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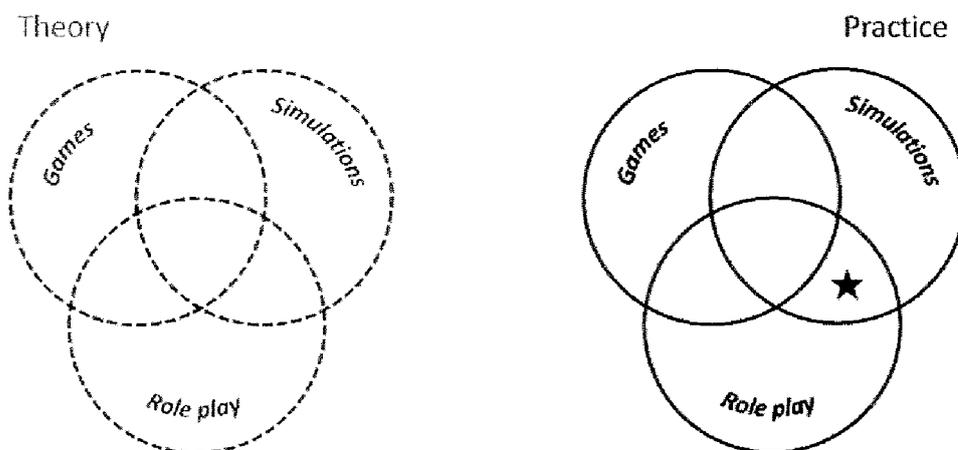
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## Chapter Eleven

# From Dictatorship to Democracy: Simulating the Politics of the Middle East

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## Introduction: the Challenge of Teaching Middle East Politics

Teaching politics subjects to undergraduate classes is often made difficult by the shackles of ethnocentricity. With only their own social values and political culture to go by students (and teachers) risk making invalid and subjective judgements on the rationality or behaviour of people and states with different historical and cultural backgrounds (Stover, 2005).

This is extremely prominent in the study of Middle Eastern Politics. The long-running and bitter conflicts, shifting patterns of allegiances and media depictions of the region can seem mysterious, illogical and impenetrable to outsiders. Additionally, students can have quite firm preconceptions and biases about various actors, often with little evidence, and in so doing create a black and white belief system for a part of the world that has so many shades of grey.

For a teacher in this subject area, imparting a thorough overview of the Middle East is impossible. Even if the physical area can be limited, the Middle East still crosses the totality of recorded human history, is a rapidly changing political environment and is perhaps the only part of the world where local, national, regional and international factors blur so seamlessly (Brown, 1984). At Deakin University the Middle East Studies units cover a geographical range from Morocco to Iran, a historical period from antiquity to current events and political ramifications that are global. The potential volume of information for students to deal with in a 12-week course is therefore great. But even with unlimited time, the problems of ethnocentricity and lack of empathy would still remain.

In order to foster a deeper understanding of the region and its inhabitants, a role-play-based simulation offers an approach to learning that might help to solve some of these dilemmas of empathy and scale. By “walking in the shoes” of the actors and groups in the Middle East the focus shifts from a study of dates and events and offers the possibility of an improved understanding of the complexities of the region. Students can begin to appreciate the motives of groups they had previously been intolerant towards and grasp the difficulties inherent to negotiation and consensus building in this part of the world (Dougherty, 2003; Stover, 2005, 2006). Such regional applications of role playing are an extension of the successful deployment of similar exercises in the delivery of other Politics and International Relations subjects. (See Wheeler, 2006 for a list of published examples.)

Unsurprisingly, the design and implementation of a simulation activity based around the Middle East can be as daunting as the region is in real life. A great deal of subject expertise is required and this would seemingly necessitate lengthy research periods for the students and/or a very central and overt role for the teacher in guiding the role play. Some would then question whether such an arrangement is really an innovative approach,

and whether the goals of student-directed understanding and empathy can be realised.

The answer to these doubts is threefold. Firstly the role of the teacher needs to be effectively built into the overall role play design. This role needs to be flexible enough to allow for unambiguous authority *and* a more covert guidance/facilitation function. Secondly, if the desired outcomes are to generate empathy and understanding (as opposed to concrete outputs like the drafting of a mock constitution) then the assessment aspects of the exercise need to emphasise and support that goal. Thirdly, dispense with any theoretical discomfort about the teacher acting as an authority figure and knowledge imparter, and recognise that this role has its uses and can co-exist with the role of facilitator and consultant.

## The Middle East Politics Simulation

The Middle East Politics Simulation (MEPS) is an online role play exercise currently hosted by Deakin University, Australia. It is an assessment task that forms 50% of the total grade for the Middle East subject units in which it is embedded. The content delivery of these units is through traditional lecture and tutorial-based methods, incorporating other assessment items, typically a tutorial paper and an exam.

The MEPS is aimed at providing students with an improved level of understanding of the political dimensions of the Middle East, including the complexities of negotiation and decision making that face actors in this turbulent region. The MEPS operates in a text-based format viewed on a web browser over the public Internet. Students take the roles of various political actors concerned with the Middle East and their lecturers perform the function of “Controllers”, adjudicating and facilitating the simulation.

First run in the early 1990s, the MEPS software was created as an Honours project by Caitlin Fegan of UNSW under the supervision of Dr John Shepherd and in association with Dr Andrew Vincent. It offers a longitudinal perspective that spans trends in technology, e-learning and the increased integration of distance education. Naturally, longevity does not necessarily equate to quality, though previous literature describing the MEPS has consistently indicated the high level of student engagement and learning outcomes (Dracup, 2009; Hardy & Totman, 2011b).

Moreover, the MEPS has served as the template for many subsequent role play learning designs utilised in Australian tertiary teaching (Wills & McDougall, 2009).

With a run time of 12 days and with 24 hour access, the role playing element of the MEPS is also significantly longer than most simulations associated with Politics or International Relations teaching. Many of these other simulations have a similar or even longer total duration, but the bulk of the time is spent in research and/or essay-style writing. This may be followed by one or more short role play sessions, perhaps restricted to a single in-class session (Holzhauer, 2009) or a short series of class sessions with a developing plot or milestone narrative (Austin *et al.*, 2006; Chasek, 2005; Shaw, 2004; Shellman, 2001). Some simulations are run for an entire semester, but with a limited range of regular and finite weekly tasks to be completed (Rivera & Simons, 2008).

The duration of the MEPS is significant because it allows a developing relationship between the Controllers and the students and, in the case of the latter, can foster a steady and sustained growth in their self-directed learning.

Finally, the size of the MEPS is greater than many other role-playing assessments used in teaching politics subjects. Typically there might be around 90 teams and 150–200 students participating in the MEPS, and although this provides a representation of the complexity of the Middle East, it also makes for an arduous moderating task for the two or three teachers involved.

## The Teacher–Student Relationship in the MEPS

In the mass of literature concerning active learning theory and practice, the transformation of the teacher–student relationship has been the subject of much analysis. The worthy intention of increasing learning outcomes and encouraging student-directed knowledge seeking is sometimes presented as an evolutionary progression towards a higher state of being. Grow (1991:129) for example describes the teacher’s role as being “to prepare the learner to advance to higher stages”. He proposes a four-stage model of this progress

- Stage 1: Student is *dependent*. Teacher is a *coach/authority*. The

basic classroom situation of giving information and testing its retention. Rote learning and drilling.

- Stage 2: Student is *interested*. Teacher is *motivator/guide*. A more inspiring lecture approach with guided discussion.
- Stage 3: Student is *involved*. Teacher is a *facilitator*. Teacher has a more equal role in discussion. Group projects can take place with limited autonomy.
- Stage 4: Student is *self-directed*. Teacher is a *consultant/delegator*. Independent research and autonomous group projects are viable. (Grow, 1991:129–136).

Whilst this transition is a desirable one, there is perhaps a linguistic bias in the labelling and the idea of a hierarchy where each step is somehow “better” than the previous. This can lead to the perception that the lower stages are inferior and to be eschewed or that the “traditional teaching relationship” and “inspiring innovation” are mutually exclusive. This is not the case, and while some would contend that self-directed learning as a whole is ineffective (Kirschner *et al.*, 2006), we would argue that there is a simultaneous place for all four of Grow’s stages (or similar models of developing learning) and that this is demonstrable in the deployment of a well designed role play/simulation.

In the MEPS, the teachers operate as “Controllers”, a role that has been designed specifically to be an active element of the game. The functions of Control during the course of the MEPS include many administrative tasks during the set-up stage, then acting as an authority figure while students learn the mechanics of the role play, and then moving to a type of guide/facilitator as students become more comfortable and immersed in the simulation. Often, all of these roles exist simultaneously. Some of the specific functions of the Controller are:

- Create a list of roles
- Divide the list amongst campuses and study modes
- Administer the “sign-up” process
- Create and publish a “starting scenario” allowing players to take action and attempting to create balanced play

- Act as a permission giver for significant actions
- Direct players towards greater depth of research in their roles and actions
- Moderate disputes
- Deal with “rogue” players affecting the game
- Maintain the game universe in line with the “real world”
- Chair the face-to-face sessions at the game’s close Grade participants for assessment purposes

What is important here regarding teacher-student relationships is that throughout the MEPS the Controllers are the undisputed masters of the universe. Their word is final and cannot be appealed to any higher authority. Their rulings and their subjective determination of “how it would work in real life” form the framework of the game’s world.

This is certainly a teaching dynamic that is in line with the first two stages of Grow’s scale. Especially in the initial day or two of any MEPS session, students tend to be very dependent on teacher guidance and, as they test the boundaries of the MEPS’ game mechanics, may require quick and unambiguous management. Is this very binary and old-fashioned teacher-student relationship problematic? Does it stifle creativity or restrict learning?

In our experience, the answer to both these questions is a resounding “no”.

Firstly, the Control function is primarily a refereeing one. And whilst the “rules” of the MEPS are mainly rules of function and etiquette, the overall intention of the game’s setting is to mimic as much as possible the “real world”. This means responding to team requests with a ruling that reflects the possibility of that action occurring in reality. (For example the Controller might have to say “You cannot move an aircraft carrier to the Gulf because it would leave you without one in the Pacific.” or “No, your car bomb will not kill 400 people. Fourteen is more likely.”) This naturally requires a great deal of subject expertise applied promptly, decisively and impartially. It would be difficult for students to fulfil this role, both from a practical (expertise) point of view, as well as with the level of final authority that would be acceptable to their peers.

Secondly, and linked to the refereeing function, is the need to balance play and ensure that all teams get an equal opportunity to shine (should they opt to take it). Since not all roles and all students are created equal, this can require some intervention and *deus ex machina* tactics.

For example, the roles of the US President and his Secretary of State are very much in the limelight. These roles have a high workload, but offer many opportunities to attract attention and be involved in key events. That is not the case with leadership roles in smaller nations (for example, the Emir of Kuwait) or in the roles of minority opposition or NGO groups. For this reason it is sometimes necessary to fetter the American roles with some sort of scenario where they are on the back foot and without a likely “winning” choice. This might involve something like starting the game with some of their troops being held hostage by an opposing entity or with a diplomatic *faux pas* to clean up.

Another aspect of this play balancing is not allowing teams to give themselves too many “free kicks”. That is to say teams do not knowingly or otherwise construct scenario events where they are the sole “winner” and other teams have no input. An example would be a team requesting a plot outcome where they gain victory over an opponent that is not actually represented in the game. Such avenues do not support the ambitions of the MEPS, where the intention is to foster the need to interact and communicate with other players and simulate the diplomacy and politics of the Middle East, rather than just the events associated with the region. It is therefore necessary for the Controller to, as discreetly as possible, shape and direct the scenarios that occur in the simulation in order to provide some equity.

However, as the MEPS progresses through into the second week a great deal more self-directed learning occurs. As students become used to the mechanics of the system and perhaps become more deeply immersed in a process of “role adoption” (Stover, 2005) many will start to invest increasing amounts of research into their role and the in-game scenarios they are involved with. It is not unusual for Controllers to start being presented with quite detailed plans backed by solid evidence and demonstrating a high level of thought. At this point we move into Grow’s third and fourth stages, where the student has greater spontaneous involvement and the teacher is becoming more of a facilitator and consultant, perhaps suggesting sources or ideas that the student can

investigate for themselves to improve their role even further (Stover, 2005).

Critically, the function of the Controller as overall manager and final arbiter is still present and enacted regularly. However this duty will usually become less authoritarian during the course of the simulation as participants become used to the procedures and more concerned with role play rather than rule-play (though obviously not all students or teams make this journey, particularly those who did not participate regularly in the first few days of the simulation).

Significantly, the ultimate reward of active learning can be reached after the MEPS has finished. Within this community of peers it is easy to notice who has executed their role play well and made a significant impact on the simulation. These students are then sometimes recognised as subject experts in their own right, being consulted in tutorials by teachers and students for their knowledge and opinions upon topics related to the role that they played. In a few cases, the role immersion they experienced in the MEPS can be the impetus for higher level studies.

The lesson offered by the MEPS exercise is that role play designers do not need to feel that strict direction is incompatible with innovative teaching. Nor that the teacher as guide or leader is incompatible with developing self-directed learning, even during the course of the one activity. As long as the authority role is properly built into the overall system and is purposeful, it can act as a springboard to greater autonomy.

## Assessing the MEPS

The challenges of assessing learning in role plays are many and require the teacher to consider the progress of the learner in terms of *understanding* rather than acquisition or recall (Wills *et al.*, 2010). That is to say, the context of the role play exercise is important and the gains in knowledge cannot necessarily be measured in the same manner as an exam type assessment format based upon repeating material taught.

Naturally there is still a need to provide assessment and this will usually come in the form of a numerical score. The need for this quantification is an inherent part of the tertiary education process, since without

some measure of performance the investment in time and resources cannot be justified (Wills *et al.*, 2010).

However, converting performance in a role playing simulation into a numerical output can be an extremely subjective task. The same is true for measuring rubbery concepts such as “improved understanding”. In addressing these challenges there are various approaches to assessing individual outcomes in role playing tasks. These include components such as role statements, position papers, quizzes, quality and quantity targets, peer assessment, panel debates, debriefing papers and so forth (Rosser, 2009). Many of these assessment components obviously have a basis in more traditional forms of assessment tasks.

What is clear is that for a successful (and amicable) measurement of learning in a role playing exercise several factors need to be satisfied:

- There needs to be a correlation between the assessment task(s) and the desired learning outcomes
- Expectations are clearly stated
- Tasks are in sequence and advance the overall exercise (Rosser, 2009)

It is obvious that such criteria differ very little from those applied to *any* form of assessment task that has been effectively scaffolded into the design of a teaching program. However, in the case of “non-traditional” exercises, the pedagogical worth of the assignment may also need specific justification to students so that they approach it with the same sincerity as a conventional assessment task (Austin *et al.*, 2006; Elgort, 2007).

The MEPS offers an extreme example of some of the challenges in assessing role playing tasks. The sheer scale of the simulation in terms of roles and participants (for example, 180 students in the first semester of 2011) is unusual in its own right. Exacerbating this is the non-linear nature of the exercise and the great deal of freedom that is available in determining courses of action. There are also no mandatory objectives for teams to achieve in the narrative of the MEPS universe; whilst diplomatic gains are considered positive, setting the acquisition of certain attainments for each team would quickly turn the simulation into a zero sum game.

The complications posed to assessment by size and narrative freedom are intensified by the disparity of the roles within the MEPS. There is no “rock-paper-scissors” equality in the real Middle East and so this is certainly not the case within the MEPS. The role of President of the United States has far more prestige, power and resources to call upon than a Palestinian splinter group or the ruler of a minor Gulf state. Moreover, some roles, such as those of state leaders, have diplomatic, intelligence and military options open to them, whilst other roles perhaps only have recourse to violence to voice their positions. Obviously some roles will only be concerned with a limited number of “local” connections, whilst others will have local, regional and global stages to tread.

This disparity in options, status and impact necessitates a subjective and sliding scale when the facilitators grade teams. The alternative to this open-ended and subjective assessment approach would be to draw up a marking rubric for every separate role. This would be ridiculously onerous to establish and administer and still would not address the open-endedness of the MEPS plots.

For some educational developers this subjective nature of assessing the MEPS might seem problematic. However, the assessment stage is founded upon several of the suggested methods and principles mentioned by Rosser above.

At the conclusion of the MEPS, students are given a grade based upon the total of a series of criteria. As role teams normally consist of two students, the team’s grade applies to both members. The breakdown of this assessment is:

- ✦ Role Profile = 20%
- ✦ Email quantity = 10%
- ✦ Email quality (i.e. role playing) = 50%
- ✦ Position Paper = 10%
- ✦ Conference = 10%

In turn, the MEPS represents 50% of the students’ overall grade for the trimester, with the other 50% coming from a tutorial presentation and an exam. An explanation of the MEPS assessment tasks and an exploration of their value are presented below.

### *Role Profile*

Prior to the commencement of the role playing component of the MEPS, teams are required to publish a role profile outlining the significance of their role. This can include information on their character's history, viewpoints or place within the wider scheme of Middle East politics. It is intended both as a vehicle for the team to gain an understanding of their role, as well as offer other teams a summary of an identity that may be unfamiliar. Hopefully the role profile will also transcend some of the shallow and stereotyped images conveyed by the media in the case of some actors.

The format of the role profile is up to the teams themselves, with the proviso that it is somewhere between 500 and 1,000 words. Some teams choose to write their profiles as neutral encyclopaedic articles, whilst others present theirs as transcribed "speeches" or newspaper items "in character" (for example, a ranting self-aggrandising monologue from Colonel Gaddafi or a White House press bio from Hillary Clinton.)

However it is presented, the role profile is fundamentally a research task aimed at familiarising a team with their role and indicating to them the likely directions their character will take.

### *Email Quantity*

Not only is the judgement of a criterion like "quality" subjective, but in the MEPS even "quantity" has to be treated on a sliding scale. Including a quantity measure at all might seem problematic, but the intention here is to provide a compulsion towards participation. A student who only bothers to log on to the MEPS towards the end of its run would be lost as to what events had been occurring and/or their absence may have hamstrung other teams. With the knowledge that the volume of their correspondence is being judged, the majority of students seem motivated to participate early and often.

However it is just not equitable to compare the same number of emails when considering roles such as the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Lebanon. If both have sent 75 emails in the two weeks of the simulation, the former would have been almost idle, whilst the latter had been frenetically active. Moreover, the MEPS is not a linear

role play with a limited plot tree; outcomes and plot lines are truly open-ended, so they cannot be dictated into a set series of quantity targets for assessment.

This requires some judgment on the part of the MEPS teachers. The quantity grade will be determined by some relative measurement against all participants, modified by an understanding of the “importance” of that role. Secondly it is possible to measure roles against similar ones. There are for example a number of Palestinian factions represented in the MEPS, so if one team has sent many more or many less emails than their peers, this can be taken into account.

By capping the quantity measurement at 10% of the overall mark, the convenors also indicate that this is not the most important measurement of a team’s participation.

### *Email Quality*

Since the aim of the whole MEPS exercise is to deepen understanding of the political dimensions of the Middle East and simulate the complexities of negotiation and decision making, the performance of these aspects constitutes the greatest weight in the overall grade. In this case it is in the role playing quality that students can demonstrate their understanding of their character and their place in the tangled web of Middle East politics.

The MEPS interface allows the controllers to see all email traffic sent and received by any team. This permits a running oversight on which teams are performing their roles well, and which are drifting away from a “real life” portrayal. This will include observing the tone or language of their communication or whom they are communicating with. (For example, it would be unrealistic for a US President to be having email chats with a terrorist leader.) Additionally, the realism of the diplomatic/political content is considered. In the real world, political actors have parameters that are non-negotiable for a variety of reasons, even though to the outside observer it might seem easier just to “let things go”. Therefore when grading the MEPS the Controllers need to look for such unlikely concessions being made, as they would not be considered “in character”. This would include examples such as Israel giving away the Golan Heights or Iran surrendering its nuclear program.

An additional aspect of the quality mark (and why we do not simply refer to it as “role playing”) is concerned with the research teams put into their actions. Any team initiating a major action, such as use of force, needs to submit their proposal to the controllers for adjudication. They are expected to outline their plan, and, more importantly, justify it. At the start of the MEPS, this will inevitably involve quite shallow proposals that are often based more on pre-conceptions about the characters and the region. “I want to set off a car bomb outside a mosque in Baghdad,” or “I want to parachute some Delta Force guys in to rescue all the hostages”. Such proposals would be rejected by the controllers with a demand for a greater level of detail or justification.

The purpose of this is to force students to delve a little deeper into the how and why of their plans. Why a bomb? Which mosque? What would it gain for you? How will you do it? What are the likely casualties? How can you rescue the hostages when you don't know where they are? How will you get the Delta Force team out again?

The ideal results of such research are that students begin developing a greater appreciation of the realities of the region. Their preconceptions are challenged, especially in regards to the use of force or the ease of carrying out certain types of diplomatic or military action. As the MEPS progresses through to its second week, many teams provide increasingly well researched and considered proposals, often drawn up after a great deal of consultation of specialist sources. Such research and interaction also leads to epiphanies as students realise things like just *why* peace is so hard to find between certain parties; often for deep-seated reasons that they had never considered before.

### *Position Paper and Conference*

At the conclusion of the MEPS students participate in a closing conference. This is a face-to-face role playing situation where at least one member of each team participates in one or more panel discussions concerned with some of the larger issues that the MEPS covers. For example, these topics might be nuclear proliferation, Arab-Israeli peace, democratisation and so forth. The controllers allocate the teams to the panels, as well as nominating a moderator for each one. Prior to the conference each team has to publish a position paper that outlines their role's stance on the

topic(s) they have been asked to discuss. Off-campus students do not have to attend this event and instead have their position paper mark valued out of 20 instead of 10.

The panel discussions also take place in role and are often a lively forum, with many teams choosing to appear in costume or adopt flamboyant behaviour suited to their character. Besides the obvious research involved in preparing the position paper and panel appearance, this event also serves as a cathartic debrief and marked end point to what will have often been the most intense and time consuming assignment many students will ever do at university.

## Assessing the Assessment

Despite the many elements of subjectivity and the need for constant one-off judgement calls on the part of the controllers, the MEPS attempt to provide a fair and balanced approach to measuring student progress in the subject of Middle East Politics. The various tasks and milestones correspond to a number of the possible assessment choices provided by Rosser (2009) for role play exercises, including:

- + Role Profile Statement
- + Position paper
- + Response to scenario
- + Inquiry appearance
- + Quality and quantity assessment
- + Debriefing report

This spread of criteria and tasks makes for a comprehensive research task whilst still placing the emphasis on understanding one's role and the wider complexity of Middle East Politics. This supports the objectives of the simulation, which are for students to increase the breadth and depth of their knowledge about the Middle East.

Other Middle East political simulations have used different approaches to assessing participants. Some place an emphasis on essay type research tasks submitted before or after a relatively short or limited role play simulation (Dougherty, 2003; Stover, 2005). Others place an emphasis on

conference/plenary type activities (Austin *et al.*, 2006). Such criteria may be a reflection of the type of learning outcome desired or an indication of student and/or institutional expectations about what constitutes a “real” assignment (Austin *et al.*, 2006).

## Student Response

Student reaction to the MEPS is overwhelmingly positive. When surveyed, 57 of 58 participants in the Trimester 1 2011 MEPS nominated their overall experience as being positive. All but two of this group (who left the answer space blank) indicated the MEPS as offering a “Much Better” or “Better” learning experience than traditional forms of assignments. Over 90% felt that their understanding of and engagement with Middle East Politics had been increased by their participation in the MEPS.

Qualitative feedback gathered at the same time reinforced this strongly positive feeling, with many students indicating the depth of their immersion in the subject matter. Here are some typical examples of their feedback.

*“Excellent learning tool.”*

*“Being half-Israeli I generally support Israel. Playing a member of a terrorist organisation in the Sim allowed me to look at the conflict through the other side’s eyes.”*

*“Immersing myself in the research to learn how my role fits in the international system.”*

*“Great learning experience. Hard work but definitely worth it.”*

*“Great fun. Better than an essay by a long shot.”*

*“It forces you to learn about multiple topics, people and conflicts as opposed to just one topic for an essay.”*

*“I liked how it was interactive and different from any other assignment.”*

*"This was an incredible learning experience as it required research/understanding of so many issues in the region."*

*"Exhausting but well worth it!"*

Encouragingly, such responses indicate a student understanding of their learning progress and a perception that they are gaining more value from the role play than from traditional assignments. The prevailing sentiment is a recognition that participating at a high level in the MEPS requires a breadth of research and critical thinking beyond that demanded by essays or exams. Moreover, this knowledge gain is not solely in terms of facts or arguments, but in empathy and a diminution of cultural relativism. Similar outcomes are reported from the Middle East role plays run by Dougherty (2003) and Stover (2005, 2006).

In responding to an open-ended question regarding their dislikes about the project, most of the remarks concerned the unsuitability of some of the functionality of the MEPS interface, in particular the chat room tool. (See Hardy & Totman (2011a) for a discussion of the chat function within the MEPS.)

Aside from these technical complaints, the bulk of the remaining negative commentary revolved around the time-consuming nature of the task and the way that it had dominated students' lives for the duration of the exercise. There were also some complaints regarding lack of workload balance within teams.

These results are consistent with previous research carried out on the MEPS. In 2009 over 95% of respondents to one study (Dracup, 2009) expressed the opinion that they had "*a better understanding of the facts of Middle East politics*" as a result of undertaking the MEPS. That research also suggested that students felt they had seen an improvement in more generic academic skills such as creative thinking, communicating, team work and problem solving.

## Teacher Experience

Of significance in assessing the impact of the MEPS and its model is the continuity amongst its facilitators. One of them has been involved from

the start of the project and another since 1995. Even the most recent addition to the team has been involved for over six years.

This long relationship with the MEPS has even included transporting it to different institutions as the convenors progressed in their careers. Dealing with the (real-world) political fallout of the MEPS is part of this experience, since it has sometimes attracted public and academic criticism over its sensitive subject matter. The ethics of encouraging students to pretend to be terrorists is a common condemnation.

Over the decades the facilitators have obviously become adept at managing this large and complex role play, which depends on deep subject knowledge as well as familiarity with the idiosyncrasies of the simulation in mechanics and technology. The corollary to this lengthy practice though is a kind of exclusivity and monopoly of experience that would make it difficult for others to successfully reproduce the MEPS “off the rack”. However, the point of such an imitation is questionable anyway, since the open-endedness of the MEPS is conducive to accommodating individual styles and direction.

## Conclusion

The MEPS provides an example of a complex role playing simulation that has been designed around the objectives of increasing empathy and breadth of understanding. With an open-ended plot line and an assessment weighting that rewards playing in character, the MEPS offers great benefit in increasing student understanding of actors in the region and transcends the gap between discipline-based and learning-based approaches to the subject. Importantly, the MEPS also shows that teaching innovation does not have to mean complete revolution, and that the role of teacher as expert and facilitator of learning is still very important, especially in the early stages of a task. Moreover, traditional teacher-student relationships can still be effective in forming the foundation for increased learning outcomes. Moderation of role plays is an example of this, where a teacher’s “authority” can be an effective tool in the early stages of the exercise, helping to build the platform for greater independent learning as the task proceeds. Indeed, just as the Middle East represents a changing blend of dictatorship and democracy, so too does the task of teaching students about it.

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