A “Model” for Active Learning and Leadership Development:

International Model NATO

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As the Farmer’s Insurance television commercial proclaims: “We know a thing or two because we have seen a thing or two.” In 48 years as a college professor, I have seen a thing or two, and I believe that I may know a thing or two about teaching. A wall full of teaching awards and citations, including one of the highest national teaching awards in the country, might attest to the proposition, but what I know for certain is that the best learning experiences have been “active learning” simulations beyond the regular classroom. The “thing or two” that I will highlight here are simulated Model activities.

Most people know Model United Nations (see Hazen 2018), but fewer have experienced the other “models.” Howard University’s Dr. Michael Nwanze created several international model simulations that include Arab League, NATO, African Union, and Organization of American States. Some operate today under different sponsors, but he continues to administer Model NATO and Model African Union. These programs are his life’s passion, a labor of love. I have done Model UN and can attest to its value, but my 31 years in Model Arab League (MAL) and 15 years in International Model NATO provide, in my opinion, far superior student learning experiences. I have written about MAL in the past (Dunn 1990; 1994; 2002); here I address International Model NATO.

In the large Model UNs, it is possible for a student to be passive or minimally engaged. That is not an option in the constant debate and negotiating in International Model NATO. The delegate is that country’s sole voice in a particular committee and all decisions demand unanimity. One must perform one’s duty every minute. Silence screams loudly. Also, the more focused agenda topics allow for and demand greater expertise by each delegate.

Model NATO imitates the 29-nation collective security alliance, headquartered in Brussels. The Model convenes for four days annually in February at a downtown Washington, DC hotel. Participating universities come from across the United States, Canada, and Europe (in recent years from Britain, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, and Sweden). Each institution represents a member country in the several committees that the Model simulates.

The directors’ strive to maintain a proper balance between reflecting the actual functioning of the NATO alliance and the adjustments necessary to maximize the participatory learning experience for all students. The North Atlantic Council (NAC), the policy center of NATO, is the heart of International Model NATO, and the conference replicates five other committees. Despite an organized agenda for debate prepared months in advance, world crises erupt in the real world and also at the Model. Intensity peaks when the directors at various points interject a crisis or multiple ones which require the delegates to respond. Often these incidents come out of the daily newspaper.

A skilled Secretariat, which includes the Security-General and the committee chairs, conduct the student-led activity. Preparation to fulfill these leadership roles begins a year in advance. The simulation operates formally within the committees during the designated hours and informally after the days’ sessions end. Committees often go to lunch and dinner together. After the conclusion of the formal committee sessions on Saturday afternoon, the Secretariat spends hours compiling from the several committee resolutions the final communique, which must be adopted unanimously at the NAC Summit on Sunday morning.

Students on the North Atlantic Council meet informally Saturday evening, often well into the morning hours, to negotiate consensus on issues still in dispute. This practice started years ago when some of the most committed students at the Model picked up the draft copy of the communique as soon as it was released and met for dinner to discuss it. Over time, more and more individuals joined the group. What began casually is now routine practice. Today most NAC members voluntarily assemble in a large hallway, sitting on the floor dressed in jeans and sweats. The activity occurs outside the structures and committee rooms without members of the Secretariat in attendance. A different kind of grassroots leadership emerges in this casual setting without formal procedures and posturing for recognition in the committee rooms. Consensus must be achieved. In many ways this simulates the real NATO more than the formal debate because concessions, compromises, and bargains are done in Brussels and other locations of Summit conferences outside the formal meetings.

This level of student engagement, which developed spontaneously, represents one of the most impressive expansions of the Model. The voting for awards by judges and peers is over at this point. Most faculty members are out to dinner and off to bed while these sessions continue well into the night. While their friends and peers may be socializing or sleeping, the NAC members, who tend to be among the most dedicated and talented individuals on each school’s delegation, are hard at work. Students participate because they care. Several confess that this is their favorite activity of the entire Model. The level of talent, commitment, leadership that I have witnessed in these sessions encourages me about future national and world leaders, and indeed many past participants are well on their way to significant careers.

The NAC Summit is the culminating event with the delegates enthusiastically representing their adopted country’s interests while engaging in compromise and seeking consensus. The Secretary General who oversees this hard-fought process must be a leader of considerable talent. I am impressed by how a young student can conduct three or four hours of fast-paced activity that includes managing hundreds of amendments, negotiating last minute compromise, and maintaining proper protocol at every point. Every year I witness leaders who make constant split-second organizational decisions and adroitly manage a room of Type A and challenging personalities.

Model NATO fosters learning about the culture, policies, security interests, and the diplomacy of nations that many students know little about. Embassy visits and briefings by top diplomats are popular opportunities. The last two years, my students represented Slovenia and Lithuania, and in 2019 represented Montenegro. I doubt that many of them knew much about these countries prior to the assignment. But intense research, meeting the ambassadors themselves at the respective embassies, and a serious effort to act as the country’s voice is the objective. Delegates must represent the country’s view, not an American interpretation of what the nation’s policy should be.

Learning the ways and means of diplomacy and practicing the arts of negotiation and persuasion are valuable skills. Meeting individuals from across the country and globe, several of whom will be world movers in future years, cannot help but enhance a student’s development. Our two Model involvements have been the beginning of careers in diplomacy and international security for a number of my students, including several foreign service officers, and some have already risen to important ranks. I will cite only three examples whose careers were directly grounded in their Model experiences. One came to college to be a high school music teacher but instead became a U.S. Air Force officer who served three tours in Iraq, including working with the development of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Another intended to be a junior high school band director, but through Model involvement came to teach in Morocco and then joined the Air Force to become an intelligence officer. Another is a State Department officer who was in Libya at the time of the Benghazi crisis and presently serves in a national security role in Turkey. All three were from tiny South Carolina towns and had virtually no experience with the larger world until they joined the Model Programs delegations in their respective freshmen years. I could cite dozens more as well, and each school has its anecdotal stories. College should be transformative. For these young women, clearly it was.

Delegations arrive at Model NATO with various levels of expertise, but most are well prepared. Within my delegation, senior peer leaders develop less experienced students for participation. Our delegation leaders train the neophytes in research skills, policy papers, parliamentary procedure, debate and diplomatic techniques, and proper protocol. Considerable thought goes into the matchups of peer mentors for each individual first-year delegate. The single most rewarding experience for me is watching the growth of mentors who take very seriously their responsibility for the care of younger members in their charge. Our delegation practices diligently for the event. The team is extracurricular and entirely student-led by aspirant leaders who exercise a level of commitment that one can see why they will be successful in life. To employ a sports metaphor, our goal is not to have a good team in a given year because we have particularly able talent that year but to ensure that with protocols of expectations, practices, and infrastructure, we will perform at the highest level every year. We enjoy the luxury that our delegates participate for multiple years so we can witness a continuing process of growth. Maximizing student development makes this, as I have said, the best learning laboratory that I am able to provide my students.

Assessment is integral to all activities today. We have several practices to enhance the experience for future years. The Office of Public Diplomacy, at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, which provides some financial support for the Model, has required procedures, including a survey monkey for all participants. The Model directors also convene student focus groups at the close of proceedings to provide feedback and to compile suggestions. The directors discuss the findings at a later date through emails and meetings. The Secretariat conducts its own internal assessment about the management of the event. These assessment activities resulted in some substantiate changes in the 2019 Model. [Because this article was written prior to the 2019 Model and was accepted for publication and in print at this time, I will not develop here the changes or the ones that likely will be instituted upon assessment of the 2019 Model.]

In the important realm of student learning outcomes, different participating schools have their own procedures. I can and will speak only to our school’s practices. Each student receives continuous feedback about performance, by me as the sponsor and by our delegation leadership team. First year delegates meet weekly with their peer mentor for advice and assistance. The prime learning objective is to develop confidence in speaking and negotiation. These skills are grounded in a knowledge base acquired from research. Whatever rubrics or tools one could develop pale in comparison to the simple observation of the enhancement of confidence and skills through practice and participation. To invoke another sports metaphor, “how one practices determines how one performs.” Possibly the best indication that participation makes a difference is that my faculty colleagues remark that they can recognize “Model people” instantly in their classes no matter what the discipline. The authority, leadership, and polish show. These students demonstrate a passion to present, whether a chemistry project, business proposal, or book analysis. Obviously, this is not the only way to achieve these skills, but in my experience it is a proven one.

The majority of our delegation members are not political science or history majors, although we win some “converts” through their participation. We draw from every major on campus from the sciences to business to the arts, with a large number of our delegation from the School of Music, one of our institution’s highest profile programs. I am often asked what kind of background I prefer for Model participants. I remark that I like athletes and music and theater people. They understand the need for practice, and at the proper time one must step up and perform. No excuses, just perform whatever the circumstances. At heart this activity provides domestic and global citizen training. While I am proud that we can boast music, art, biology, and accounting majors (among others) who are now foreign service officers, leaders in global NGOs, or serving roles in various areas of national security, I am equally gratified that students whose careers are far removed from the political realm are better informed citizens through their experience in our program. I will add at this late point that we are a women’s college and I have devoted forty-two years intensely to developing women leaders. The Models have done that.

A brief word about expense. This activity is not cost free. For International Model NATO, travel and hotel costs are not inexpensive. Delegation fees, however, are considerably less than Model UN delegate fees. The travel and hotel costs for most regional models are much less expensive than in Washington, DC. Each participating school has differing funding means. Bringing home awards and resultant publicity tends to appeal to deans and others who control budgets. The issue of academic credit is another matter. It varies by institution from academic courses, extracurricular credit, club activity without credit, etc.; and funding sources are often determined by the nature of where the program resides at any given institution. I will add only this personal remark, which some may consider heretical, that I closed down our Model UN to devote the money to Model Arab League and International Model NATO, because I discerned far more value for the expenditure. Finally, for those contemplating venturing into this kind of teaching exercise, it is possible to enact many of the practices of Model active learning within a classroom or on one’s home campus.

If you believe in active learning, in students asserting control of their own education, and in maximum development of skills that translate into career success, you should give serious attention to the power of Models as a learning venue. As I observe my own students in action, I often remember when the individual first joined the program, and as I reflect on what she has become and will be, I cannot help but say to myself, “This is what a teaching career is all about.”

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