

Towards Evaluating the Model United Nations as Teaching Tool in Morocco

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Abstract:

Model United Nations (MUN) has seen dramatic growth in Morocco, both at the university and high school levels. It is a popular and effective teaching tool. This paper aims to test its utility using various methodologies. It shares the results of surveys, both historic and current, conducted at Al Akhawayn University evaluating the activity among students. It also includes interviews with MUN participants, both coaches and students, at Al Akhawayn University and elsewhere. Finally, the paper evaluates whether the tool is trans-cultural or whether it is an expansion of White space.

Keywords: Model United Nations, Morocco, teaching tool

Introduction

I began to teach in Morocco two weeks before the attacks of 9/11. The attacks changed the nature of several of my classes over the semester. Given the students' interest in the events, I designated time for them towards the end of the coverage period. There was a relative lack of understanding of the underlying values of international relations, at least in their Westphalian form. The students understood the notions of sovereignty, reciprocity, and the rules governing war, but they did not understand how these notions are actualized in life. They had not participated in simulations relating to international events. None had debated or taken positions that they do not personally hold. They were deeply troubled by the idea that they could and should argue positions they do not necessarily believe in, or role play countries that they feel uncomfortable with or dislike. Their arguments assumed perfect communication between countries and were set in a very clearly defined dualistic world of us/them, right/wrong, in/out,

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and these tended to correspond to self and “other.” Graduate students were particularly affected by this since they mostly reflected the non-liberal arts educational system.

There was no tradition of formal debate in Morocco, but by the mid-2010s, formal debate became enmeshed in Moroccan elite private schools due to its introduction by American-pattern institutions by instructors who had been part of the Forensics subculture in the United States. The successful arrival of formal debate in Morocco coincided with the rise of Model United Nations (MUN) as an activity introduced at Al Akhawayn University and independently by U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers in the Tafilalat region. Model United Nations is an activity that can help our students acquire empathy towards each other, and it particularly suits the context best.

This paper outlines the development of Model United Nations at Al Akhawayn University, a process that was neither linear nor straightforward. It discusses the rise of the NGO-provided Model United Nations programs outside Al Akhawayn University, including ones provided by the American Language Center in Fez and by associates of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. It outlines the rise of the activity as a way for independent groups of university students, sometimes backed by tourism interests and hotels, to have fun and raise funds. The paper concludes with an exploration of the directions that the activity needs to take to develop and become more relevant to Moroccan students outside elite and privileged circles.

Brief Methodology

I set out to evaluate the effect of the Model United Nations in terms of being a teaching tool for international affairs in general. I learned that a clear contextualization of the question needed to take place first, particularly in terms of the presence of the Model United Nations in both Al Akhawayn University and in Morocco in general. As a result, I set about creating a brief history of the Model United Nations movement in Morocco. Given my involvement in its introduction at Al Akhawayn, I was able to draw upon my own experiences to draw a picture, however imperfect, of the history of the activity in Morocco. The effectiveness variable was operationalized in terms of the relevance of the Model United Nations course at Al Akhawayn, and there is data from three years to support the claim that most students find it relevant. The increasing popularity of the activity, particularly considering the obstacles discussed in the introduction, strongly suggests that the Model United Nations is an appealing teaching tool and that it has somehow managed to set itself within the context of Moroccan student life. That said, this is a preliminary work that will be followed by several other surveys and evaluations with the students and participants in the Model United Nations programs. This work will be shared with three Model United Nations

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trainers and practitioners outside Al Akhawayn to improve its detail and to include the voices of those active outside Al Akhawayn University in the follow-up work. Of course, we need to start with a discussion about what Model United Nations is.

MUN topics can be historical or current, involving any of the organs or their various committees. The student participants typically play the role of a country. The MUN differs from the United Nations in some respects. Given that the participants are non-professional, have far stricter time limits for negotiations, and are engaged in a learning exercise disguised as a competitive “fun” extra-curricular activity means that the word “Model” is indeed operative and applicable. The activity features all the arts of diplomacy such as negotiation, public speaking, the strategic use of rules, alliance building, band wagoning, and balancing. The students also learn how to write resolutions, compromise, and negotiate. Given that no one is likely to represent their own country, the students must conduct extensive research into the assigned country’s position on the issues chosen for the event. The activity is competitive, with the dais usually controlled by the host institution’s Model United Nations program or club.

The activity is student-run, and that enables it to appeal beyond narrow academic interests. Students learn how to manage events, fundraise, budget, negotiate for materials and services, and market their event to other interested students. MUN imparts a large and diverse skill set. Students network and sometimes build long-lasting links with each other that include business and political ties. The role of faculty members is to train the students, provide insight into the various positions of the countries they represent, and act as coaches and advisors. The activity can also be held in a classroom context, but it would not have the full advantages of a student-run standalone event. Using the classroom to introduce the Model United Nations and allow for practice is essential to its introduction to Al Akhawayn.

There is wide consensus that the Model United Nations constitutes a highly effective teaching methodology. Obendorf and Randerson (2015) used the Model United Nations at the United Kingdom’s University of Lincoln to corroborate a wide and deep body of literature attesting to the utility of the activity in terms of inducing learning: “There is no doubt that the MUN – in any of its forms – provides students with valuable experience, knowledge, and proficiencies.” Their work is corroborated in a recent article by Engel, Pallas, and Lambert (2017), in which they studied Model United Nations program effects on students outside the political science field in Australia and confirmed the consensus that Model United Nations works.

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AUI MUN

The initial approach taken at AUI was to teach MUN as part of International Relations classes. Towards the end of the class, the students carried out a simulation, usually that of the United Nations Security Council. The topics discussed were selected with the students and reflected their interests and concerns, but we tried to avoid issues from the Middle East or the dispute over the Sahara region because the students were too emotionally engaged in these to enable their use as a teaching tool. The students selected which countries they wished to play on a first-come basis. France was initially the state most heavily fought over in terms of country assignments for the simulations, but as the years have passed, China and Russia have become more appealing to the students. The remaining P-5 members were also very much in demand, and I had to encourage our students to take up some of the roles of the smaller states. During the early years and before the appearance of online training content on demand, training the students took the form of providing photocopies covering motions, resolution writing, and speaking, as well as guided sessions where I acted as Chair for the first session. I encouraged the students to use simplified rules, including a permanent round-robin speaking order that gives all of them a chance to speak. The final week of class was reserved for the simulation, which often ran into two or three sessions. Assessment of effectiveness was verbal, with the students encouraged to provide verbal feedback on what worked and what did not before the capstone lecture concluding the class.

The common MUN lesson of frustration was part of the common feedback felt by many students, especially those who attempted to solve historic problems like Kashmir or Congo. Sometimes unusual solutions would appear, but the students tended to duplicate what took place historically. They tend to share their frustration in the debriefing at the end of the simulation, but they also acquire a better understanding of the underlying conflicts of preferences between states. After 2006, the proliferation of online material, particularly from outfits like YouTube, MUNUSA, and other Model United Nations organizations, made training the students much easier. Instructional videos produced by various Model United Nations programs not only eased the in-class training, but they also helped cement Model United Nations as a student club activity. The repeated administration of the classroom exercise led some students to attempt to establish a club early on. Like many student clubs, AUI MUN saw cycles of enrollment, bloom, graduation, and bust.

Old issues that plague the Model United Nations, like the relationship between the teaching faculty and the student clubs, appeared along with issues like the lack of funds for competitive

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off-campus events. At the same time, the university decided to offer Model United Nations as a separate annual activity, making it independent from the Theories of International Relations class where it was offered as an activity. By the early 2010s, students appeared who were interested in reviving the defunct club and doing so in a sustainable, self-duplicating way. The club was led by students interested in acquiring management and event-planning skills, and by a student who wanted to use the activity as a means of introducing Moroccan students to international affairs and to further international and inter-communal communication and understanding. This final attempt was successful in establishing a very institutionalized club that has seen multiple club leadership clusters. Once a year, AUI MUN attempts to host an MUN tournament for Moroccan High School students from all over the country, and that activity has seen dramatic interest by many parents and teachers.

The club's rise and regularity coincided with the strengthening of attendance and enrollment in the class in what became a mutually reinforcing cycle. The class includes an evaluation by the students at the end of the semester, and the reviews document both rising interest and greater appreciation for the activity over time. At the start, the class was small and faced serious hurdles in terms of administrative support and acceptance of the idea that a class concerned with the activity is legitimate. Over time, this changed dramatically.

The January 2019 AUI Model UN program for high schools allowed me to interview two coaches, those of the Al Akhawayn School in Ifrane and the American School in Fez. Both coaches affirmed that their students developed a more sophisticated understanding of international affairs over the course of their involvement with the event, but as with all things, their performance depended heavily on the time they invested in preparation. They noted that students' performance was closely aligned with their enthusiasm for role-playing their assigned country's diplomats. Some students also saw the Model United Nations as primarily a social opportunity, and our own organizing Model United Nations Club saw to it that there was plenty of age-appropriate entertainment. Coming for fun is fine, but if awards were to be earned, some real learning and work would have to take place.

Other Moroccan MUN Activities

While no definitive claim can be made about where the activity started, MUN began due to the presence of Peace Corps volunteers who participated in it as students. The activity can be held using bare bones frameworks that need little more than a school's permission and butcher paper for placards, so it would have been rather easy to introduce. Over time the activity began

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attracting people associated with the “American Corner” program of the U.S. Department of State, and one of the earliest Model United Nations events. An early Moroccan Model United Nations competition was held in Marrakesh in 2011, and attracted the nascent Al Akhawayn University MUN Club, which had begun to take deeper institutional form.

Gradually, about a dozen Model United Nations events appeared all over the country. Elite foreign-curriculum high schools led the trend towards the establishment of these events, and these were often joined by university-based programs, mirroring the experience at Al Akhawayn University. Gradually, increasingly Model United Nations programs appeared, including those offering the activity in Arabic and French as well as in English. While the early events were beset with problems with organization and timekeeping, it is safe to say these problems have been superseded by the increasing professionalization of the activity. In no small measure, the internet and the widespread availability of smart phones has enabled the dramatic improvement of Model United Nations events in Morocco. About 10 Moroccan universities now have Model United Nations and clubs, and there are several standalone programs started by young people elsewhere like Sahara International Model United Nations and the Tangier Model United Nations. Fundraising, one of the most difficult aspects of creating and running Model United Nations programs, seems a non-issue. One Model United Nations program, Morocco MUN, lists the U.S., Belgian, and Dutch embassies as sponsors.

At the university level and at the elite level, it is safe to say that the activity is now deeply entrenched and has proceeded along both educational and civil society lines. At the high school level, it is also entrenched among elite schools. Moroccan public schools, on the other hand, remain underserved, and their students cannot necessarily afford the cost of events like the Tangier MUN, which has a 950-dirham registration fee. Al Akhawayn University’s Model United Nations program offers an annual event in January for high school students, with reduced rates for students from disadvantaged schools. There is an urgent need to expand the reach of the Model United Nations into high schools and middle schools where parents cannot normally afford the activity. There is work promoting Model United Nations currently taking place with two Al Akhawayn graduates, one at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Morocco and another at the American Language Center in Fez.

The Path Forward for MUN

The original intent of teaching Model United Nations in the classroom was to help students develop a deeper understanding of other countries’ perspectives. In some ways, that

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fundamental goal has been achieved in the context of Morocco. Hundreds of young people in many Moroccan universities, not just Al Akhawayn University, participate in Model United Nations programs that allow them to research, understand, and represent foreign countries. There are two main remaining challenges facing the Model United Nations in Morocco. First, there is the issue of professionalizing coaching, and second, there is the issue of enhancing access to the activity to disadvantaged and poorer young people, particularly at the high school and middle school level. Each challenge may provide the solution to the other. Coaching Model United Nations teams is a topic that has been written about in other contexts, particularly that of the United States (Mickolus & Brannan, 2013), but coaching requires a large measure of learning by doing. AUI students will be impressed in Moroccan life and need to understand how to promote MUN in this context.

The Model United Nations class needs to shift from being a class that introduces students to the United Nations, teaches them the rules and procedures of the Model United Nations, and then applies this knowledge within a simulation to a class that also teaches students how to coach high school students by involving the students with Model United Nations clubs in disadvantaged areas. We work with AUI graduates to select schools that would be suitable for a coaching immersion program.

In the meantime, we need to seriously study the possibility of transforming the club into a permanent university program with the requisite administrative and clerical support. Given that Model United Nations programs can not only fully recover their cost but also generate funds that the university can use for scholarships, this possibility needs to be explored and pursued at Al Akhawayn. The country's liberal tourism visa regime and relative low cost can help attract international Model United Nations participants. Adding a college-level Model United Nations Conference can help AUI MUN transform itself from a well-established student club to an academic and extracurricular program.

There is an argument that the current international system and consequently the discipline that studies it are Western and thus privilege Western epistemologies and ontologies. Elijah Anderson (2015) notes that social spaces reserved for Whites are regarded as "White space" by those excluded from them and that the term is fluid. The concept has been adapted to refer to institutions and activities that privilege narratives, practices, and values of primarily European origin. Within a Moroccan context, this question primarily concerns the issue of whether the activity privileges Western approaches over Moroccan, Islamic, and North African perspectives. There are reasons for taking this question very seriously. Moroccan Model United Nations

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programs require attendees to use “Western business dress.” Naturally, women participants are allowed to wear headscarves, but perhaps *Jallabas* and other daily or *Abaha* (traditional formal) wear should be allowed. Adding Model Arab League and Model African Union events in the Model United Nations conference offering may make the experience more relevant. Several Moroccan Model United Nations programs including the one at Al Akhawayn already do so.

Conclusion

The Model United Nations grew a great deal in Morocco over the last 15 years. It started with small efforts both at Al Akhawayn and outside it, particularly due to the influence of the Peace Corps. Its ability to entertain and create networks for young people and students has helped it grow in an increasingly middle-income country reaping the benefits of its relative political stability. Its potential as a business and as a market for professional tourism firms also provided it with a more commercial basis. The story of each Model United Nations program in Morocco is different and remains an elite activity at this stage. As stated earlier, two Al Akhawayn University alumni are working on extending the activity beyond the elites, and one is planning to author a doctoral thesis on the issue using Moroccan Model United Nations programs as case studies.

Adding Morocco to the literature on the Model United Nations risks becoming overdue. MUN’s popularity attests to the dramatic shifts that have taken place in society and culture. Students are no longer reserved towards role play and no longer view it as unethical or deceptive. They no longer view the world in the stark binary terms that appeared in the aftermath of 9/11. Empathy clearly emerges among MUN participants. The bigger question is whether these changes reflect the influence of the Model United Nations or the broader opening of Moroccan life and society.

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