

## **Super light simulations for assessment in large social science classes**

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### ***Abstract***

*Simulations are an increasingly popular way of teaching social science, but are sometimes viewed as too complex and resource-intensive for assessment, especially in large classes. This practice paper introduces the concept of a super light simulation, one that is simple enough to be used for an individual written assessment without a live precursor. It provides examples from a politics course of two hundred students. The article also reflects on how light simulations can prevent plagiarism, promote engagement, and contribute to an assessment portfolio that still includes the traditional essay.*

**Keywords:** *assessment, simulations, social science, higher education, large classes*

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## **1. Introducing Super Light Simulations**

Simulations, including elaborate and interactive role-playing, are increasingly popular in teaching (Ní Mhuirthile 2018; Torney 2018; Usherwood 2015). This type of simulation is hard to assess. Contrary to the literature, I demonstrate that a simulation can work as an individual written assessment. I have designed over eight such “light” simulations. Recently, I have gone further and assessed my students using “super light” simulations, which have no live precursor and are therefore suitable for classes of unlimited size. The aim of my simulations is to challenge students to apply theory in complex situations. Thus, they have something in common with the problem questions and case studies used in law and business teaching. Since my subject is comparative politics, many take the form of descriptions of fantasy countries. The countries do not exist and, therefore, the students cannot just research and regurgitate “the facts”.

## **2. Teaching Context: Comparative European Politics**

I have used super-light simulations on a second-year class of two hundred students from different programmes and faculties, as well as individual exchange students. The class has a history of highly variable engagement and performance, including plagiarised essays. There are no tutorials or seminars. My lectures are punctuated with exercises to promote engagement and check for understanding. After the simulation assessments, the students write an essay and take a multiple choice exam.

The first assessment concentrates on the classification of a political system and evaluation of proposals for political reform. It tests the students’ ability to apply the most basic concepts of the course to a concrete situation, which combines some relatively simple analytical challenges with some very difficult ones. In a traditional essay format, students would have been asked to critique and evaluate these concepts without ever having been asked to apply them. So, the assessment avoids the skipping of a logical step that was typical of traditional university teaching and assessment. Figure 1 is an excerpt from this exercise. Most students were able to do quite well in this assessment by offering a largely correct classification of the political system. A smaller number managed to engage with the subtle technicalities of the proposed reforms. Those who did the assessment without engaging with the relevant course material scored badly and were asked to present for some remedial tutoring before moving on to an essay.

The second light simulation dealt with another widely used, but less technical, set of concepts in comparative politics. The students are presented with four tweets from a pretend political party, which they have to classify into one of the party families from the political science literature. The classification depends on the students’ interpretation of the combined meaning of images and text across the four tweets, one of which is reproduced in

Figure 2. The students enjoyed this light simulation and it served to encourage weaker students who had struggled with the previous exercise.

**Which features of this country are consensual? Which are majoritarian?**

**Overall, would you describe it as a majoritarian or consensual political system? Why?**

**What effect would the reforms proposed by the NZIPS have? Would they make Novaya Zembla more or less consensual?**

The President is elected by a joint sitting of the House of the People and the House of the Regions ... The President does not head the executive, but she decides who should be given the first opportunity to form a government after legislative elections ... Deputies to the powerful House of the People are elected according to a party list system in large regional districts. Its composition of the House of the People is shown in Figure 1. ... The regions are responsible for their own educational and cultural policies, but depend on funding from the central government. The Constitutional Court often has to adjudicate disputes between regional governments and the central government ...

*Figure 1. Current Composition of the House of the People*

Zorbian League

National Democrats

Environmentalists'

True Left Democracy

Left Democracy

Figure 1. Classification simulation



Figure 2. Party family tweet

### 3. Literature Review: Traditional Efficiency, Innovative Luxury?

One of the great challenges of contemporary higher education is to avoid a trade-off between efficiency and engagement, between innovation and resources. There is a mountain of literature on simulations in social science, mostly a combination of “how-to” guides (Alden 2005; Maddrell 2007; McDaniel 2000; Van Asselfedt 2006; Woodward 2003; Usherwood 2015) and experimental evaluations of their efficacy (Raymond & Usherwood 2013; Chin, Dukes, & Gamson 2009). Implicitly or explicitly this literature assumes that simulations are only suitable for small classes (DeNeve & Heppner 1997; McCarthy & Anderson 2000; Howes & Cruz 2009; Gorton & Havercroft 2012; Usherwood 2015). Less obvious, but perhaps even more important, is that simulations do not tend to be associated with assessment. Indeed, the efficacy of simulations is often evaluated by reference to its effect on student performance in old-fashioned examinations. In the preceding, I showed how simulations can be used for individual written assessment, even without a precursor in class.

#### 4. Concluding Reflections

Many teaching and learning papers offer real pedagogical benefits but often at the cost of substantial resources, especially the time of the teacher. This time cost squeezes attention from other teaching tasks on the course where innovation takes place, other courses for which the teacher is responsible, and, of course, the research career, and interminable list of other jobs, of the teacher. Super Light simulations are not time consuming. They are also plagiarism proof. The low-cost and flexibility of super light simulations has been an important part of my motivation in writing this practice paper.

The aim of this piece has been to share a successful experience. While my experiments have been overwhelmingly successful, there have also been failures. In particular, one year I asked students to play the role of actual politicians in only slightly amended political contexts. This produced some very low-standard work. My super light simulations have worked best when some relatively clear theoretical ideas have been combined with an obviously fake context. I am very confident that super light simulations can and should be used more often in political science. I wonder to what extent super light simulations are prevalent and practicable in large classes in other social science disciplines. I have the impression that our pedagogical problems and opportunities are relatively similar and that light simulations like the ones described here could be effective in cognate subjects.

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