



Teaching about terrorism through simulations

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Teaching, Learning, and Leading With Computer Simulations

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Chapter 9

Teaching About Terrorism Through Simulations

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ABSTRACT

Creating positive learning outcomes regarding terrorism can be challenging. The nature of the topic offers several obstacles to learner understanding, not least of which is how to enable students to transcend their own cultural perspectives and develop deeper and more objective insights regarding the groups and causes that foster terrorism. Following an exploration of the growth in terrorism as an academic subject and the challenges posed to teaching in this area, this chapter presents a possible solution by describing an online role play exercise that has proven learning results over more than 25 years of usage. This tool, grounded in an experiential learning approach, can assist in easing some of the stresses faced by teachers and institutions, while also offering deeper and more insightful discoveries for participants.

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INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning growth of radical groups and ideologies around the world has seen a related expansion of terrorism as a 'subject' to be delivered in an educational context. The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent War on Terror spurred rapid development in higher education courses that either focus wholly on terrorism or include component modules on the topic. Today the need for students and teachers to grasp this phenomenon has not abated and educational providers are increasingly required to offer learning aimed at preparing graduates for careers in security and counter-terrorism.

Despite all this activity and demand, creating effective learning outcomes regarding terrorism can be challenging (Pinar Alakoc, 2018). The nature of the topic offers several obstacles to learner understanding, not least of which is how to enable students to transcend their own cultural perspectives and develop deeper and more objective insights regarding the groups and causes that foster terrorism. Achieving such comprehension by climbing the dry mountain of scholarly literature on terrorism is not likely, yet neither can traditional 'hands-on' experiences such as field trips be offered. At the same time, the emotive aspects of terrorism can be challenging for teachers to deal with, particularly in a political and legal environment that reacts strongly and punitively to perceived 'sympathy' for terrorists.

How then can educators best impart a multifaceted understanding of terrorism as a form of political violence? Following an exploration of the growth in terrorism as an academic subject and the challenges posed to teaching in this area, this chapter presents a possible solution by describing an online role play exercise that has learning results proven over more than 25 years of usage. This tool, grounded in an experiential learning approach, can assist in easing some of the stresses faced by teachers and institutions, while also offering deeper and more insightful discoveries for participants.

The growth in scholarly publication on terrorism after 9/11 is staggering. An audit of book titles available via *Amazon* carried out by Silke (2009) noted that prior to the attacks 1,310 non-fiction works had been published containing the word 'terrorism' in their title. But within the subsequent seven years, another 2,281 titles had been added. Dolnik (2015) reports that a new book on terrorism is released roughly every six hours! Similar studies on journal outputs covering terrorism offer comparable results: within four or five years after 9/11, the volume of scholarly articles produced on terrorism had exceeded the entire number produced in all the decades prior. Whole new journals devoted to terrorism studies were created and

existing journals in the topic area increased their publishing frequency and article counts. To illustrate the physical extent of this slew of material, Dexter and Guittet (2014) describe their compilation of a 'scroll' by connecting printed pages of all the references they could find to books and articles on terrorism. The resulting list rolls out to over 120 metres.

This increase in words is paralleled by an increase in study options for those interested in terrorism, either intellectually or in terms of career progression. Degree courses offering majors in terrorism, counter-terrorism and related areas of political violence and security have blossomed, often on the back of post-9/11 funding avenues that saw universities around the world establish new research institutes, think tanks or outreach programs (Jackson, 2012). Existing degrees in areas such as International Relations, Political Science, Criminology and Sociology began to include modules and options that examined terrorism and/or political violence generally or in specific regions. For example, according to its archived handbooks, in 2002 Australia's Monash University offered only a single undergraduate module that dealt with security (in this case arms control).¹ They also offered just one unit dealing with the Middle East and none at all that mentioned terrorism in the title. By 2007, however, there were nine undergraduate units that had the words 'terrorism' or 'violence' in their titles, including ones that allowed for writing extended research projects on terrorism and security. There were also now three units specifically on the Middle East and another on 'Political Islam'. The same university had also opened a Global Terrorism Research Centre in 2006, which had emerged from a group called the Global Terrorism Research Unit, which was quickly put together in 2002. Such a growth in course offerings and dedicated research centres would be a common narrative around the world.

The growth and routine presence of academic studies of terrorism is in one way laudable and in another manner of concern. Whilst discussion and investigation of this topic help to improve understanding, satisfy intellectual curiosity and, hopefully, help us ameliorate the causes and effects of terrorism, the obstacles to *successfully* teaching in this area are significant (Miller, Mills, & Harkins, 2011). There are several reasons for this.

OBSTACLES TO SUCCESSFUL TEACHING ON TERRORISM

The initial challenge is posed by the sheer volume of published material. As noted above, literature and commentary on terrorism is overwhelming in quantity and the variety of themes pursued. Dolnik (2015) argues that over the last decade no other

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branch of the Humanities and Social Sciences has seen such a growth in output as that of terrorism studies. Not only is there the standard approach in looking at terrorism as a form of political violence, there are also troves of research on aspects such as the economics of terrorism, the psychology of terrorism, the history of specific groups or conflicts, legal remedies, counter-terrorism, media depiction and so on. For teachers or students, trying to distil some core readings or lines of enquiry into terrorism can therefore be daunting. Added to this is the Sisyphean nature of the task. The emergence of new terrorist groups, amalgamations of existing movements, name changes, state failures, tactical adaptations, counter offensives all of these happen at such a rapid pace that what is written and published one year will likely be redundant the following. The slow pace of academic investigation and publishing will never succeed in catching up to the rapid evolution of this topic. This increases the difficulty for teachers in trying to deliver relevant material on terrorism and can deter students with a seemingly hopeless undertaking.

On top of this volume of scholarly attention is the extensive and sensational media coverage that results in an exaggeration of terrorism's reach and power. This can affect the preconceptions with which students approach the topic (Alakoc, 2018). Dramatic attacks such as those that took place on 9/11, or in Manchester, Boston or Paris, capture a great deal of notice and analysis in comparison to the more regular outrages that occur in states such as Afghanistan and Iraq. This raises the fear level of Western citizens disproportionately high in relation to the actual threat. Students may not be aware that the majority of casualties caused by terrorism do not happen in the West, do not target non-Muslims and tend to go largely unreported. This leads to a skewed and geo-centric perspective on the nature of terror, not to mention being infused with racial stereotypes and prejudices. Moreover, the depiction of terrorism and counter-terrorism in popular culture also serves to create a more fantastic impression of the topic, replete with nefarious masterminds, dashing heroes and climactic outcomes of choreographed violence. Terrorists have become a "popular and generic enemy" and thus a bankable ingredient in film, television and video game production for decades (Dexter & Guittet, 2014). As these romantic plotlines deliberately mirror some of the discourse and events surrounding the War on Terror and world events, a confused reality that merges fact and fiction becomes an accepted wisdom (Van Veeren, 2009). A focus on the tactical is also inevitable. The imagined abilities of terrorists and those who fight against them therefore become increasingly hyperbolic and divorced from the more mundane realities. Cutting through this blurred truth is therefore challenging for teachers, since their students' foundation for understanding terrorism and the campaign against it may be skewed from the outset.

An additional encumbrance encountered when teaching about terrorism is attracting criticism from those who see such analysis as a form of appeasement or encouraging of sympathy with extremists (Gereluk, 2012). Depending on the region and cause being studied, this can lead to accusations of national treachery, anti-Semitism and other vitriol. Poorly planned teaching activities can lead to media scrutiny and public outrage, such as in the case of an Australian high school teacher who asked her class to plan a fictitious mass casualty attack upon the country (Associated Press, 2010). Furthermore, concerns around the radicalisation of ‘home-grown’ terrorists at universities can exert pressure on academics to curtail their speech or teaching material on terrorism, either through fear of bad publicity or because of anti-terror laws (Dexter & Guittet, 2014). The 2008 case at the University of Nottingham highlights this paranoia. A pair of students were arrested for possessing an ‘al-Qaeda training document’ after nervous staff noticed it saved on a shared computer. The fact that one of the men was preparing a PhD proposal on militant Islam, that he had downloaded the document from the US Department of Justice website and that the so-called training manual was also available on *Amazon*, were not taken into account before police were contacted. Furthermore, the University of Nottingham subsequently instituted a peer review system, whereby the teaching material and reading lists of academics presenting classes on terrorism were scrutinised by a “module review committee” (Miller et al., 2011).

It is to be noted that there need not be an overt set of regulations proscribing the presentation of terrorism in university classes in order for academics to be nervous about their offerings. Instead the prevailing political climate combined with the realities of the 21st century higher education workplace can place an *implicit* gag on teachers. Factors such as the erosion of tenure, the growing reliance on corporate funding, enhanced cyber surveillance, risk-averse (and often non-academic) senior management and increasingly strident populist rhetoric in the media: all of these can exert a pressure on teachers to ‘keep their heads down’ (Gerstmann, 2006). In such an atmosphere it is likely that the teaching and study of terrorism may become shallow and generic, or at least limited to ‘dates and names’ type exposition.

This fear of becoming too close to the terrorist cause is related to a final challenge: how to impart understanding in a topic area that is often dichotomised into a simplistic contest between good and evil.² Moreover, that evil side of the equation is often swiftly dismissed not only as wicked, but also as irrational, perverse and un-representative of the demographic it purports to represent. Even those who avoid such moral judgement still tend to express a binary belief system encapsulated by the hackneyed adage of “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. Whilst having the intent of relativism, this dodge has very little to do with some

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of the ideological (rather than secessionist) terror movements of today and all the gradations in between. Conclusions that simplify terrorism would seem at odds with the time, money and commentary that are devoted to the issue.

Expanding the breadth and depth of terrorism teaching coverage is therefore necessary. As outlined above, there is no shortage of academic material on the topic, but dumping volumes of text on students is not an efficient tactic. Given that a teacher will have, at most, a few dozen hours to facilitate student learning on terrorism, much more than 'chalk and talk' is required. This is where computer simulations can help.

CHALKING IT UP TO EXPERIENCE

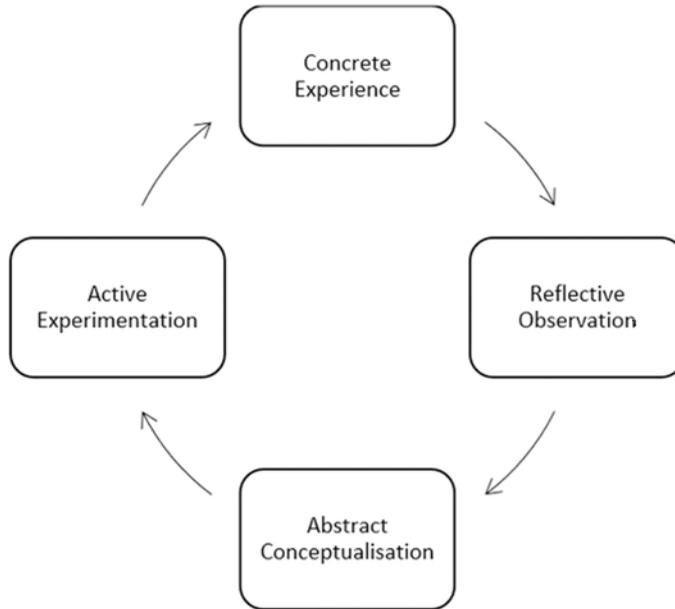
The strength of simulations is that they can offer the opportunity for experiential learning. At its simplest, experiential learning involves 'learning by doing'; the natural ability of human beings to gain knowledge and insight from having experienced or undertaken something (Beard & Wilson, 2006). Stehno (quoted in Itin, 1999) elaborates further, describing experiential learning as

- action that creates an experience
- reflection on the action and experience
- abstractions drawn from the reflection
- application of the abstraction to a new experience or action.

The reflective stage is critical and stems from the scholarship of Schön (1983), Kolb (1984) and Boud et al. (1985). The defining outcome is the transformation of that which is experienced into new knowledge or perspectives which can then be re-applied or adapted to future experience. Without this reflection and assimilation, experiences just remain experiences; effective learning does not occur. A graphical representation of this process is furnished by Kolb's model, which describes how new knowledge can be created through the transformation of experience. Under this process, the opportunity to reflect upon experience, analyse the components and concepts involved and then test them in new situations, cycles back to provide new experiences and learning.

Well established as this model is, fulfilling the cycle through *literal* experience in terrorism is an obviously absurd proposition for countless reasons. The need is for students to learn about and understand terrorism, not be involved in it. Indeed,

Figure 1. Kolb's (1984) description of the reflective learning cycle



this quandary reflects many of the same challenges inherent to studying other, even non-violent areas of Political Science: how to give students practical experience? Concepts such as international co-operation, non-state violence, compromise and choosing between two wrong decisions; these are all difficult to experience and apply in a classroom setting. "Like card games and sports, politics is something that makes the most sense if it is actually played, not just talked about" (Grant, 2004, p. vii). The same would be true for understanding terrorism and global responses to it.

Naturally someone studying terrorism cannot just become a real politician or leader of a dissident group just for experiential learning purposes. It is necessary to pretend and for this reason, the use of role plays and simulations offer substantial benefits for those engaged with political and security studies.^{3,4} Simulations allow students to experiment with variables and hypotheses in a safe environment. These can operate in a variety of formats, including face-to-face, via computer, in class, out of class and so on. They may be quite short or build up over weeks. They can be assessed or form the basis for further tasks such as reports or essays. There may be only a handful of teams or students or potentially hundreds. Whatever their

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configuration, these exercises allow examination of political topics, such as terrorism, in an experiential learning format that can unlock improved levels of understanding.

Even a cursory examination of Political Science pedagogical literature will offer many examples of in-class or face-to-face simulations being used to teach political topics. This includes the use of video conferencing or other technological means to facilitate synchronous negotiations where students are not co-located. However, there are fewer examples where a dedicated online environment is utilised and the emphasis in these studies is often on technology as a supplementary means of supporting or providing background for some sort of climactic *live* negotiation. This preliminary online communication may also be ‘out of character’ and mainly involve intra-team planning of their approach to the final event. Simulations that take place entirely online and entirely in-character are less apparent in the literature.

Whilst there is nothing problematic with using technology to plan or facilitate face-to-face simulation events there is further benefit to be found in removing the live factor and utilising a dedicated online interface, especially where the true identity of the student is hidden. Wills et al. (2010), emphasise the anonymity and asynchronicity provided by such online environments encourages the journey from passive learner to active contributor. When online roles remain anonymous participants can feel more liberated in their engagement with the exercise and in the adoption of their character. Their performance is less likely to be fettered by external, real-life factors such as power relationships, gender, reputation, cultural restraints or language ability. For example, it may be less credible, more uncomfortable and more likely to result in a stereotypical performance if a very masculine student is required to play a female role in front of his classroom peers, compared to him being able to do it anonymously. Likewise, the student well known for their strong left-wing and humanitarian views may also seem less plausible when trying to *publicly* play an ultra-conservative politician. Yet such examination of contrary viewpoints is a rewarding and encouraging possibility with role plays.

Beyond these practicalities, though, Wills et al. (2010) suggest that asynchronicity generates a greater depth of research, reflection and learning. Participants are not so much ‘on the spot’ as they are in live role play and can therefore put more thought into their words and actions, both before and after their ‘turn’.

Furthermore, using an online role play can eliminate many of the temporal-spatial limitations of face-to-face role play. Depending on how the exercise is designed, asynchronous and remote participation are possible, meaning that off-campus students are much more able to take part (Hardy & Totman, 2013; Lloyd, 2004). Given the burgeoning numbers of remotely located students enrolled in higher education this is a significant advantage. Student cohorts that may be geographically dispersed, part-time and with significant commitments to paid work and family, can be accommodated more easily in an online format.

For the purposes of fostering experiential learning as well as addressing many of the realities of teaching the topic of terrorism today, online models of role play therefore seem to offer the best overall format option. A case study of a long-running example that deals with terrorism and political crisis will now be explored.

SIMULATING THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East Politics Simulation (MEPS) runs twice yearly at Deakin University, Australia.⁵ Operating through a custom-built web browser interface, this email-driven simulation of diplomatic activity has been used for teaching Middle East studies content since the late 1980s, and has even moved between different universities. At around 30 years of age, it is possibly the oldest continually running online political role play and certainly one of the largest (in player numbers) and most complex examples used in the Political Science discipline.⁶ In any iteration of the MEPS around 100-150 students will fill 50-70 roles comprising state and non-state actors concerned with the Middle East. The role play lasts 12 days and activity can take place 24/7 during that period. Over the last two decades thousands of students have taken part in at least one occurrence of the MEPS (Hardy & Totman, 2017a).

The MEPS uses a simple HTML interface (originally designed by a Computer Science student as an Honors project) to provide an imitation webmail environment that has no connectivity outside the simulation's walled garden. Students log in as their role (e.g., Whitehouse Press Secretary) and then have access to an email account with that alias. The appearance of the interface is very similar to a basic webmail client. A chat and tweeting function are also included. The basis of the exercise involves these students then playing the role they have been assigned by communicating through these various forms of text. The use of the team email identities is an important component of the simulation's realism, since emails received will have the role's name as the sender rather than a student's. This helps to hide the identity of the student, assisting role adoption and promoting credible in-character performance.

From the start the teams are expected to adopt their role and communicate with each other in character. The simulation relies upon the participants themselves to drive the narrative and act according to the goals, duties or views of the role they are playing. There is no specific goal or winning criteria beyond this need to act in character. There is no fundamental problem to solve or treasure to locate. Peace is not expected to break out. This is in contrast to other political roleplays, such as a Model UN or single-issue negotiation, that usually revolve around concluding with a particular output, like the wording of a resolution or a treaty that satisfies all stakeholders.

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The simulation begins with a series of about 20 invented news stories (always based on real events). Every role will be a stakeholder in more than one of these stories and so have a natural opportunity to react. For example, there may be a story about the King of Jordan wanting to host a regional summit on terrorism. This obviously includes the King as a stakeholder, but also those teams playing his neighbouring states, perhaps some American cabinet members and so on. The students performing as the King of Jordan could then begin their simulation by planning the summit, sending out invitations, developing an agenda and so on. They would probably use the interface's chat function to hold the summit. Their job might be complicated by factors such as the Israeli government wanting to attend, which might then cause recrimination from Arab states, and so on. As the simulation progresses, these original news stories will usually fade from relevance because the actions and reactions of the teams provide their own self-sustaining plotlines.

Teams devising acts of violence, military intervention and so forth must first ask permission from the in-game referees, providing a plan, a rationale and some expected consequences. These will then be judged as to their viability, including whether other teams have taken specific counter-measures, as well as whether the act is 'in character'. Usually some form of negotiation between students and referee then occurs, where the original plan and its outcomes are adjusted before being approved.

The intended learning outcome for the MEPS is for students to gain a deeper understanding of the Middle East political system. This includes exploring the use, misuse, and limitations of violence as a political tool. Whilst not focussed solely on terrorism, the MEPS necessarily incorporates coverage of this tactic. This occurs through the inclusion of terror groups as roles in the simulation, as well as the roles of the state leaders and institutions that deal with terrorism and its effects. For example, at one time or another the exercise has included some of the following roles directly classed as terrorists:

- Islamic State
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
- Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
- Hamas
- Hezbollah
- The PKK

In addition to these groups the leadership of every state from Morocco to Iran is also represented, as well as the USA, Russia, China, UK and France. In some cases these national groupings will also incorporate cabinet roles, such as foreign

and defence ministers, intelligence agencies and so on. International institutions such as the UN, UNHCR, EU, mass media and peak aid and development NGOs are also included.

Of significant difference to many one-off political simulations is that students can participate repeatedly in the MEPS. As the exercise is used in three Middle Eastern Studies modules offered in the major, some students will have the chance to undertake up to three MEPS iterations during the course of their degree, typically over a two-year period. These repeats will always be in different roles. This repetition not only assists in their own learning, but it provides a scaffold of peer exemplars to the first-timers on how to play the game, since in any run of the MEPS around half the participants will have one or two previous simulations under their belts. This ameliorates the very daunting first day or two of the MEPS where the rookies will have a limited idea of how to proceed. The repeat students then become the 'locomotives' that pull the neophytes along until they build up their own speed. By the time students have completed their third MEPS, the most successful will have developed a great deal of subject expertise, often being called upon by their peers and their teachers to share knowledge and opinions in class on the topics they have dealt with (Hardy & Totman, 2012).

The amount of work that students invest in the 12 days the MEPS runs is significant. Over six years of collecting data on the exercise, the average student reports around 4.5 hours a day as their involvement, far more time than they would probably spend on a task such as an essay (Hardy & Totman, 2017a). This leads to great depth and breadth of knowledge, not just regarding the role they are playing, but those other roles and issues that they will interact with. As a complex storyline emerges and students become more immersed in their roles, Kolb's reflective learning cycle accelerates. The simplistic actions and responses of the first days will become more nuanced, better researched and exhibit a growing depth of understanding.

Evidence of the learning journey in the MEPS is offered by long-term studies of the cohorts that have undertaken it. Students in each of the two runs per year are invited to take place in an anonymous feedback survey at the conclusion of the exercise (and prior to receiving their grade).⁷ This survey has now been running across eight years and has attracted 986 responses. Although neither the MEPS nor the survey are targeted at terrorism learning specifically, one of the open-ended questions asks "*What did you learn about terrorism as a political tactic during the simulation?*" Some of the responses from that survey are included in the discussion of learning presented below.

THE SOLUTIONS OFFERED BY THE MEPS

A better understanding of the roots of terrorism is a principal gain for most participants in the MEPS. The two-week period allows multiple revolutions of the experiential learning cycle and a consequent evolution of attitudes and understanding. Whilst saying that the students ‘learn more’ could be seen as a nebulous claim, the gains made can be better exemplified by addressing them in the context of the challenges regarding teaching terrorism outlined above and in relation to Kolb’s reflective learning cycle.

Developing Deeper Thinking

The phenomenon of seeing terrorism as a global omnipresence and/or having a media driven and exaggerated vision of it can be ameliorated by the MEPS. In the first two or three days of the exercise there is certainly a tendency for those ‘popular culture’ visions of terrorism to be apparent. The terrorist teams begin their experimentation by proposing repeated and simplistic schemes of bombings and other mass casualty attacks to the referees. These often pay little regard to the realities of their group’s strength and location, what the repercussions might be and with scant thought as to what other goals their group may have aside from killing innocents. The estimates of what the result of such attacks might be in terms of casualties or damage are often vastly over-estimated by the students, as is the frequency with which a given group could undertake large and very complex attacks away from their core geography. For these students at the start of the simulation, the prevailing idea is that terrorist groups should be killing almost as a *raison d’être*: it’s what they do, isn’t it? Beyond this violence, the understanding of what a radical group might want to achieve politically or in the longer term is less obvious.

When such requests for violence are made to the MEPS referees they are usually met with gentle refusal and a suggestion to do more research. This would include asking the students what their group would hope to gain from such an act besides some vague ‘statement’, as well as asking them to investigate what their groups have tended to do historically and with what outcomes. Likewise, the anti-terror teams tend to have a Hollywood or video game understanding of how to respond to violent deeds, which is always focussed on the kinetic. Fanciful schemes of SEAL team raids, fleet movements, drone strikes and somehow finding all the terrorists by ‘listening in’ on their communications are the norm. Dramatic hostage rescues by Special Forces seem to be a particularly attractive fantasy. Again the predicted results

of such acts are misjudged, with students making the assumption that a sufficient increase in airstrikes or troop deployments will somehow solve the problems posed by a terrorist insurgency. Teams proposing such plans are also urged to do more research as to the realities of their resources and the likely outcomes (including the low success rate of armed hostage rescues in the real world).

These negative responses from the referees/teachers form the ‘concrete experience’ end of the learning cycle; something was proposed and experimented with but did not have the expected outcome. It is now the task of the students to reflect as to why and conceptualise new or amended ideas.

Some students will struggle with this next step. As with any cohort there are a range of abilities and work ethics on display and those who have not done enough initial research on their role will find it difficult to put aside their preconceptions. It is not unusual to have students playing an insurgent group feeling deeply frustrated by the half-way point of the MEPS because they have no idea what else to do besides setting off bombs. Similarly some state-based teams will be clueless as to what else they can do to combat terror apart from *drop* bombs. An associated irritation will arise from the belief that organisations such as the CIA or Israeli military intelligence are omnipotent and it is *just not fair* that the referees are refusing to let them find the location of the hostages or where an attack is being planned.

This is where the simulation’s long duration and asynchronous nature offer the chance for further reflection, though some further guidance from the teachers can be offered. This might be posed as a set of questions: Have you read your group’s manifesto or mission statement? Based on this, what do you want to achieve? What are your major grievances and with whom? Who funds you? Who else could you approach for support? What geographies are you strong in? What type of actions has this group undertaken before and what were the results? Since the objective of the MEPS is to communicate in character and deepen one’s understanding of the region, having a terrorist team write an updated manifesto or pen a reasoned plea to a sympathetic government for more political support is demonstratively more important for student learning than fixating on a tactical outcome such as suicide bombing. Likewise, for the Jordanian team to participate in a virtual summit on regional terror with their Arab neighbours is more valuable for all concerned than just asking “Can we send more planes to bomb ISIS?” This sort of experiential learning is also of greater worth than writing a standard academic essay on such topics.⁸

As the exercise progresses and the learning circle turns again and again, the teams inevitably advance their understanding of terrorism and the way that it operates in the Middle East and North African region. Plans become more considered and for the

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terrorist groups, questions of ideological, political and financial support come to the fore. Students begin to appreciate that killing a handful of people with a car bomb is limited as to its long-term impact. A sense of why some groups resort to the use of terror also emerges, expressed as an identification rather than an endorsement.⁹ This is an important outcome since for students who aspire to working in fields where they may have to deal with the security and political consequences of terrorism, an awareness of the ‘why’ is more important than the ‘how’. Examples of this deepening understanding are provided by comments taken from the student feedback that is gathered after each MEPS:¹⁰

- *Whilst I don't condone terrorism you can see why some people resort to extremism. You see people's lack of opportunity, disenfranchisement, the human rights abuses they face (often at the hands of their own government) and you can understand on a personal level how this would change someone.*
- *I do not think that terrorism is a valid form of resistance at all. I think that its use only gives your enemies a moral standpoint from which to attack you and your organisation's beliefs further. Each time a terrorist group attacks, the rest of the world unites around the victims of that cause (although observably less so if you're Iraqi and not French). I understand the effectiveness of terrorism as a tactic, however I believe it to be short term and is not suitable as a catalyst for any real political change.*
- *I think terrorism is a lot more complicated than I anticipated; it's a lot more than blowing up something. For some groups it is their only valid method of standing up to an oppressor or making a point about something. I think its deeply entrenched in the region's political history and that makes it almost inescapable, as so many people turn to it because it is the political norm. (By participating in the MEPS) I never expected to understand terrorism the way I did.*
- *I think the (MEPS) changed my views on terrorism in that I understand why certain groups may be inclined to use terrorism as a tactic. I definitely saw the strengths and weaknesses in terrorism - it definitely helps achieve certain goals but it comes at a cost, usually through the response of the international community. I feel that I view terrorism as more complex now. Terrorists are not necessarily out to shed blood for the sake of it but have 'legitimate' reasons for feeling the way they do and are often pushed into seeking alternative ways to achieve their goals and terrorism happens to be a semi effective way of doing so.*

A more measured contemplation of the way that governments can use the threat of terrorism as a rallying point or excuse for further repression is another conclusion for some students. This includes addressing the reality of whether terrorism really is as potent a force as they previously believed:

- *Terrorism didn't seem like a hugely successful tactic and only seemed to draw countries closer in the Middle East and the West.*
- *You can move an agenda when acts of terrorism occur. Enacting a closed border policy is simple when you cause terrorism to justify your response.*
- *What I get from it is that a terrorist organization can become a common enemy for feuding countries to fight together against.*
- *What we did find was that people have many different ideas when it comes to tackling it. Terrorism seemed to be more of a shadow, and not anything physical yet it was all anyone talked about.*
- *The sim shows how much impact a terrorist organisation can have. The unpredictability of attacks exacerbates people's fear.*
- *It's amazing how such an isolated event can cause such wide spread ramifications. A murder is a murder and is worth maybe a two second mention. But call it a terrorist attack and everyone thinks they are going to die for no apparent reason.*

Understanding of specific debates or examples of terrorism can also arise. Among those teams playing Palestinian actors a vigorous debate inevitably ensues over the use of terrorism, with some wanting to take a peaceful stance of negotiation while others want to lash out in any way possible. In the pro-peace camp, a fear of how acts of terror can affect the image of the Palestinian cause is paramount, yet this is tempered with some acceptance that other options are disappearing. Even the violent factions will understand that their acts are ultimately self-defeating, but they will also become conscious that acts of militancy are important in building prestige both with domestic audiences and those in non-Western states.

- *Trying to work alongside Hamas who continuously resorted to violence instead of negotiating with Israel identified how short term terrorism is. They were fighting a losing battle by resorting to violence and it was extremely difficult to negotiate with that thorn in our side.*
- *As Hamas, I learned that when the media ignore or misconstrue your perspective, when everyone refuses to acknowledge your diplomatic efforts and when it really feels like you're caught between a rock and a hard place,*

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sometimes acts of resistance seem like the only way to not get trampled on, even if it means being branded a terror organization. However, we always gained more sympathy and support when we tried to buck that trend and make our enemies look worse than we did. I think violent resistance is always going to make a message heard more effectively, but probably not in the way that's going to provide the best outcome. It is a valid form of resistance but one that is going to have significant draw backs.

To facilitate even wider reflection, the MEPS convenors encourage (but never force) students to play a role that has a diametrically opposing viewpoint to their own, real-world sympathies. For example, asking students with strong Zionist views to play Palestinian roles, or those with strident anti-American sentiments to play US government roles. The aim here is not to 'convert' people, but merely temper them through a deeper understanding of the other perspective. In the context of researching this role, this can also push them towards sources and scholarship that they would not have ordinarily been exposed to. For those students who will play the MEPS three times during the course of their studies, the convenors will guide them to play quite different roles each time in order to ensure a broad spread of learning.

Cutting Through the Volume of Scholarship

Having learning outcomes driven by the students themselves provides a solution to another of the challenges noted at the start of this chapter: dealing with the vast volume of scholarship on terrorism. The MEPS helps to reduce this because the required reading and scholarship for any one student becomes more focussed around their particular role. This makes the mountain of literature less daunting and gives a natural entry to the topic as a whole. The typical reported journey shows a progression through levels of reference material. As with any student these days, the MEPS participant will most likely start with a *Wikipedia* article on their assigned group or leader. From there they will progress to relevant books, news articles and primary sources. The simulation therefore flips most Political Science teaching: the students start with a case study and this then acts as the key for unlocking reflection on wider issues. For example, rather than the typical approach of students wading through literature and debate on the definition of terrorism, the MEPS team members will begin with a belief system on terrorism dictated by the role they are playing. They then have to test this against the values of the other parties in the simulation. By the end of the MEPS they will have experienced all sorts of definitions of what is and is not terrorism and responses to it. This equips them to engage in sustained discussion on the 'bigger picture' of the topic outside of the simulation without that initial inundation of reading.

A Dangerous Topic

The student-driven approach also goes some way to alleviating another of the tensions described earlier: the implied pressures felt by teachers regarding what they present on terrorism and how this might be construed as supportive of radical causes. The students in a role play will need to research their own roles, removing the need for the teacher to ‘lecture’ about the topic and have this material ascribed to them. The experiential learning cycle also offers a deeper level of insight than a standard lecture approach can and allows students to form their own opinions.

With regard to awakening ‘terrorist sympathies’ in students, the likelihood of someone becoming radicalised *solely* due to participating in a simulation seems remote. As with any approach to the topic, there may be a tiny chance of someone *already* on the brink of radical activity having their beliefs further substantiated by a simulation.¹¹ There is no antidote for this besides not teaching anything at all about terrorism and discouraging any exploration of the phenomenon. Of course, this could have the exact opposite outcome, with the resulting ignorance leading to a more romanticised vision of radical groups.

Caution is still required when running simulations dealing with terrorism, particularly in the way the content or intention may be misconstrued by security agencies and the public accidentally encountering this activity. This is the reasoning behind making the MEPS a fully closed system where emails cannot leave the interface. To avoid misunderstandings, students are also forbidden from contacting each other on simulation business outside of the system (e.g. via Facebook or messaging apps) and warned about discussing things in public places where they may be overheard and, understandably, cause alarm. The convenors of the MEPS also counsel students about accessing, downloading and distributing what might be considered illegal content in Australia; such as the magazines and manuals produced by groups such as al-Qaeda or Islamic State. Finally, the Australian intelligence authorities are notified prior to each running of the MEPS to avoid any confusion. Being conscious of this intersection between state security sensitivities and education will always be something that needs to be considered in any planning of such a simulation and firm learning objectives should always be kept in mind.

CONCLUSION

The challenges posed by teaching about terrorism are a consequence of its centrality to world political discourse since 2001. This has created a great market demand for academic analysis but also formed sensitivities on the topic and an overwhelming

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volume of scholarly material and popular culture treatment. All of these can combine to hinder effective learning outcomes for students seeking to understand terrorism. However, online role plays such as the MEPS can address these difficulties.

Based on decades of experience with the MEPS, a common realisation regarding terrorism is a greater understanding of the underlying causes of radicalisation and what drives individuals and groups to adopt terror as a tactic. However, an awareness of the ultimate futility of this approach is also gained, along with the limitations of the military solutions often used to counter terrorism. Students emerge with thoughts along the lines of ‘I can see *why* they do it, *but* I don’t agree that it is the right path. More needs to be done to address the roots of these grievances.’ This sort of sophisticated learning outcome is a direct result of that chance afforded by simulations to play the role rather than read the book or write the essay.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Experiential Learning: Learning through experience and reflection upon those experiences. The process involves the student progressing through their own learning journey and can incorporate experience gained in non-classroom settings too.

Middle East: A geographical and political term used to define an area of the world incorporating parts of West Asia and North Africa. This is approximate to the Arab-speaking states, plus Israel, Turkey and Iran.

Political Science: A discipline within the Social Sciences that analyses political behavior, governance, and philosophies of leadership and communal activity. Comprised of numerous sub-fields.

Reflective Learning: Taking learned experiences and transforming those into new knowledge or perspectives which can then be re-applied or adapted to inform future experience. Part of the Experiential Learning cycle.

Role Play: Acting the part of another person or entity or a framework for doing so. In an educational context this includes adopting the behaviors and priorities of a real-world person or group and interacting with other players who will have their own competing agendas.

Simulation: A role-playing framework that seeks to imitate genuine scenarios or parameters in order for participants to undertake an experiential learning process through their interactions.

Terrorism: A form of politically or ideologically motivated violence intended to invoke fear and change among a wider population via indiscriminate attacks or threats against civilians.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a list of archived handbooks at this university, see www.monash.edu.au/pubs/handbooks/archive.html.
- ² For example, see Baylouny, Anne Marie. 2009. "Seeing Other Sides: Nongame Simulations and Alternative Perspectives of Middle East Conflict." *Journal of Political Science Education* 5 (3):214-232; Stover, William James. 2005. "Teaching and Learning Empathy: An Interactive, Online Diplomatic Simulation of Middle East Conflict." *Journal of Political Science Education* 1 (2):207-219; Hardy, Mat, and Sally Totman. 2012. "From Dictatorship to Democracy: Simulating the Politics of the Middle East." In *Simulations, Games and Role Play in University Education*, edited by Claus Nygaard, Nigel Courtney and Elyssebeth Leigh, 189-206. Faringdon, UK: Libri Publishing.
- ³ The term 'role play' does not in itself equate to simulation and nor does every simulation involve role play. However, role play may be an element of a game or simulation, particularly those focussed on 'social processes'. For example, simulating the diplomacy prior to a UN Security Council meeting may involve students playing the roles of delegates. For purposes of this chapter, though, the terms 'simulation' and 'role play' will be used interchangeably.
- ⁴ For a broad range of coverage on this topic, see Asal, V. (2005); Boyer, M.A., E. Trumbore, and D.E. Frick. (2006) 2006; Chasek, P.S. (2005); Hintjens, H.M. (2008); Simpson, A.W., and B. Kaussler (2009); Dougherty, B. K. (2003); McCarthy, J. P., and L. Anderson (2000); Sasley, B.E. (2010).
- ⁵ For a fuller description of the task and its assessment practices, see Hardy & Totman (2012, 2013, 2017a). For a discussion of how the game has evolved technologically over time, including student feedback to changes in the interface, see Hardy and Totman, 2017b.
- ⁶ The University of Maryland's ICONS Project has a similar timeline as an online political simulation tool. However, it is not one single simulation but rather a platform for facilitating multiple examples, both off-the-shelf and tailor-made.
- ⁷ For data presented after the five-year mark on how students have evaluated their learning experience of the MEPS see (Hardy & Totman, 2017a).
- ⁸ In the five-year study (Hardy & Totman, 2017a), an average of 94% of respondents (n=609) rated the MEPS exercise as 'better' or 'much better' than a traditional written assignment, despite the fact that it is much more work for them.
- ⁹ See also Ben-Yehuda and Zohar (2018) for a good exploration of identification versus empathy in simulations of fanaticism.

- ¹⁰ All the student responses utilised in this chapter are from a cohort that undertook the MEPS and completed the feedback survey on September 2016.
- ¹¹ For example, unknown supporters of Islamic State released a video game in 2014 called “Salil al-Sawareem” (*The Clanging of the Swords*) in an attempt to glamorize the group’s battlefield actions and draw attention from a demographic *already sympathetic* to the IS ideology (Al-Rawi, 2018).