercel (2022), Multimedia appendix 1

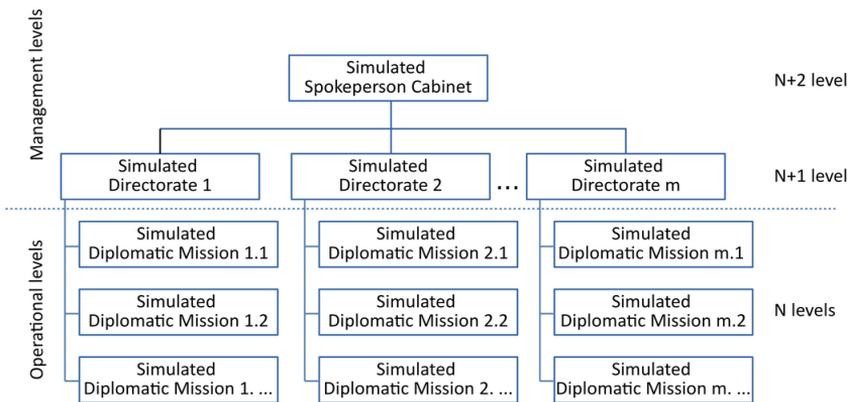
Although the game is using only remote work, creating a specific location where students can meet would be beneficial in order to enhance the direct communication between them. In our case, the students are doing their work

from home. We created a virtual space coordinated by the teacher, where every participant can receive help or advice.

3.1.2. The Simulated Roles

A system of communication and a chain of command that simulates the various divisions of an ordinary Ministry of Foreign Affairs are established. In MAEDRI game we are simulating two management levels: Simulated Directorates (N+1 level) and Simulated Spokesperson Cabinet (N+ 2 levels). (see Figure 3).

Figure 1. The organizational chart of the simulated organization – MAEDRI



Source: Cercel (2022, e32996)

During the simulation, the students in simulated diplomatic missions (N level) will analyze the information published in the selected media based on several criteria¹ indicated by the teacher. The result of their daily work is a report; in

¹ The criteria that we are currently using are:

fact a series of synthesis of articles published in the media from the selected countries in that respective day.

The results of their work are sent to the next decision level – the Simulated Directorates – organized on geographical or functional criteria by grouping 4-7 simulated diplomatic missions. In order to develop their time management capabilities and work organization, reports submitted after the agreed deadline will not be considered. Nevertheless, exceptions can be made for unexpected events in progress in their simulated country, after informing the chain of command which will decide about the relevance of that particular event.

The students in each structure are connected online and work simultaneously, using tools like Google docs. As for the previous structure, the simulated chain of command activities must respect a strict deadline.

The simulated „Spokesperson Cabinet“ is the last hierarchical structure in the MAEDRI game and has the responsibility to analyze the reports received and to rephrase if necessary for a unitary style. This structure is responsible for publishing the most relevant reports on the Facebook page of the MAEDRI (in Romanian only) at https://www.facebook.com/pages/MAEDRI-Proiect-al-studentilor-DN/768070223277127?sk=info&tab=page_info).

At the end of each edition we organized a debriefing and focus groups that gave students the opportunity for feedback and suggestions for further improvements.

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1. Bilateral relation between Romania and the country where the simulated diplomatic mission is based;
 2. Political, economy, social and cultural situation in the selected country;
 3. Positions expressed by the representatives of the selected country regarding the international main topics

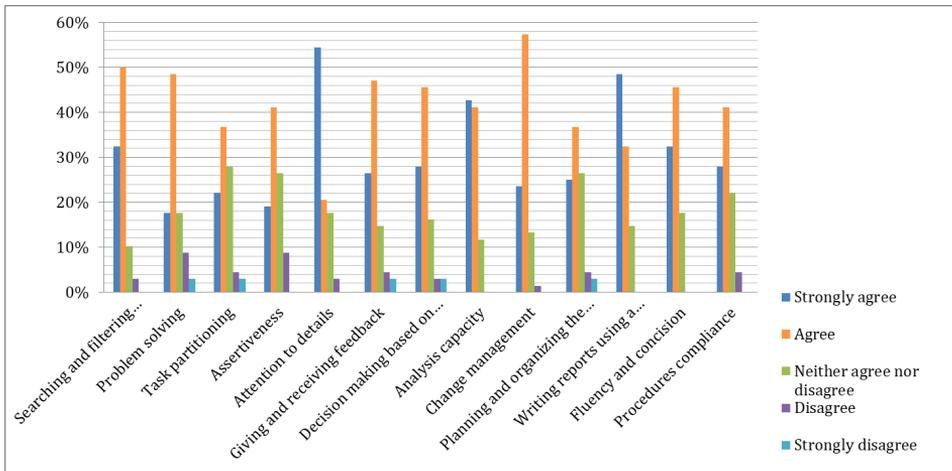
The criteria may change from an edition to other, either to increase the difficulty of the tasks or to develop specific competencies

4.METHODS

The study is a follow-up to our previous study published in 2022 in JMIR Serious Games (<https://games.jmir.org/2022/2/e32996>). The research was designed to evaluate the capacity of the MAEDRI simulation game to develop key skills for their future active life in international relations related professions. Also, this data collection is giving an insight about what activities are appreciated by the students and to determine what could be done for improvement. The data were collected during 6 editions (2016-2021) using the questionnaire method and involved 68 respondents from 223 participants in the MAEDRI editions. The participation in the research was voluntary.

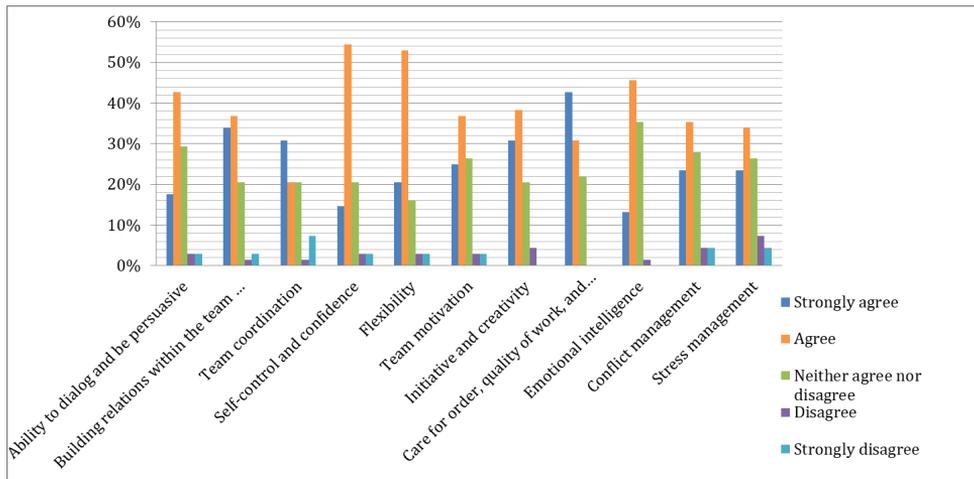
The students strongly agreed that the simulation reached its objectives in terms of developing the professional skills. The most remarkable results were observed regarding analysis capacity, where 84% of participants agreed in different ranges that the game simulation improved their competencies. Significant outcome can be seen in change management (81%), fluency and concision (78%) and, attention to details (75%). For ease of comparison (see Figure 2) across the various yearly simulations, the results to specific questions are presented below in adjusted percentages.

Figure 2. Improvement of professional competencies after MAEDRI simulation game



The same tendency could be highlighted regarding social skills, although the agreement rates are not so strong (see Figure 3). Care for order and quality of work and accuracy, and flexibility were recognized by 74% of respondents as the most important skills developed by the simulation. A percentage of more than 60% of participants admitted that the simulation game permitted them to develop skills like: building relations between the team (71%), initiative and creativity (69%), self-control and confidence (69%), ability to dialogue (60%). The results are in line with our previous study, where the tendencies were similar.

Figure 3. Improvement of social skills after MAEDRI simulation game



5.LIMIT OF THE RESEARCH

The limits of the research could be separated into three categories. The first one is related to the number of questionnaires received. All students had received the invitation to participate to the study, on a voluntary basis, so the number of questionnaires received is still small.

The second one is related to the research design which cannot measure how other external factors are taken into account; i.e. those that might contribute to skills development outside the academic environment. Further research will try to evaluate the influence of those factors. Finally, the last limitation refers to the lack of control group.

6.CONCLUSION

This study showed that the use of experiential learning methods helps master students to better understand and use the diplomatic concepts.

This study evaluated students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the MAEDRI game to simulate a typical Ministry of Foreign Affairs organization. Overall, the study demonstrates that students' perceptions indicate an enhancement of their competencies as a result of the game simulation. In other words, results of this study show the exercise may have a positive effect in terms of knowledge transfer.

Moreover, the participants highlighted the role of the exercise as a motivation factor, providing a better understanding of the real diplomats' tasks and offering a snapshot of real professional situations where their hard and soft skills have been exposed and enhanced.

The research presented in this study analyzes if and to what extent the role play game MAEDRI, developed by the author within the SNSPA, reached its objective - to form or to enhance a series of competencies necessary for students in International Relations in order to prepare them better for the active life period. The research covers 6 years of annual simulations. While this study was designed to analyze mainly the transfer of a number of professional competencies, the findings not only confirmed the hypothesis, but also showed that the learning game is more complex and it impacts some social competencies.

The success of the MAEDRI simulation was observed in students' motivation during the whole period of the exercise. In this respect we noticed an increase in team work and a stimulating competition between teams. More interesting, during the admission interview to the master programs, a number of students chose us for of our interactive master programs, and named specifically this simulation as a criterion for their decision. Although we didn't measure the weight of different criteria in choosing a certain master program, further research could provide interesting insights regarding how students are selecting the university. Our research is in line with the literature findings (Giovanello, Kirk și Kromer 2013, Mariani și Glenn 2014, Owston 2013, Rivera și Simons

2008) where an increase in engagement by simulation was demonstrated in teaching political science.

Is experiential learning and more specific role plays effective in knowledge transfer? Yes, according to our findings. Students self-assessed that the simulation game helped them acquire new competencies or enhanced the existing ones.

Statements on Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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