agreements with foreign universities.”
While the U.S. cannot shrug off its moral responsibility towards the crisis, the ultimate responsibility for the refugees must lie with the Iraqi government.


7. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 38–43. A poll conducted by The Economist showed that the middle class is more supportive of democracy than the poor. The Economist, February 14, 2009.


SIMULATING THE IRAQI PARLIAMENT; BENEFITS OF A NON-TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING IRAQI POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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During the Spring 2009 Semester, Eric Davis offered an advanced undergraduate course at Rutgers University, “Iraq: Political Development, Sectarian Identities, and Democracy,” with the assistance of Andrew Spath, Brian Humphreys, and Maroun Soueid. Teaching the comparative politics of a foreign country is difficult enough since many American college students often have had limited contact with cultures other than their own. Teaching Iraqi politics constitutes an especially daunting task. Not only is Iraq a complex political system, and one that is very different from the American political system, but one that has experienced significant change since Saddam Husayn’s Ba‘thist regime collapsed in April 2003. A central question that needed to be addressed in the course is the following: What pedagogics would best promote student understanding of Iraqi politics? As we discovered, a classroom simulation proved to be one of the most effective tools to enhance what students learned from more traditional resources and pedagogical strategies.

A prerequisite for students to participate in the simulation was a necessary grounding in the appropriate conceptual frameworks, and historical and factual basis of Iraqi politics. To address students’ conceptual and empirical lacunae, the course employed multiple resources. Readings were chosen that offered students different perspectives on Iraqi society and
politics. Charles Tripp’s *A History of Iraq* was useful due to its emphasis on political history and elites. Eric Davis’ *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* and Faleh Jabar’s writings on Iraqi tribes and tribal politics gave students a somewhat different focus by examining the social bases of politics. Jo Tatchell’s *The Poet of Baghdad* was chosen because it offered students a “micro-analytic” approach to Iraqi politics by tracing the daily life of an Iraqi family, and the important opposition poet it produced, over a period of almost sixty years. These course readings were intended to offer students a variety of perspectives by employing readings that emphasized different analytic levels and vantage points on Iraqi politics and society.

Course readings were supplemented with an extensive variety of films and video clips. These included the film, “Forget Baghdad,” in which four Iraqi Jews who were forced to leave Iraq in the early 1950s recounted their experiences as younger men in Iraq and their continued attachment to and yearning for contact with that past. Another film was “Saddam’s Latest War,” a 1993 film from the Public Broadcasting System’s well-known “Frontline” series. This film, which was produced in Iraq’s southern marshlands (*al-ahwar*) and other parts of Iraq by Yale art historian Michael Woods, documents a very disturbing manner Saddam’s draining and destruction of the marsh region after the 1991 Intifada when rebels retreated into this area. We also viewed “Iraq in Its Fragments,” especially the sections on the Mahdi Army’s activities in southern Iraq, and the section on the problems faced by Kurdish farmers and their families in the rural areas of northern Iraq.

One of the most popular films was the HBO television production, “Baghdad High.” This film documents the lives of four Iraqi males as they prepare for their final comprehensive examinations during their final year of secondary school. What struck students most was the similarity of interests and the fact that the Iraqi youth were from different ethnic backgrounds, long-term friends, but demonstrated no sectarianism.

To offset the pessimistic tone of the films and take account of some of the positive developments that have occurred in Iraq since 2003, we incorporated YouTube video clips (several in Arabic) that were produced by Iraqi youth, as well as those produced by U.S. television channels such as MSNBC. What was interesting to students was how attracted Iraqi youth were to Western music and popular culture, and to Western sports. Among these visuals was an anti-sectarian music video by Iraq’s most famous “rock star,” Kazim al-Sahir, called “Please Love Me” (*Akhbini*). Many of the video clips that highlighted Iraqi youth had a very positive quality because youth often expressed great hope for the future now that Iraq had shed authoritarian rule and violence had receded. The films and videos allowed students to connect text with visual imagery, thereby facilitating a more effective contextualization of the course readings.

Because students obviously required significant historical and political background before they could participate in the Iraqi Parliament simulation, it was scheduled during the last month of the class. To structure the simulation and make it manageable, we organized it around the two of the most central and sensitive issues that Iraq has faced since 2003: security and oil. We divided the eighteen members of the class into nine of Iraq’s most prominent political parties, including the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (ISCI), the Da’wa Party, the Iraqi National Accord, the Tawafuq Front, the Iraqi Islamic Party, the Padîla Party, the Sadrist Trend, the Kurdish Democratic Party, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

Each party was tasked with developing a position paper that outlined its suggested solution to the security problem and the extraction and distribution of Iraq’s extensive oil wealth (hydrocarbon law). In the position paper, students were required to detail the party’s objectives in the simulation, and the strategy they would use to entice other political parties to support these objectives. In effect, the position paper required each party to articulate its “private” as well as “public” persona. The position paper was also designed to have students learn the requisite ideological and behavioral parameters of their respective political party. In this sense, the position paper was designed to enhance the realism of the simulation.

Once students submitted their party’s position paper two weeks prior to the simulation, they were required to engage in a lengthy period of “negotiations” with parties with which they shared an ideological perspective and hence might be able conclude agreements prior to the simulation. Students were required to maintain a daily log that discussed the logic and results of these interactions. Half of two class sessions during the month prior to the simulation were devoted to researching the latest developments in Iraqi politics in the Department of Political Science computer lab. Here Davis and the course assistants were able to help students find many additional resources that facilitated their preparation for the simulation.

The simulation itself took an entire class period of three hours (the course met once per week). During the first forty-five minutes of the class, each party was required to make an opening statement outlining its policy regarding passage of a new security and oil law. Following these rhetorical interventions, the parties broke for an hour and a half to engage in negotiations with other parties as they attempted to assemble the necessary votes, through coalitional strategies, to be able to pass a security
and an oil law that accorded with their party’s policy objectives. Davis and
course assistants expedited meetings
among parties in other class rooms. At
the end of the hour and a half period,
students reassembled to conduct a
vote on the security and oil issues.
Following the vote, the remainder of
class time was used for debriefing as
each party contributed its conclusions
about the functioning and results of the
simulation.

As for the results, students
representing the more nationalistic parties
in the Iraqi Parliament were able to
create the necessary coalition to pass
both a security law and an oil law. The
laws that were passed accommodated
the views of a large number of
political parties whose goals could be
considered, grosso modo, nationalist,
rather than regional or sectarian in
orientation. While this vote may not
accurately reflect the current trends and
dynamics of the Iraqi Parliament,
there should be noted that the Parliament
did pass an oil law in May 2009 and the
Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)
had begun exporting oil from the
Kurdish region for the first time in the
country’s history. Violence continues
to occur in Iraq. However, in many
areas of the country, security is the best
it has been since the spring of 2003,
indicating that important progress has
occurred. In this sense, the outcome of
the simulation was not that far from the
reality of contemporary Iraqi politics.

What was most striking about
the simulation was how much the
students learned in this exercise. It is
no exaggeration to say that students
learned as much if not more about
Iraqi politics through preparing for
and engaging in the simulation as they
did from the readings, films, and video
clips that they had studied earlier in the
course. Why was this the case?

In his study, Pedagogy of the
Oppressed, the late Brazilian educator
and anthropologist, Paulo Freire,
distinguishes between the banking
theory of education and the problem
posing approach to education. By
“banking theory,” he means, of course,
the time worn and highly ineffective
educational process of having students
memorize “facts.” For Freire, this
type of activity does not constitute
meaningful learning but rather promotes
submissiveness to authority. True
learning must be based on developing
critical thinking skills. The problem
posing approach constitutes real
education in Freire’s view because
here the learner is required to apply the
concepts and knowledge that s/he has
learned to solve a particular problem.

Students learned the validity
of Freire’s theory through participating in
an exercise that required them to both
apply what they had learned and solve
problems. The diligence and excitement
with which students approached
this process underscored Freire’s
arguments. Once students moved from
an abstract and passive learning process
(even if they found the blogs, books,
and articles that they read and films
and video clips very interesting), and
began to apply what they learned, Iraqi
politics came alive in a way in which it
had not up to that point in the course.
The competition that emerged during
the two week period of “negotiations”
prior to the simulation, and during the
simulation itself, provided an incentive
for students to obtain more detailed
information that would give them a
competitive edge in trying to achieve
their goals.

Combining readings, visual imagery
in the form of films and video clips
with a capstone simulation proved to
be a very effective pedagogy. Student
evaluations of the course were very
positive and reflected especially well on
the simulation. Many indicated that the
complexities of Iraqi politics became
much clearer as they were forced to
situate their party within a much larger
political context. It was very satisfying
to see the extent to which the simulation
worked to integrate other pedagogical
elements by helping to clarify the
intricacies of Iraqi politics.

The simulation demonstrated how
complicated the problems that Iraqaces are in a way that readings could not.
The learning process transcended Iraqi
politics because students could see
that trying to negotiate solutions to
political problems on a national level
is a difficult and complex process. The
simulation forced students to view the
Iraqi political process from different
angles. It also helped them better
understand how political institutions
function and the benefits of democratic
and participatory politics.

Organizing a simulation can be
difficult, especially in a large class,
because all students require significant
amounts of attention during the process
of running it. If our simulation is an
indicator, then the rewards can be great.
In an era in which it is essential to
attract young people to develop greater
interest in international affairs, both in
the United States and in other countries,
course simulations seem certainly to be
one of the most effective ways to create
such interest.

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For further information about the Iraqi
Parliament simulation and a copy of the
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LANGUAGE
ANNOUNCEMENT

As readers may be aware, TAARI is
committed to producing a bilingual
newsletter in English and in Arabic.
We regret that we are now printing
our newsletter in English only. We
are seeking funds to resume printing
a bilingual newsletter and to include
full Arabic translations of English-
language newsletters on our website.
We appreciate your patience and
understanding in the meantime.