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Model United Nations and the perception of global citizenship, for Greek senior high school students

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Abstract

A Model United Nations School Conference is a brief simulation, during which senior high school students take on the roles of official delegates in various UN Committees. This paper describes the early findings from a longitudinal case study which followed a small team of 15 MUN senior high school delegates, in Athens, Greece, during their preparation and actual participation in three consecutive conferences, from March 2012 to March 2013. The research aims to explore the impact of MUN Conferences on the participants' perception of global citizenship, which may emerge during their engagement with this simulation, for a limited period of 12 months. Different data collection techniques have been used, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with photo-elicitation, focus groups, and a journal log. During the first wave of data collection in October 2012, adolescent participants reported that their MUN involvement gave them a more holistic perspective of the issues that plague humanity, and helped them hone their social skills. What the participants emphasised was that their participation in the MUN process led them to a state of heightened global awareness and empathy in times of trouble.

Keywords: *Model United Nations, global citizenship education, simulations, active learning*

Introduction

Current migration patterns around the globe lead to the emergence of a new social reality, where people of multiple identities, affiliations and backgrounds share a common fate (Appadurai, 1996; Appiah, 1996; Banks, 2004, Kymlicka, 2011). Slowly but surely, globally minded citizens (Parekh, 2003) need to re-conceptualise and redefine the basics of co-existence, namely civic bonding, citizenship practice, multicultural literacy and competency (Delanty, 2009), in a fair and sustainable world where political, religious, ethnic, and cultural orientations are respected.

Model United Nations (MUN) is a role playing simulation conducted at senior high school and higher education level around the world, and participants take on the roles of UN delegates in various committees. This case study focuses on a group of Greek senior high school MUN delegates who participate in 3 conferences, and aims at examining the

way involvement in the conferences impacts on the students' perception of global citizenship. In this study, I hold a dual role, both as a researcher and the MUN team advisor. In the course of this paper, I am planning to mention the basic information concerning the MUN Conference structure and organisation in Greece, the theoretical background of the study, my personal involvement in MUN and the research, the methodological options selected, before I briefly refer to the preliminary findings and insights.

Model United Nations basics

During the MUN simulation, student delegates represent a country, an international or a non-governmental organisation and engage in lobbying and negotiating, resolution drafting and debating, while adhering to the official UN rules and regulations and using the current UN agenda. Each MUN committee is chaired by experienced student officers who facilitate and organise the procedure, while teachers/advisors are refrained from intervening; actually, their contribution ends the moment the conference starts. The students usually prepare themselves for three or four months by researching information concerning the country they represent, its allies and adversaries, and its presence in the world, the agenda topics, the rules and regulations that apply at the conference, and also produce policy statements and resolutions or rehearse their roles in mock MUN preparatory meetings.

MUN School conferences in Greece

The MUN School Conferences in Greece are mainly organised by private schools or groups of university students, and usually host 300 to 400 participants. Each school is allocated one or more delegations of students, who are escorted by a MUN advisor/teacher to the conference venue; prior to this, though, each school is granted official participation approval by the Ministry of Education (CGS, 2013; DSAMUN, 2013; HMUNO, 2013).

Theoretical Background

Learning by doing

Learning is accomplished when new ideas and concepts become internalised, either replacing older pre-established ones or introducing new ones, in a creative interaction among the learner, the material and the environmental context leading to change (Dewey, 1938). 'Learning by doing', as an alternative pedagogical approach, promotes personal active involvement in the learning process, where 'an experiential continuum' (Dewey, 1938, p.36) replaces rote learning and allows individuals to 'create knowledge' following observation, reflection and reconceptualisation of the established concepts (Lewin and Cartwright, 1951). Experiential learning encourages the students to adopt a proactive, participatory role in the learning procedure where both the content and the context of learning are of prime importance (Hawrtey, 2007).

Role playing simulations in education

Simulations of international organizations such UNESCO, the European Parliament, or the UN, have been used as effective teaching instruments for decades (Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Prince, 2004; Shellman and Turan, 2006). Simulations of the UN in specific, or its predecessor the League of Nations, date back to 1927 in Harvard University, whereas today more than 400,000 delegates in 35 countries participate in as many as 400 MUN conferences per year (UN, 2013).

Role playing simulations are believed to encourage critical thinking and understanding of complex concepts (Bender, 2005; Lightcap, 2009), and help participants gain a deeper insight of the current issues and promote empathy (Krain and Lantis, 2006; Wheeler, 2006). What is often emphasised is that they offer participants the opportunity to internalise the course material by playing a role (Wedig, 2010), refresh their interest in the lesson by becoming responsible for their knowledge in a hands-on experience, in a realistic environment (De Jong et al., 1998), improve public speaking and writing skills, promote teamwork and cooperation (Taylor, 2012) and also generate self-efficacy in an active learning context (Strachan, 2006).

Global citizenship education

For Marshall (1950) and Osler and Starkey (2005), citizens are bound to share a common identity and enjoy civil, political and social rights within the confines of a specific territory. Citizenship education could transform the ‘citizens in the making’ (Marshall, 1950, p.25) or ‘citizens in waiting’ (Osler & Starkey, 2003, p.245), as young people are often called, to an informed and actively participatory citizenry of a democratic community (Davies et al., 1999). However, a narrowly focused allegiance to a limited and sovereign nation-state seems too hard to realise today, when globalisation inevitably impacts on the global political and economic infrastructure (Beck and Cronin, 2006; Benhabib et al., 2006; Benhabib, 2007; Delanty, 2009; Pichler, 2012).

This pluralism and social heterogeneity that modern societies are involved in invokes Benedict Anderson’s (2006, p.6) ‘imagined community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’. It seems, then, that imagination plays a crucial role in the process of global citizenship conceptualisation, as ‘connective ties, actual or potential, between all individuals in a global human community’ (Cabrera, 2010, p.13) could help shape the future global citizen, whom Rhys Griffith successfully defines in *Educational citizenship and independent learning* (1998):

A picture, then, of the global citizen: not merely aware of her rights but able and desirous *to act* upon them; of an *autonomous and inquiring* critical disposition; but her decisions and actions tempered by an *ethical* concern for social justice and the *dignity* of humankind...(p.8, my emphasis)

Osler and Starkey (2005) suggest that this kind of imaginary conceptualisation of the nation should, eventually, apply to humanity as the boundaries are not finite or static anymore. Martha Nussbaum, reminiscent of the ancient Stoic ideal of the ‘citizen of the world’, the *kosmopolitis*, or ‘the person whose allegiance is to the worldwide community

of human beings' (Nussbaum and Cohen, 1996, p.4), claims that we should imagine ourselves 'not as devoid of local affiliations, but as surrounded by a series of concentric circles' (ibid, p.9) which encompass our family, friends, neighbours and local groups, fellow citizens, other particular identities and the wider world as the outer circle of our social reality. Since such a perspective entails difficulties, Nussbaum admits that 'the task of world citizenship requires the would-be world citizen to become a sensitive and empathic interpreter' (1997, p.63) whose identity would transcend local constraints. In the same vein, Cabrera (2010) and Pogge (1988) agree with Richard Falk's picture of the 'citizen pilgrim' (1995) when they envision an imaginary, humanely governed community where patterns of ethos, solidarity towards others, participation, collective responsibility and compassion would prevail. In this context, education for global citizenship entails addressing various issues, from different perspectives with the ultimate goal of preparing the student for a viable, multivocal future (Davies, 2006; Oxfam, 2008; Unesco, 2004), where informed citizens will analyse and reflect, acquire skills and act as well as convert apathy to agency (Davies, 2006).

Background

The MUN agenda (DSAMUN, 2013) serves as a call for reflection on the current issues that plague the country and humanity at large. In a country that is currently reeling from the blow of an expansive financial crisis and an insurmountable debt, skyrocketing unemployment and widespread citizen depression, an unprecedented influx of refugees, immigrants and guest workers and pervasive xenophobia (BBC, 2013), the mere reference of global citizenship and commitment to the protection of a global humanity often triggers heated debates. As an English teacher and MUN advisor for years at a senior high school in Athens, my engagement with these MUN topical issues in class and the MUN conference was the first stepping stone on my research path.

Methodology

This longitudinal case study follows a team of 15 senior high school MUN delegates during their involvement in MUN conferences for 12 months, in three phases and in various settings. My intention is to explore and expose the delegates' understandings and perceptions of global citizenship in terms of skills, attitudes, knowledge and behaviour, as well as trace the effect ongoing participation in this simulation has on their personal growth and development, if any, as well as examine what other factors might facilitate or hinder this change.

Purposive sampling (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) was used and all participants were recruited because of their status in the MUN conference and the knowledge they possess. The main participants are the 16-17 year-old students who belong to the school MUN team and have volunteered to take part in the study. To gain a deeper insight, additional feedback from the secondary participants, namely the MUN organizing committee members and teachers/MUN advisors, has been examined.

Different data *collection methods* were used, including semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation, focus group interviews, participant observation, both during the

preparation sessions and the actual simulations, MUN committee documents and a research journal. The interviews were based on different, loosely-structured lists of topical issues to be discussed every time (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), actually moving from general ones after the pilot study, to more detailed and focused ones after the third MUN conference; issues that were raised involved self-confidence, English language proficiency, teamwork and teambuilding, negotiation skills and public speaking, rote learning and active learning, cosmopolitanism and patriotism, civic duties, maturity in adolescence and elitism in education.

Photo-elicitation constitutes my main visual research tool, as well as the central point of reference employed during the interviews, with a view to stimulating participants to reflect on the reality of the MUN conference experience as vividly portrayed in the photographs taken by me, during the preparation and actual simulation phases. The collaborative exploration and interpretation of the photographs may build rapport, and help both the participant and the researcher construct multiple readings of the shared experience, through reflection and introspection (Harper, 2002; Pink, 2006; Rose, 2001).

An inductive reasoning approach was used to synthesize the various data into a manageable whole (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were fed into the NVivo software program, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) tool, which eventually offers a more comprehensive view of the raw data and facilitates a rigorous analysis, without aiming to replace or supersede human intuition and analytic thought (Bazeley, 2008; Kubanyiova, 2012; Richards, 2009).

After gaining full ethical approval from the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee, a *pilot study* was conducted within the context of the MUN conference, in March 2012, and seventeen adolescent participants (two male and fifteen female) were interviewed. During the first data collection phase at the MUN conference in October 2012, eleven adolescent delegates (four male and seven female) participated, along with three adult MUN organizing committee members. The second data collection phase was conducted during the MUN 2013 Conference, in March 2013, when fifteen adolescent delegates (five male and ten female) as well as eleven MUN organisers/advisors (two male and nine female) took part in the study. All interviews were conducted in Greek (if the interviewee's native language was Greek, otherwise English was used), digitally recorded, transcribed and fed into NVivo, along with the observational field notes, MUN official documents and the researcher's journal entries for further analysis.

It is this specific journal log that facilitated the attempt to achieve *reflexivity* and self-scrutiny in the research process. My dual role, both a researcher and the MUN team advisor, entailed intimacy with the research group; therefore, I needed to be vigilant about my subjectivities and the professional experience, prior knowledge, power relations as well as beliefs and perspectives that I carried onto the field and the subsequent interpretative analysis. Being an 'insider-outsider' (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) in the research process, I often switched from the role of the 'peripheral member' researcher (Adler and Adler, 1994) to the 'active member' MUN team advisor according to the circumstances and the needs. By recording and questioning all my understandings, interpretations and choices made during the study in my journal log, I

have come to realise that reflexivity is an indispensable ongoing practice that may lead to transparency and less biased exploration and exposure of the participants' perspectives.

Preliminary insights and discussion

The preliminary analysis of the pilot study and the first data collection phase data revealed certain themes that both adolescent and adult participants considered of major importance. Although seen from different perspectives, the idea of global interconnectedness and shared fate and responsibility emerged as principles human beings need to embrace.

Feedback from the adult MUN advisors/Organisers

The MUN advisors/Members of the Organising Committee considered the simulation a valuable educational tool that could combine knowledge and fun in an innovative and intriguing fashion for the students. Despite being overburdened with the onerous task of orchestrating a 400-people conference while teaching regular classes at school, MUN advisors were contented to trace most of their MUN students' personal growth and development within the context of the simulation. In specific, they stressed how the MUN delegates learned how to collaborate in a team where diversity should be respected, and how to abide by strict MUN rules and regulations for the common good. They also claimed that the delegates developed critical inquiry and research skills and familiarised themselves with global issues by attempting to provide viable solutions to problems, often alien to their social reality .

Due to their dual role as both MUN advisors and Conference organisers, they discerned various cases of MUN delegates who simply joined the simulation to break away from the school routine, perfunctorily tending to their tasks and just brushing upon the issues superficially. Painfully retaining a realistic gaze, they stressed that the MUN simulation could not do wonders and magically transform indifferent students to active, participatory delegates that all teachers would aspire to having. At the end of the day, though, they kept a positive outlook and were not distracted by pitfalls.

Yes, I think they get an idea what it means to be a global citizen, and understand what is going on in the world they realise that there is a global picture... (Adult participant, male)

The adolescents' point of view

Adolescent participants readily demonstrated their enthusiasm for the MUN simulation at all stages, during voluntary recruitment, preparation and actual participation in the conference.

Participating in the MUN does not necessarily imply that you agree or disagree with all of the UN's actions, ... it is about opening up to a new educational

experience, you widen your horizons because you explore issues that are related to the whole world, and you stop being just 'my friends', 'my family', 'my city', 'my country', (adolescent participant, female)

The students explained how learning for the MUN conference was different, as they were not expected to learn material by heart and perform their best at a common test in class. Inevitably, they mentioned how they learned through practice and example and compared active learning to rote learning techniques they are regularly subjected to in the Greek educational system.

I think it was so nice there, because they are experiences, not just dry knowledge, these are things that stay with you inside you, ...because the memory deletes what does not attract its attention... (adolescent participant, female)

The students mentioned they were glad to acquire knowledge concerning current world issues which, in most cases, they were unaware of or simply did not seem to belong to the modern youth's group of interests.

I had a good time, but beyond enjoying yourself, this experience is necessary for my life, because it helps me to keep in contact with the outer world and not to be confined in my own personal bubble, I mean, my life shouldn't be just me, my friends, my school ... (adolescent participant, female)

Adolescent participants confessed that discussing complex issues in the safe MUN environment or at school is one thing and actually experiencing the situation is another. However, the MUN conference exposed the issues and offered the delegates the possibility to explore, try to understand and gain a deeper insight into the troubled lives of the 'other' around the globe.

Yes, I guess MUN has helped me prioritise things in my life, ...because as you deal with such issues and learn how much people suffer and that there are so many dilemmas that look for answers, then you ask yourself: is this important? ...and you feel like a small piece of a huge picture, and so unimportant things become even smaller... (Adolescent participant, female)

A female delegate who participated in the Social and Humanitarian Committee was shocked when she examined reports concerning LGBTs' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual) treatment in various parts of the world. Growing up in a safe and protected environment of a middle class urban family, she found inconceivable the cruel way human beings often dealt with diversity.

The students also reported that being active in the conference was no easy task, as it entailed wide knowledge, thorough preparation, language proficiency, good public speaking skills, critical thinking, and self-confidence; actually they focused on how their performance and self-concept gradually improved in the process. Older MUN delegates bragged about their numerous entries in conferences and how ongoing participation and experience helped create the image of a dynamic and accomplished adolescent diplomat.

Effective research skills, critical thinking, and teambuilding could be improved, according to the MUN participants, as long as the delegates took their engagement seriously, got sufficient support from the MUN organisers, their advisor and the school environment; actually, patience, perseverance and practice could make up for all the perceived weaknesses. As for the level of language proficiency, the non-native English speakers admitted their inability to express themselves as confidently as their English native speakers counterparts in the MUN conference, but they added that, in the long run, 'what matters is what you say, not how you say it' (adolescent participant, male).

Conclusion

The preliminary findings of this research study suggest that MUN could be a useful tool for educators who would like their students to acquire a global mindset and gain deeper understanding of the world issues they are exposed to (Marshall, 2005; Noddings, 2005). Within the context of this simulation, students may have the opportunity to practice skills, behaviour and attitudes they will be expected to entertain as adult, mature members of a community, be it their neighbourhood, their country or the wider global humanity (Osler and Starkey, 2003). Global citizenship is not a status that an individual can casually don, but it is a lengthy process of self awareness which could critically shape the citizen and their social reality. The research study has not come to an end yet and it is premature to predict the final outcome; however, evidence so far leads to the understanding that MUN involvement may help students realize how knowledge, teamwork and action may reshape the future world, and redefine the global so that it looks as approachable and familiar as the local. The challenges MUN delegates face could only prove small stepping stones, rather than hurdles, which could be overcome once initiative and free will are exercised.

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