***Active and Experiential Learning in European Studies:***

***The Pressures and Demands of Today’s Educational Landscape***

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European Studies educators on both sides of the Atlantic exercise the art of teaching in an era of ever increasing pressures. It is difficult enough trying to helping the European or American student—let alone the average American or European Union citizen—understand the theory and practice of European integration and the European Union. Yet today those of us in European Studies are asked to do more than simply help our students grow in their cognitive understanding of the European Union.

In the broader milieu of American and European higher education, educators have been urged to take up the cause of civic education, as part of clarion call to increase life-long civic engagement and to refocus on the very nature of one’s identity as a citizen. This challenge becomes that much more nuanced if one also considers the ever increasing demands placed on institutions of higher learning by official accrediting bodies, by governments that face pressures because of the rising cost of higher education, by governing elites, scholars, and scholarly organizations that press for more effective civic education, and especially by parents and students who today frequently view themselves as consumers in the exceedingly competitive higher education marketplace. As such pressures continue to escalate, higher education administrators and faculty in Europe and America alike have pursued new strategies and tactics to ensure a student-centered learning experience, in which varied learning styles become foundational in the development of learning goals and objectives, and, thus, positive learning outcomes for students. European Studies educators have not been immune from the pressure to move from passive to active learning, precisely because the former focused almost entirely on the efficiency of classroom instruction while the latter turns its attention to the effectiveness of methods of student learning. It is within this context that today’s European Studies educators must continue to pursue their craft.

The literature on active and experiential learning is now a couple of decades old and is rich in its depth. In turn, this paper will examine at the value of active and experiential learning within European Studies, including various pedagogical techniques such as simulations, in light of these multilevel and sometimes competing pressures in higher education circles. Multiple questions naturally emerge as one thinks broadly about this topic: How might active and experiential learning in European Studies lead to the kind of cognitive knowledge and skill development that experts say is needed to support broad student learning outcomes? Can active and experiential learning in European Studies help address the myriad challenges of meeting the demands of civic education and engagement? Further, might such education and engagement lead to a deepening of a one’s identity as a citizen, in the European sense but also in a broader sense—meaning one’s identity as a global citizen? While it is nearly impossible to provide definitive answers to each of these question, they certainly will provide a backdrop for the examination that will be presented in this paper. Further, they remain valuable areas of conversation, discussion, and exploration for those of us in higher education who remain committed to enhancing the educational experience for students engaged in European Studies. Today’s educational landscape on both sides of the Atlantic practically demands that European Studies educators come to terms with these challenging, pressing, and fundamental questions, particularly if civic education and engagement are educational goals.

*The Art of Teaching, Learning Goals and Objectives, Outcome Assessment, and Civic Education*

Teaching is an art. The professor, the artist in this case, looks out at a classroom of students and essentially sees a new “canvas” of learners. The challenge for this kind of artist becomes turning that canvas into a work of art that expresses a certain perspective (or perspectives) about the reality that is being conveyed in the practice of teaching, and also in the act of learning that is being undertaken by the individual students. The final canvas is likely to be multi-colored, with various learners representing the assortment of colors; how much depth and dimension there is in this final “painting” will necessarily depend on the how deep the learning experience is for the individual students and the class of learners as a whole. In this art form, therefore, the final canvas does not simply express the perspective of the artist (professor), but the experience of learning by the students in the class. Further, just like any artist, the skill set of the professor will greatly influence the final work; moreover, just as the model(s), visual(s), and/or artistic perspective(s) influence what the artist portrays, so do the styles of the learners that one encounters in each classroom experience affect how many present-day professors approach their craft.

The art, process, and learning goals, objectives, and outcomes of teaching in higher education have come under tremendous scrutiny in recent decades, both in the United States as well as in other democracies in the Global North, such as in Europe. In the United States, students and families traditionally have been responsible for configuring a plan for financing one’s college degree, examining private resources and applying for direct government and/or government-sponsored financial assistance that is administered by individual schools (ie., Pell Grants, government subsidized loans, etc.) if they so qualify for such programs. If a family’s government-determined contribution is too high, thus disqualifying it from government support, a family may be forced take such actions as re-mortgaging its house or securing private loans or scholarships to ensure financial feasibility for the student. American college and universities also conduct substantial fundraising to establish and sustain merit-based scholarships that help relieve some of the financial burdens faced by individual (meritorious) students.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In contrast, many European universities, as public entities, in the past were accessible to qualified students at little or no cost, because they were funded entirely by the government or heavily subsidized by government. Because of the ongoing challenges associated with the maintenance of extensive social welfare structures, including government subsidization of post-secondary education, many European countries have been forced to instituted student fee structures. Thus, in most EU countries, the individual student is required to assist with the costs of higher education, even though the today’s European Union has articulated a clear commitment to ensuring broader access higher education, as a social imperative (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency/P9 Eurydice, 2011, 3). Although student fees vary widely across EU member states, European citizens and governments seemingly are committed to higher education as a basic right in today’s European society (see Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency/P9 Eurydice 2015, National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education, 2014/15). By implementing student fees and also cutting government funding of higher education, European governing elites in particular EU countries have sought to relieve some of these governmental financial pressures, in turn precipitating some of the same financial concerns and the potential for socio-economic inequality that American students and families faced in funding a student’s post-secondary education (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency/P9 Eurydice, 2011, 15).

Official accrediting bodies as well as governments have been forced to respond to ever increasing pressure from citizens, who, not surprisingly, are demanding accountability in the face of the seemingly endless rise in the cost of higher education and who expect tangible outcomes for extraordinarily expensive post-secondary degrees. On top of those demands and as part of the expectation of tangible outcomes, governing elites, academic scholars, and scholarly organizations and think-tanks on both sides of the Atlantic have urged institutions of higher learning to take seriously the goal of civic education and engagement, to ensure life-long, active citizenship and, ultimately the long-term health of our democracies. Anyone connected to academic affairs, in both American and European higher education today—whether as an administrator or as a faculty member—knows the pressures being brought to bear by the array of outsiders looking into the traditional Academy (especially outside accreditation bodies and government officials) and their insistence that the work one does in a college classroom adheres to well defined learning objectives and assessable learning outcomes.

Such pressures in the United States date back to the 1960s and 1970s, to early questions asked by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and, later, the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, such as “What societal purposes does higher education fulfill?” and “Who benefits?” (Moriarty 2006, 409-10). Pressures persisted and deepened as the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education, in its report *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform*, offered harsh criticisms regarding the state of American education:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world….We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people….Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. This report, the result of 18 months of study, seeks to generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the Nation’s commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of our land. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, 1).

This commission’s call for reform was followed by a 1984 report, *Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*, which, among other recommendations, underlined the need for learning assessment (Moriarity 2006, 410). By the beginning of the new millennium, the six regional accreditors, responding to ever increasing demands from their own accreditor—the federal government—for “more proof of student achievement in accreditation reviews”, increased emphasis on “what students learn” and exerted “more pressure on institutions to measure what students learn” (McMrutrie 2000, A29). The ultimate goal of these changes clearly demands that institutions set forth clear learning objectives so that student learning achievement (outcomes) can be measured. Thus institutions are essentially being forced to demonstrate that they are “deliver[ing] the goods” so that the accreditors, in turn, can prove to the federal government and the public that educational institutions are “meet[ing] minimum standards of quality” (Ibid, A30).

Needless to say, university administrators and faculty across the United States cringed as a G. H. W. Bush administration commission on higher education in 1986 began “examining whether standardized testing should be expanded into universities and colleges to prove that students are learning and to allow easier comparisons on quality” (Arenson 2006, A1). Even as accrediting bodies have pushed colleges and universities to focus on students’ learning outcomes, institutions have pressed to maintain the authority “[to] define their own measures of academic success” (Basken 2008, A19). A symbol of their efforts was the success that colleges and universities had in forcing compromise language for the Higher Education Act as it was being drafted in Congress in early 2008, which would have limited the capacity of accrediting agencies to superimpose specific evaluation measures on the institutions when the institutions disagree with those measures. Interestingly, accreditation guidelines, initially established by colleges and universities “as a system of voluntary self-improvement,” were subsequently embraced by the American government as the set of standards by which students could gain access to federal financial aid (Ibid).

Regardless of faculty members’ resistance to accreditation demands, American academic administrators are infusing their campuses with the language and practices of accreditation to ensure successful reaccreditation and to hold at bay demands from some outside parties that government—federal and state—determine the terms for defining academic success (Ibid). Further, as the process for Congress’s anticipated 2014 renewal of the 2008 Higher Education Act moved forward, the examination and analysis of American higher education naturally continued and intensified in several key areas, including affordability, transparency, and accountability, with special emphasis in this last area on the accreditation bodies and processes themselves. As the cost of higher education continues to take a prominent place in the discussions and debates in the public square, as the fiscal/financial health and well-being of traditional public and private colleges and universities are scrutinized by the media and other sources, and as for-profit educational institutions and on-learning programs increasingly challenge the non-profit colleges and universities for enrollments, higher education accreditation has garnered significant attention both within the academy and in the public square (Kelderman 2011). “The public and some policy makers have a long list of expectations for accreditation these days. They want it to serve as stamp of financial stability; a fire wall against fraud and abuse; a barometer of basic academic performance; and a tool for parents and prospective students to compare the value of different colleges” (Ibid, A13). In 2013, Kelly Field pointed out that “lawmakers’ doubts about accreditation bodies have only grown, along with calls for accreditors to do more to promote innovation and ensure quality in American higher education” (A3).

Field’s assessment was underscored by the Obama administration’s own call that year—and reiterated periodically since—for a new “set of benchmarks for affordability and student outcomes as criteria for receiving federal student financial aid,” in sharp contrast to past practice in which the past regional and national accreditors had always been “the primary gatekeepers for access to those dollars” (Kelderman 2013). Not only did the Administration introduce a new ratings systems, but it continued to “[urge] colleges to experiment with approaches to reduce costs,” including “competency-based degrees, in which college credits are based not on the hours students spend in classrooms, but on how much they can show they know” (Lewin 2013). As such language continues to dominate the public’s focus on the cost, quality, and value of higher education in America, administrators will likely continue their demand that academic curriculum, programming, and innovation (all typically in the purview of faculty in systems of shared governance) be framed in the language of learning goals, objectives, and learning outcomes that necessarily are student-focused, directly tied to the educational goals and strategic plans of the institution, and, thus, assessable for accreditation purposes. Such a framework is likely to be valuable for institutional marketing as well, an added weight in a highly competitive educational marketplace.

American academics are not alone in facing demanding educational expectations from external forces, which naturally increase pressures on educational institutions and faculty who must try to address those expectations. Concurrent with actions also being taken by American educators to confront another significant concern, that being civic disengagement among younger Americans citizens and demands for higher education to take seriously the mission of civic education and engagement, Europeans educators have been forced to confront the issue of civic education and engagement on the European level. In their June 1999 launching of the Bologna Process, 29 European Education ministers established the European Higher Education Area. In so doing, the European Ministers’ joint declaration underscored the natural connection between the development of a European Identity and the role of education:

A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space (European Commission-Education and Training 2010: Bologna Declaration).

One presumes that the Education Ministers saw the real need for citizenship development among European students, not just to be citizens of Europe, but also to be European citizens in a twenty-first century global community.

In light of a subsequent March 2000 Lisbon European Council pledge to transform the EU into “the most competitive market and dynamic knowledge-economy in the world…”, the EU Commission established “learning for active citizenship” as a key pillar of the Lisbon program (de Weerd et al 2005, 1). Moreover, a 2004 EU Council decision launched a Community action program “to promote active European citizenship” and civic participation, while a 2005 EU Parliament and Council offered a “Europe for Citizens” program for 2007-2013. This latter program afforded educational institutions the opportunity for funds to support civic engagement initiatives (Kostakopoulou 2008, 293). In addition, the program desired increased citizen engagement in the European integration process, while also “empowering them to develop a sense of European identity, and enhancing mutual understanding among Europeans” (European Commission-Citizenship Overview 2010; Kostakopoulou, 286, 293).

More recently, the European Commission has in the past few years emphasized two related objectives: that higher education in today’s EU should be made accessible to more than simply the socio-economic elites of European society; and, that institutions of higher learning should redouble their commitment to high quality teaching—to ensure high quality student learning. To the Commission, both elements are essential for meeting the wide-ranging challenges first recognized in the Bologna Process and in Lisbon 15 years ago, and that will continue to confront the EU and its citizens in the years ahead (see: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency/ P9 Eurydice, Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe 2011; and, High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe’s Higher Education Institutions). Among numerous initiatives targeting higher education, one finds the Jean Monnet Actions (under the broad auspices of the Erasmus+ Programme), the aim of which is to “promot[e] excellence in teaching and research in the field of European Union studies worldwide” (European Commission-Education and Training, 2015, Overview – Jean Monnet, 2015). The Commission explains the value of Jean Monnet Actions and the importance of European Union studies in the following way:

These Actions also aim at fostering the dialogue between the academic world and policy-makers, in particular with the aim of enhancing governance of EU policies.

European Union studies comprise the study of Europe in its entirety with particular emphasis on the European integration process in both its internal and external aspects. The discipline also covers the role of the EU in a globalised world and in promoting an active European citizenship and dialogue between people and cultures (Ibid).

Among the six desired outcomes of Jean Monnet Actions, presumably for EU policy elites, educators, and students, is “an increased interest in understanding and participating in the European Union, leading to a more active citizen” (Ibid). These myriad endeavors in the EU since the Bologna Declaration clearly accentuate the belief particularly among government elites at the EU level that education as the key to unlocking citizenship development. Incentive programs, such as the Jean Monnet Actions, have been designed to entice European educators to join this unique educational mission.

Subsequently as well, EU-level policy elites have encouraged higher education educators to incorporate the development of civic competences into specific academic programing, and the European Commission’s 2003 Staff Working Document on the Implementation of the “Education & Training 2010 Programme”, is a classic example in this regard. In its effort to implement this March 2002 European Council agreement, the European Commission endeavored to move beyond the “matter of key competences”, meaning the array of skills “all people, particularly the most vulnerable, should henceforth have in order to live and work in the knowledge-driven society and economy….” (17). In turn, it recognized eight additional competences: communication in one’s mother tongue; communication in a foreign language; mathematical literacy and basic competences in science and technology; digital (ITC) competence; learning to learn, interpersonal skills and civics; entrepreneurship; and, cultural expression (18). For the European Council and the Commission, advancement on those key competences continued to be the benchmark for measuring the successful implementation of the 2010 program. In its 2013 “Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe’s Higher Education Institutions,” the special High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education offered sixteen recommendation to the EU Commission, among which was one that articulated and underscored an important and rather familiar element: “Drawing on new methods of teaching and learning, so that *students acquire relevant skills that enhance their employability*” (65, italics added by this author). This emphasis on skills and competences, first set by government elites at the EU level, is the context in which European faculty are now working, especially those engaged in European Studies programs across the spectrum of EU member states, at various levels the curriculum and at various stages of the education process (see, eg. Goldsmith and Goldsmith 2010).

Moreover, the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning (CRELL), established as a collaborative enterprise between EU Commission’s Directorate General for Education and Culture and the Directorate General Joint Research Center, has further expanded that backdrop, as an important partner to the EU Commission in this area. CRELL’s 2006 project on “Active Citizenship for Democracy,” pointed to various gauges of active citizenship, grouped according to knowledge, skills, or attitudes. Two additional categories, values and identity, are considered to be valuable in evaluating personal-level civic engagement outcomes (Josef and Veldhuis 2006, 7-9). “Civic competence,” as Hoskins and Deakin Crick (2010) suggest, “is a complex mix of knowledge, skills, understanding, values and attitudes and dispositions and require a sense of identity and agency” (126). These competences are not unlike the basic civic skills and the underlying skills that Mary Kirlin (2002) maintained were essential for engaging younger Americans in active citizenship (573-574). Kirlin’s 2003 CIRCLE working paper on civic engagement skills, further specified four categories of civic skills (organization skills, communications skills, collective decision making skills, and critical thinking skills), strongly suggesting a multi-layered skill development process in effective civic education (14).

On both sides of the Atlantic, therefore, academics and other experts have suggested that classroom experiences can be structured more successfully to heighten students’ capacity to absorb politically-related knowledge so as to nurture them as informed, engaged citizens. From this perspective, content (or cognitive knowledge) *and* skill development are equally important learning objectives for civic education and engagement. On the one hand, teaching “content”—meaning the governing structures, policies, processes, organizations of politics and government, and political actors—is not a difficult education goal for the average Political Science professor to understand. On the other hand, teaching “skills” and “competences”, with the expressed objective of enhancing capacities for citizenship, may tend to be a bit more challenging. One can only imagine the implications of accreditation, governmental pressures, and institutional responses on specialized area studies, whether in Political Science, International Studies, and in EU Studies, in which course content is anything but static.

*Student-focused Teaching and Learning Styles: Arguments Favoring Active & Experiential Learning*

Traditionally, the classroom experience for college and university students has been an instructor-focused enterprise: the professor stands behind the lectern and presents his/her knowledge and wisdom to a group of students sitting quietly—and passively—in their lecture hall seats, supposedly listening attentively and taking notes on the lecture material. In fact, Omelicheva and Avdeyeva (2008) remind us that the “[l]ecture is, arguably, the oldest known instructional technique,” dating back to Plato’s Academy and consistently “an indispensible part of teaching across the college and university curriculum” (603). The classic image and description of the professor in this scenario is that of the “sage on the stage,” who might occasionally draw students out of their passivity by using “the tried and true Socratic method” (Raines and Rochester 2003, 432). As Michael Fowler (2005) has suggested, in this learning environment knowledge essentially is imposed on the student-learner (156). It is natural to wonder why lecture-style teaching has been omnipresent in colleges and universities, in virtually all part of the world, over such a long period of time. In response, some scholars have pointed to the “efficiency” inherent in the choice of the lecture “as a method of instruction” Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008, 603). “It is inexpensive, since one instructor can teach a large group of students, and familiar to students and teachers alike” (Ibid). Moreover, by lecturing, an instructor covers “large chunks of the material quickly” and can be easily modify that lecture to suit the particulars of any given class and/or group of students (Ibid).

Krain and Shadle (2005) nicely compare this passive approach to that know as active learning, which in contrast “shifts pedagogy from “instructor-focused” teaching to a student-focused “learning paradigm” by abandoning traditional and more passive modes of information delivery in favor of active and experiential approaches centered on the learning needs of students” (52). In this active learning environment “the professor “explodes” the traditional classroom, literally stepping out from behind the lectern to “open a space” in which students can speak and learn from one another” (Fowler 2005, 156). The lecture-format of instruction has been criticized for supporting only one empirically-proven learning outcome, that being “short-term memorization of lecture content” so that the student can reproduce “information laid out by the instructor” (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008, 603). Conversely, active learning pedagogies have been praised because they produce such learning outcomes as “fostering higher order cognitive skills” in which students are able to comprehend complicated material and draw linkages among “several components of a phenomenon in a logical and meaningful way” (Ibid, 603-4). While the lecture-modal may be ineffective in the “skills of application, analysis, and evaluation” (Ibid, 604), active learning “help[s] the students understand the concrete application of the concepts and theories through the use of use of hands-on activities, small group analysis, role-plays, and group projects” (Raines and Rochester 2003, 432). Susan Summer Raines clearly recognizes the value of lectures, particularly in terms of expanding upon basic material provided in course readings or adding concepts and details not covered in assigned texts (Ibid, 433). Yet she argues as well that the professor’s goal should be “to create a lesson plan that maximizes student learning, encourages critical thinking, aids information retention, and allows students to apply key concepts and knowledge gained through reading and lectures to real (or realistic) problems” (Ibid, 432). One is hard pressed to see how those leaning objectives can be met effectively without incorporating active learning pedagogies to refine and enhance the knowledge that is routinely shared with students through assigned readings and traditional class lectures.

Those of us who teach particularly at the undergraduate level—in Political Science, International Studies, and European Studies, among others—have increasingly become familiar with the scholarly literature surrounding the use of experiential and active learning pedagogy. Those discussions, in which active and experiential learning is encouraged, tend to be rooted in the recognition that students learn in different ways; further, the learning experience tends to be enhanced and students tend to internalize and take ownership of what they learn when are able to combine cognitive knowledge with its application in experience. Today’s literature almost consistently confirms the value of the varied experiential and active learning instructional techniques that many of us now are incorporating into our courses. This type of pedagogy is rather new, especially when compared to the classic lecture style of teaching, and has emerged from a greater understanding of the Kolb Experiential Learning Model, which introduces four distinct stages/modes of student learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As Brock and Cameron (1999) point out, “[t]he key to planning lessons that take students full cycle is to note that the second word in each of the four stages’ names indicates what the learner experiences” (251). Additionally, Brock and Cameron also remind us that, according to Kolb, students may not engage in all four stages evenly and consistently, and instead typically can be group according to their learning preferences: divergers, who tend to combine concrete experience and reflective observation; assimilators, who tend to combine conceptualization and reflective observation; convergers, who tend to combine abstract conceptualization and active experimentation; and, finally accommodators, who tend to combine active experimentation and concrete experience (252). The goal for the professor would be to plan his/her course requirements and activities being mindful of all four learning styles and the related learning preferences, particularly if the educational goal of a discipline, department, and/or institution is to attract more than the “usual” student learner.

In Political Science in particular (and we can use that broad classification to include such specialties as International Studies and EU Studies), numerous articles have been published about the applicability of the Kolb model to the political science classroom (see, eg., Fox and Ronkowski 1997; Rosenthal 1999; Brock and Cameron 1999; Kelle 2008). A range of classroom activities and instructional tools are often listed as supporting active and experiential learning, including (but not limited to): fieldwork, trigger films, case studies, laboratory projects, problems sets, guest speakers, projects on actual policy proposals, debates, media and internet assignments, journal writing, and in simulations (Fox and Ronkowski, 736; Brock and Cameron, 254). More recent additions to this list, and specifically in the area of European Studies, are problem-based learning, blended learning, and the utilization of various social networks exercises in today’s technologically advanced classrooms (Maurer and Neuhold 2014; Klymenko 2014; Mihai 2014; and, Farneti et al 2014)

One can easily see the applicability of such pedagogical methods across multiple disciplines, as individual instructors seek multiple ways to connect to various student learning styles and preferences to ensure the deepest level of student learning possible. Active learning techniques are particularly valuable in the introductory political science courses for instance, as one of the goals of such courses is to “interest as many students as possible...in choosing political science as a major, or at least taking greater interest in politics regardless of the career field they choose.” In turn, students are more likely to form “a [more] positive relationship with an academic discipline that they would otherwise find dull, difficult, and uninteresting were it presented through only one [more traditional] method” (Fox and Ronkowski 1997: 736). Those of us who teach the European Union to American college students, to European university students –or to students in any part of the globe, regardless of discipline but typically at the upper-division level, can easily see the value of active learning techniques precisely because this topic is likely to be so foreign even for students who have clear and established academic interests in the global community, whether they are political, economic, social, religious, and/or cultural.

Peers throughout all levels and areas of Political Science have increasingly turned to active learning methods in general, including simulations, but not limited to them, as specific experiential learning tools, to amplify more clearly the academic theories, principles, and facts associated with a wide range of complex issues within the domestic and international political arenas. Political scientists across the United States have made and continue to make countless conference presentations, write scores of conference papers, and publish numerous articles about using particularly simulation and role-playing to teach about: Congress, voting and elections, the National Security Council, various areas within the subfield of Comparative Politics, minority and gender politics, international law, humanitarian intervention, foreign policy decision making, comparative and international political theory, and of course the European Union. One can also see that growing body of literature in such publications American journals as *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *Journal of Political Science Education*, *International Studies Perspective*, and a prominent European counterpart, *European Political Science*. Moreover, it is not just American academics who are contributing to this conversation, but an increasing number of *Europeans* are doing so as well. A September 2013 workshop, “EU Simulations: Scholarly Reflections and Research on an Innovative Teaching Methodology”, at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Germany, is but one of multiple recent examples of European academics who are actively looking to address the EU-level emphasis on the necessity of teaching enhancement in European higher education today. Clearly there is a common commitment on both sides of the Atlantic to elevate the level of student-focused learning, and to ensure that learning goals and objectives really lead to positive learning outcomes for students. For the purposes of this discussion here, let us finalize this examination by considering briefly one specific type of experiential learning (simulations), and its value for teaching the European Union and its possible contribution in addressing the myriad challenges posed by today’s educational landscape.

*Are Simulations Valuable Experiential Learning Tools in European Studies Curriculum?*

As Smith and Boyer (1996) argued persuasively in their now classic article on in-class simulation design, active learning approaches have multiple, valuable learning outcomes: giving students “a deeper level of insight into the political process;” encouraging an increase in student attentiveness and activity within the learning process; encouraging greater retention of academic information over the long-term; helping students “develop critical thinking and analytical skills through collaborative efforts;” and, enabling “students to develop speaking and presentation skills, simultaneously building their confidence”(690-691). As we and our colleagues continue to discuss our experiences, those of us who embrace experiential learning exercises such as simulations nod in agreement. It also is easy to see the natural connections between discussions about the value of active learning and the conscious goal of academic administrators and faculty alike—whether in Political Science, International Studies, EU Studies, or other related disciplines—to use the classroom as a vehicle to connect students, in a real and much more profound way, to such international phenomenon as the European Union.

Beth Dougherty (2003) noted that “[b]y putting students in control of their learning, interactive exercises can make the real world both relevant and intellectually exciting” (245). Michael Fowler (2005) maintained that active learning “may be particularly appropriate for those teaching international relations” in that it “encourages students to become engaged in international issues by interacting with one another and grappling with problems as a practitioner might”(156). Simulations and other active learning techniques, such as that which Dougherty uses in her Middle East politics class and Fowler used in classrooms in Vietnam, or the multi-institutional European Union program in which Van Dyke, DeClair, and Loedel (2000) have engaged their students, connect students to political reality in ways not generally found in more traditional political science classrooms. Simulations help the real world of politics come alive and, thus, become relevant, precisely because students “recreate through their own experiences the multiple and often countervailing interests, pressures, and constraints” that political actors–domestic and international– experience in their work every day (Dougherty 2003, 240).

Some in the political science discipline have begun to undertake systematic assessment of specific, experiential learning exercises that have been conducted within a semester-long class (see, eg., Krain and Shadle 2006; Krain and Lantis 2007; Jones, 2008; Kelle 2008). In fact, Smith and Boyer (1996) readily admitted at that time, that there was a lack of empirical data assessing the long-term impact of simulations, and while there has been significant headway made in the discipline to conduct assessments on specific simulations experiences, there has been limited long-term assessments of such experiences since Smith and Boyer published their article. In the field of European Studies, Rebecca Jones and Peter Bursens (2014) are among an important group of European Studies educators who are making significant headway in assessing formally the value of simulations in European Studies and the importance of simulations in terms of actual student learning outcomes (also see Jones, 2008). Nonetheless, countless anecdotal evidence from the vast majority of faculty who use experiential learning exercises supports what Smith and Boyer concluded eighteen years ago: simulations often “motivate students to become involved in real processes that our simulations seek to emulate” (691). Active learning and experiential learning exercises in general, and simulations in particular, have become critical, legitimate pedagogical tools in Political Science and related disciplines like European Studies, and they may very well be the one of several keys that over time unlocks the door to long-term, active, international engagement for our students, especially when it comes to specific topics such as the European Union.

Faculty who teach the European Union may, thus, find Model EU simulations of particular interest, particularly as they consider how innovative, active learning techniques may help address the myriad and persistent external pressures that continue to be a backdrop for higher education today. Formed in 1993 and held in Washington, D.C., each fall, the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation Consortium (MEUSC) offers one of several long-standing intercollegiate Model EU programs established by American faculty who help students learn and engage in different elements of today’s European Union (EU). MEUSC’s program includes a 3-day simulation of the EU policy-making organs and decision-making processes, including the European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Ministers, and the European Council. The Transatlantic Consortium for European Union Studies and Simulations (TACEUSS, also known as “EuroSim”, which dates back to the 1980s) draws together various New York State and European institutions in a comparable program; a unique feature of Euro-Sim is its rotation between an American host and European host in alternating years. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis provides a somewhat less comprehensive EU simulation each spring, in which students explore EU decision-making through a simulated European Commission, European Council, and various configurations of the Council of Ministers. Several EU Centers of Excellence at American universities, as well as a group of State University of New York (SUNY) schools, also run annual European Council simulations. Numerous American professors also have utilized classroom-based simulations to underscore particular aspects of EU governance and decision-making (Van Dyke 2010: 5184–5189).

A continual goal of the many faculty who incorporate EU simulations into their curriculum has been to engage students in discussions and debates about the EU that are both current and topical in EU decision-making circles (see Van Dyke et al. 2000: 146, 149; Van Dyke 2010: 5187–5189). As a long-standing faculty advisor in MEUSC and member of MEUSC’s executive planning team, this particular author has worked to ensure that the primary topic of debate simulation coincides with current issues and challenges facing EU policy makers at any given time. Those issues have included: Economic Monetary Union, terrorism, food safety and genetically modified organisms, the proposed EU Constitutional Treaty, and the protection of minorities and asylum seekers, trafficking of women and children, climate change, the impact of agriculture on the environment, and EU-Russian relations to illuminate and underscore broader EU debates about European Monetary Policy, Common Foreign and Security Policy, EU-US bilateral trade relations, EU immigration and human rights policy, EU Agricultural, Environmental, and Climate Change policies, the EU Neighborhood Policy, the crisis with Euro, and the deepening and widening of the EU integration movement. MEUSC faculty have been equally committed to helping students refine and enhance key “life” and civic engagement skill as part of their simulation experience, such skills as: leadership, analytical and critical thinking, public speaking and oral debate, small group cooperation and consensus building. MEUSC’s faculty advisors also hope to encourage student development in terms of increasing student’s cultural sensitivity, global awareness, and international sophistication in the course of their EU learning experience.

Regardless of whether they incorporate a large-scale, intercollegiate Model EU, such as those found in the United States, or utilize an in-class EU simulation experience, faculty who embrace such educational tools consistently endeavor to connect their students to EU policy makers and policy making in a distinctive yet powerful way, utilizing the simulation experience to help bridge what at times seems like a huge learning curve between the academic study of the EU and the actual political practices of the European Union. Such learning experiences meet the goals, learning objectives, and outcomes of active learning advocates, and surely they help to address the demands of external forces that shape the climate of higher education today.

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1. The U.S. Department of Education’s Federal Student Aid Office has an excellent website that outlines the various elements of student financial in the United States. See <https://studentaid.ed.gov/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)