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Germany

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## Model UN class at University of Trier and Erfurt, Germany

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### Abstract

This article explains different aspects of teaching Model UN classes at two German universities. After five years of teaching EfMUN at the University of Erfurt the author moved to the University of Trier, where he teaches TriMUN today. Recalling the recommendations of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), the article covers aspects of personal development of students as well as preparing them for an active citizenship. The interdisciplinary character of the course is explained and put into context of the teaching model that is centrally based on tutors as peers for the student. In this context, the article also addresses the question of English as the central teaching language.

Key words: Model United Nations simulations, interdisciplinary, active citizenship, personal development, English as a medium of instruction

## 1. Introduction

Preparing students for NMUN New York has a long tradition at many German universities. Many groups have a long-standing history of participation in New York, while still a small number of new groups have joined in the recent past.

Approaches towards preparation of students for NMUN are as diverse as the German higher education system itself. While some universities follow the traditional approach of a Professor or University teacher preparing the students in a regular class during the semester, other groups are completely self-organized by student-groups that are only (sometimes loosely) connected to the university. The preparation at TriMUN, the Model UN project at the University of Trier as well as EfMUN at the university of Erfurt follows an approach that lies midway between these two poles: A small group of tutors, recruited out of former TriMUN/EfMUN participants forms the peer group, organizing the weekly preparation of the students in the TriMUN/EfMUN meetings. An external lecturer with relevant NMUN experience and a full professor supervise these tutors jointly. Between these two supervisors the tasks are divided depending on background and timely availability of the external lecturer.

This specific combination of actors directly impacts the practicalities of preparation of students for NMUN. Tutors act as peers and are closest to the students while having the best understanding of the everyday challenges students experience when preparing for the simulation. Hence when designing and redesigning the specifics of the class every year the new team of tutors provides feedback on issues that they found particularly challenging or aspects they considered less helpful. The external lecturer provides the continuity and puts the new input of the tutors in context and liaises with the responsible professor at the university. This way, jointly with the external lecturer the specifics of the class can be improved year by year. At the same time there are two learning levels involved: students who learn by participating in the project and tutors who learn by designing part of the experience for the students.

## 2. Priorities in Preparing Students for Model UN

### 2.1 Background

Teaching NMUN in higher education in Germany is spread amongst different faculties depending on the individual setup of the specific university. You will find Model UN

projects in the departments of Political Sciences, Law, or even in Economics. Some universities also place the course in an area of general studies where it is available to students from all faculties to generate non-subject-specific competencies. At the University of Trier the project belongs to department IV: Business Administration, Economics, Mathematics and Computer Science. The chair of Monetary Economics supports it. The University of Erfurt places Model UN in the general competencies sector called *Studium Universale*. However, at both institutions the project is open for students from all faculties.

Serving as front-runners of competency orientation, Model UN classes address all four dimensions and demands formulated by the Council of Europe towards higher education.<sup>1</sup> These are: 1) Preparation for sustainable development, 2) Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies, 3) Personal development, and 4) Development of a broad and advanced knowledge base.

Broadening and advancing the knowledge base are closely connected with the knowledge dimension that most forms of teaching will cover even in more traditional forms of higher education. Hence I will not put any special focus to this aspect here. As the aspect of sustainable development is always reflected in the topics discussed in some of the committees of the simulation and it is therefore naturally a topic of any substantial Model UN preparation this aspect can also be skipped, as it is one of the subject specific topics. However, *preparing students for active citizenship*, as well as *contributing to the personal development* are both demands towards higher education where Model UN classes have a specific contribution.

## 2.2 Personal development of students

While teaching about the United Nations, its structures, and the topics the organisation deals with is one of the cornerstones of the project, supporting the personal development of students by acquiring a number of so-called soft skills is at least equally important. When selecting students in the application process, students are also interviewed about their motivation to participate in the programme. Preferences may differ and some students report that they are interested in the substance, others clearly indicate that they participate in order to practice their English in a professional

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe 2007: Recommendation CM/Rec (2007) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the public responsibility for higher education and research.

surrounding, while others want to be challenged by giving a speech in front of 400 people. Of course there are also a number of students who are interested in the practical work of the United Nations with an on-site visit at its headquarters in New York.

When introducing the selected group during the first official session of the semester, students are requested to define and write down their own personal goals on a piece of paper. Students are aware that the goals they write down are their personal goals and they will not have to share the content. The papers are then put into envelopes with the students' names and collected. After returning from the conference in New York the envelopes are once again handed to the students so they can compare intended outcome with the achievement. Experience shows that most of the students by that time have long forgotten the envelopes, so when confronted with their own remarks they start reflecting on how the perception has changed due to experience. While this is an open process and nobody is forced to share their thoughts, the overwhelming majority of students participate in what becomes a lively discussion.

Another aspect contributing to the personal development of students in the project is the requirement to manage their own expectations. One part of the preparation process are different simulations of growing size with an increased diversity of participants from other universities. Students will enter these simulations with an expectation of what to achieve and how the meetings will go. While these expectations are not always very conscious, as soon as things develop in a different direction the participants are confronted with their own expectations. Sometimes this can even show up as anger or frustration. Daily debriefings including all members of the delegation and the tutors serve to discuss these situations and deal with emotions. While students report that these situations are the most challenging during the simulations, retrospectively they explain they learnt a lot about their own personality in these situations.

During the semester and in order to keep the preparation going, students form different subgroups with specific tasks for the delegation. Some groups are in charge of arranging sponsorship and take care of the finances, while others arrange the logistics and transportation, and a third group takes care of public relations and liaises with the media. Naturally these groups have to interact and coordinate their activities. However these groups are totally self-governed creating their own leadership structures. While the tutors as well as the lecturer provide some guidance and advice, the final decisions

on most of the issues lie with the groups. Consequently different conflict resolution mechanisms are developed within the groups as well as between the different groups. Students learn to act in different roles and to take over responsibility.

Finally – and this might be the most obvious focal point for personal development – the group travels together to New York City. As most students are even first time visitors to the United States the trip brings a lot of excitement and expectations while confronting many students as well with physically challenging situations due to jetlag as well as long and intense working hours.

### 2.3 Preparing students for active citizenship

Working in the above mentioned different subgroup configuration has another very important effect. Students recognise that it is their responsibility to find solutions that do not only serve the purpose but are also accepted by the whole group.

While the external lecturer reassures that the major milestones of the project can be achieved, students are actively involved in the learning process and in defining many details of the seminar and the simulations. Basically one of the experiences students make is to actively change the things instead of complaining. A typical example for this very practical learning experience is the attitude of students towards the schedule in simulations. After a number of mock simulations that only simulate a small part of the committee debate, in their first full day simulation students expect the simulation to break for lunch at the time outlined in the schedule. However it takes groups a different amount of time to recognise that the committee will only break for lunch once one of the members asks for the break. While this is a small and minor example, it stands for the fundamental learning experience of the students that each and every member of the committee has a responsibility for the flow of the debate. While nothing happens unless somebody takes the lead, things can develop in an unwanted direction unless someone starts speaking against it.

### 2.4 Interdisciplinary Character

TriMUN as well as EfMUN are projects open to students from different faculties encouraging dialogue across borders of disciplines and fostering a multifaceted exchange on the topics discussed in the committees in New York. Consequently the knowledge about and the perspectives on the United Nations are different when

students join the project. While the selection test also requires a basic level of knowledge about the UN, discussing the structures of the UN and explaining its mission as well as selected specifics of its working methods are part of the first sessions of the class. As this also includes a historical perspective, the different scientific approaches of the students lead to a variety of discussions encouraging students to leave their field-specific way of thinking and form their own opinion on the situation of the organization.

At a later point when students prepare for various committees the different backgrounds once again are beneficial. Some topics might be particularly interesting for students with a specific background while the same topic seems confusing or far too detailed for students lacking this background. In the weeks before flying to New York, students present their topics and their suggested solutions to the group. Due to the different perspectives, very often a lively debate occurs as other students add new points that could contribute to address the issue under debate.

One of the unintended outcomes of the interdisciplinary selection of students frequently is the intense socialising of participants across the boundaries of their own faculties. Once they discover that they have different approaches to comparable challenges, students continue the debates in the evenings and very often make new friends. While this can happen in every social surrounding, the particularity of the model UN experience can be found in the fact that these friendships often develop between actors that first looked at each other with certain prejudices. Experience with more than 14 years of teaching Model UN classes shows, that the friendships developed in the MUN class very often keep existing many years after graduation.

### 3. Teaching Model UN

After a basic introduction to the UN, the classes concentrate on the working methods and the rules of procedure required to succeed during the simulation. From a very early stage, theoretic teaching is combined with simulation of short committee situations in order to develop basic theoretic knowledge into skills required for practice. At this early point, when the basics of the rules of procedure are practiced, the substance of the discussion is of minor priority as the focus clearly is the method at this time. Early introduction of small simulations shall prevent students from acquiring a theoretical knowledge that is unsuitable for practical use. Misunderstandings can easily be

addressed at an early stage enabling students to develop advanced knowledge based on a foundation they truly understand instead of just reproducing it.

In a second step a structural analysis of UN documents follows, covering specifics of language as well as formal requirements. At this point also the differentiation between spoken and written diplomatic language is addressed by comparing real resolutions with published speeches on the same issue.

Step by step rules of procedure are practiced until uncomplicated voting procedures are simulated. At this time a first one-day simulation is held with an up to date topic. Students are assigned a country, research the topic and write their first position paper. The priority during this first simulation clearly is the practice of the correct use of the rules of procedure as well as practicing speeches in foreign language in front of the class.

The feedback on this first simulation is a priority in the session directly following this simulation. On the one hand the flow of committee can be discussed, on the other hand specific situations can be reconsidered and analysed. Based on the experience of their own performance rhetorical training and specifics of negotiation techniques are introduced in the class. Students are required to give short and spontaneous speeches on current events practicing rhetorical techniques.

In a next step, students participate in different smaller MUN conferences in Germany with a growing number of participants. This way they practice participation in committees of different sizes and representation of different Member States. When assigning the countries to students it is assured that each student represents developing countries as well as industrialized nations as well as countries in different geographic locations to reassure existing views and prejudices can be confronted with academic research as well as the experience to represent these countries positions.

Parallel to the different preparatory simulations and the research required from students on an individual level, the classes move on to cover specific aspects of the country represented at NMUN. History, culture, foreign relations as well as population, economy and trade relations are discussed during the classes. Individual students give presentations and discuss their findings with the group.



Two to three months before participating at NMUN the students are teamed up for their committees in New York. These assignments are based on student's preferences but also considering their strengths and potentials as well as performances in preparatory simulations.

### 3.1 The peer concept

As described, a central success factor for TriMUN as well as EfMUN is the team of tutors. Delegates of one TriMUN year share their experience with the next generation of students by organizing the weekly class. The external lecturer guides and supports them. However, most of the time his presence is limited to three weekend blocs for intense teaching. Consequently the in depth exchange on the proceedings of the semester between the different actors is important. Part of the concept is also the educational progress of the tutors. They act as chairpersons for the preparatory simulations; for this purpose they receive a coaching from the external lecturer providing them with the necessary skills and deeper understanding of the rules of procedure (Figures 1 & 2).

Also the group forms different self-governed organizational sub-groups responsible for different aspects of the group success. A travel and finance team arranges all logistical aspects for the preparatory simulations taking place across Germany while a PR team liaises with the press trying to promote the project.

Besides the potential that comes with the individual delegates, the guidance provided by the team of tutors is a major success factor of each delegation. First of all it has to be recognised that tutors are closer to the students and in some parts they meet these students in other classes where they once again meet on the same level. Consequently a clear definition of the role of tutors is important. They do support the delegation in their preparation, talk about their experience and cover many aspects of the rules of procedure from the practical point of view. The different roles will vary depending on the size of the group of tutors. As it is a volunteer position, the encouragement of students to become future tutors is equally important as setting the right tone with the new team every year.



Figure 1. The EfMUN Team– left to right: Sarah Duryea (head tutor), Thomas Weiler (guest), Mareike Voss, Dimttri Saramonow; Ronny Heintze (Lecturer), Paul Witzenhausen, Amalya Tonapetyan, Charlotte Krause, Sarah Zapf.

It is important to clarify on the different motivations tutors have to join the team. In an open discussion at the beginning of the year as part of the division of tasks in the team these different motivations are discussed as well as the particular interest of the tutors. The goal is to cover all duties while considering the individual preferences of the team. Later during the semester the aspect of conflict resolution becomes an issue as the challenges brought by the delegation need a unified approach by the team while individual opinions might differ. For this reason leadership training becomes a natural part of the position of the tutor. Of course the lecturer provides leadership and also moderates between the different positions of the tutors, while part of the teaching concept is to develop a joint position then is accepted by all actors. This position will be based on the long-standing experience of the lecturer while taking into consideration the demands of the current group and delegation as well as the talents of the group of tutors.



Figure 2. Team of Efmun 2014/15: Holger Bär NMUN Secretary General (guest), Ronny Heintze (Lecturer), Alia Smektala, Katja Sagerer, Jens Anderer, Sarah Duryea (head tutor), Lydia Weber, Florian Emmerich (guest), Julia Luther (guest), Florian Hader, Hosea Handoyo

One of the explicit targets every year is to recruit tutors with different cultural backgrounds. With a team size of four to seven tutors per year it is preferred to have at least one member in the team that is not a native German. There are two particular reasons for that. First of all with one of the actors not being native to the German language there is an immediate need to stick to English as the language of the project in every conversation. Secondly this decreases the likelihood of leaving cultural traps un-reflected upon when discussing intercultural awareness, which is a vital part of the NMUN experience.

### 3.2 Individual feedback

A key concept within teaching NMUN is direct, individual, fair, and appreciative feedback. In the early sessions of the semester students are encouraged to develop their own priorities and understand the project as a joint learning activity that can help them develop not only particular skills connected to negotiations, intercultural awareness, or knowledge about the United Nations, but much more to achieve personal growth besides academic advancement. It is important to create an atmosphere of openness and trust. For this purpose also social activities are integral part of the project.

Based on this atmosphere students will receive individual feedback on the different tasks they fulfil or presentations they provide. During preparatory simulations, nightly debriefing sessions serve the purpose of group feedback where general aspects are addressed. During the meeting hours however students are offered a face-to-face feedback on their performance. The goal of this feedback format is to help each student

advance from their current status. Consequently a strong presenter will receive a more critical reflection on small details of his or her performance, while students who are obviously much more nervous and inexperienced when it comes to presenting in front of a large group will receive more advice on how to fight an insecure presence.

Feedback on this level never happens uninvited and always is presented respectfully with a clear focus on specific actions that a student could try to implement to improve his or her performance. An important aspect is also the follow-up to these feedback conversations, when the experience of the students is discussed on how they felt trying to implement the suggestions. At every stage students are first encouraged to provide a self-assessment in order to use this as a starting point for the external feedback. Very often students are well aware of their own weaknesses while they do not find right way how to address them. Besides providing specific suggestions to students, a very successful model is also to connect students with a comparable challenges amongst each other. This allows for an open conversation and very often creates support tandems where students jointly advance step-by-step with some support from the lecturer whenever it might be needed.

### 3.3 Position papers

Position papers strongly reflect the level of academic preparation for a simulation. In a position paper students demonstrate not only breadth and depth of their research on a certain topic, they also demonstrate their understanding of the policy of the represented country.

Students are required to write position papers for every preparatory simulation they attend. Step-by-step they learn how to use diplomatic language in a written format and how to explain their countries position while at the same time leaving enough room for the different outcomes in the negotiations. Writing these papers also requires students to acquire topic specific language skills before entering a simulation. With a strong emphasis on soft skills and oral presentation abilities, position papers create the counterbalance, as they require advanced writing skills and the ability to outline complex challenges and solutions on a very limited space.

Additionally the quality of the position paper forms one of the cornerstones of student's assessment. Writing at least three papers that are used in the preparation process of

smaller simulations, students receive feedback on style and content of their papers. Considering the development from paper to paper only the final one written for NMUN is then considered relevant for their final grade. This method particularly allows students with a weaker proficiency of English language to develop the required skills over a time period of at least six months.

### 3.4 Language

English proficiency is one of the requirements to enter the NMUN preparation class at the university. However, due to the intended interdisciplinary character of the project as well as due to diversity in student's biographies, students arrive with different levels of English proficiency. Within TriMUN/EfMUN, English language must be seen as the only practicable language as usually the class is quite popular also with exchange students who might only have limited knowledge of German language at all. The course is set up in a way that students constantly are required to use spoken as well as written English.

However one priority in the didactics of the course is given to the eradication of psychological boundaries to practice spoken English language. From the beginning students are provided with appreciative feedback also on their language skills focusing on their strong points and achievements, without neglecting to point out their potential for improvement. In both written and spoken language usually the style of students develops from a more informal one to one that is more diplomatic and formal. Quite often students are reluctant to use a more formal language in the beginning as they might not be familiar with the vocabulary or might not deem such constructions to be appropriate for their position.

One of the targets in the selection procedure every year is to recruit students with an international background who do not necessarily have an advanced understanding of German language. This way very quickly it is guaranteed that English is the only common language between all actors. However, particularly students with a weaker entry level of English usually profit heavily from the academic surrounding that uses English as an inevitable tool. While students feel that the focus of their attention is the development of other skills, they improve not only their active vocabulary, much more they start feeling comfortable using English language when expressing their point of views.

Recognizing the diverse backgrounds of TriMUN as well as EfMUN students, when asked what is one of their personal targets for the class, a number of students will always point out that they want to learn how to speak in front of a large group of people. When asked how they assess their own progress after NMUN, very often students are satisfied with their level of achievement on this target outlining that they implicitly also progressed a lot in their English skills.

Inevitably in order to reach, in order to progress in English language proficiency, English is the only accepted language at any given time when students interact regarding the project. Very quickly students understand, that switching to German language usually excludes at least one or two people from understanding. Step-by-step students learn that particularly in a diplomatic surrounding excluding others by using a language that not everybody speaks can be perceived to be offensive. While in the early sessions of the class this language-policy often seems very strict it is interesting to observe that once students participate in preparatory simulations on a national level, they start complaining that other groups use German language amongst themselves.

Of course it cannot be ignored that some vocabulary is not available to all students from the beginning. For this purpose students are encouraged to describe what they want to say with different words – even if that might seem complicated – and in the worst-case scenario include the missing word in German in their statement. Out of reflex other students then come up with different suggestions what the appropriate English word could be. This way step-by-step students improve their English language skills while treating this development as a natural process.