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Development Sustained: Searching for Fresh Sustenance

ABSTRACT

In this article, I describe the evolution of Introduction to UN Studies, a four-skills-one-semester course in which EFL students research, discuss, and present on topics in discussion at the UN on behalf of a Member State. Its evolution is intertwined with my role as Faculty Adviser for a student Model United Nations (MUN) committee at a Japanese university in Chiba, a role without which there would have been no course. After observing members of our MUN committee at a student conference in the USA, I recognised the need for a course that emphasised specific speaking skills. Since 2020, the course has gone through four iterations and, from 2021, has been taught at a second university in Tokyo, serving a wider community than the initial group. In my LD30 Conference presentation, I discussed responses from over 70 students to a survey I administered and sought ideas in my search for fresh sustenance.

Keywords: course development, faculty adviser, global studies, MUN

DEVELOPMENT ACT 1: DAMASCENE MOMENTS

In late 2018, I was approached by the incumbent Faculty Adviser of my university's Model United Nations (MUN) student group and asked to take over in March 2019. Having experience in studying world politics, I accepted his request and followed his advice. In April 2019, I registered to participate in the November 2019 student MUN conference in Washington DC. We expected to send eight students and chose from a list of countries that required a delegation of that number. Most delegations with eight members sat on four committees, and from our choices, the organisers gave us the challenging and delicate task of representing the *Syrian Arab Republic*. From May to November, I gave weekly assistance and advice to students in the MUN group who worked on topics for four of eight UN committees that students would sit on at the conference (see NMUN 1). Prior to flying to the US, this advice culminated in the students submitting four position papers to the conference organisers.

1.1 PREPARATIONS

Preparing students to role-play being a Syrian delegate meant that I had to put them in the unenviable position of representing Bashar al-Assad's government – and in a second language, to boot. This may have presented an ethical dilemma for some students, impossible and immoral some might say, but it was a student role play for a conference in Washington with almost 1000 students from around the world. These students had every incentive to learn their lines and rise to their roles. It was an opportunity to do well in an activity that requires creative thinking and the construction of

new identities. Factual topics were acted upon in a fictional dimension – on a stage, as it were, in the USA. We referred to the real world in the full knowledge that it was a simulation.

As the adviser, I assisted and encouraged students to develop the knowledge and language required to be a Syrian diplomat. They had to understand their topics and discuss ideas with delegates from other countries in DC. My dilemma was twofold: firstly, how realistically should I approach it, and, secondly, how could I prepare them for the language demands they would face? Should a faculty adviser consider confrontational claims that were available online and were welcomed by real Syrian diplomats? Maybe not, but in the spirit of the conference (whereby students ‘acted’ a role) I counselled them to take realistic positions in their committees - and this helped us to gain recognition through an *Honourable Mention Delegation* award, and plaudits for an *Outstanding Position Paper* in the General Assembly First Committee - the latter of which required awareness of geopolitical realities and having a realistic Syrian position (NMUN-DC 2019).

1.2 THE COURSE: WORKING ON DAMASCENE MOMENTS

After returning to Japan, I considered some Damascene moments that I experienced in DC when recognising the need for a course based on researching, discussing, and presenting on topics on behalf of a Member State. I fully realised the importance of Agenda 2030 and the need to reference SDGs more skilfully when discussing global issues. I was informed that such a course would have to be of service to a wider community, but, perhaps because the university had won at least one position paper award at the NMUN (National Model United Nations) tournament in Washington DC for four consecutive years, the proposal for a new course was accepted and implemented from May 2020. The course focused on contemporary topics, with an emphasis on how each country could help work towards meeting sustainable development goals while using activities that optimised discussion. I continued being the faculty adviser to the university MUN group and now taught *Introduction to UN Studies*.

DEVELOPMENT ACT 2 – YEAR 1: WHEN HERCULES SEIZED US

Table 1: The course taught at 2 universities (2020 to 2024)

	Year	University 1 English Communication majors	University 2 Politics, Economics & Law majors
1	2020	Introduction to UN Studies* (online)	
2	2021	Introduction to UN Studies* (online)	English C 1** (online) English C 2*** (online)
3	2022	Introduction to UN Studies* (classroom)	English C 1** (classroom) English C 2*** (classroom)
4	2023	Introduction to UN Studies* (classroom)	English C 1** (classroom) English C 2*** (classroom)

* Elective for English Communication majors

** Compulsory for first year Politics and Economics majors

*** Compulsory for first year Law majors

I therefore spent the months preceding the start of the academic year 2020-21 planning a new course to cater for the needs of students in the MUN group and also for those outside the group who were interested in the topics. It was designed to focus on discussion skills without the use of a textbook, and I sought to recycle material from past conferences and use topics from the UN News website. COVID-19, however, made its fateful appearance and prevented the classes from being taught in person. Despite this uncertainty, I proceeded to teach the course online and registered the university for the 2020

NMUN-DC conference. We were able to plan for what would be an online-only conference in November 2020, where we had the challenge of representing the *Argentine Republic*.

The students who registered for the first iteration of the elective *Introduction to UN Studies* course were mainly MUN group members. Class topics were from contemporary UN News items and were chosen because of their relevance to committees that students would sit on at the conference. Representing countries in small groups, the students researched issues related to a pandemic, an environmental issue, and discrimination. The MUN committee had separate weekly meetings where they could concentrate on their research and issues related to committees they would sit on in the conference (see NMUN 2). There was much cross-pollination between the course and the group, and the course helped to unify the students, which, in turn, helped students focus on the conference. Student evaluations were based on class performance, vocabulary tests, and written reflections.

In the online conference, students were hampered by Wi-Fi issues. They were unable to use some skills that we had studied in the course; however, the persistence of the students won them admiration for their ‘herculean’ efforts. They had researched professionally before the conference, and because of their erudition eight students won recognition via four *Outstanding Position Paper* awards (NMUN-DC, 2020). They achieved this through their hard work, but the course had undoubtedly played a major part. After the first year of the course, the university had won its highest number of awards at NMUN-DC.

DEVELOPMENT ACT 3 - YEAR 2: AND CARACAS FACED SANCTIONS...

Following the MUN group’s success in the student conference, the evening elective *Introduction to UN Studies* course attracted more students from the university. I also started teaching the course at a second university in Tokyo – as a CLIL course titled *English C* to students from the Faculty of Law (and also to Economics and Politics students). Partially because of the increased workload, but mainly because of the global importance of SDGs, I chose to use an SDG-focused textbook (Sasajima et al, 2021) for themes and basic readings of topics that could be used in role plays and diplomatic simulations. The pattern of the course in 2021 was almost indistinguishable from the 2022 curriculum in Table 2 below.

In 2021, however, using Google Forms, I tested students on vocabulary knowledge, something which I phased out in 2022 in favour of written reflections that students could upload onto the class Google Classroom site. In class, I designed role plays based around one or more of the SDGs that we had studied and followed this with diplomatic simulations that replicated the type of discussions and speeches that MUN students experience at a MUN conference. Student evaluations were again based on class performance, vocabulary tests, and written reflections. At the end of the course, I continued an ungraded experiment that I tried at the end of year one, viz., to get all students (countries) to work together and write a working paper on one topic.

Table 2: *Introduction to UN Studies - 2022*

	Class	Homework
1	Introduction. Quiz! Choose a country	World Factbook data
2	Your country: culture, history & geopolitics	Presentations
3	Role Play 1: <i>A Pandemic</i>	Unit 1 / SDG 1 and 2
4	Topic #1 – Poverty	Unit 2 / SDG 3
5	Topic #2 – Health	Unit 5- 6 / SDG 6-7
6	Topic #3 – Water & Energy	Discussion questions
7	Discussion and reflection	Role Play prep
8	Role Play 2: <i>A Pressing Issue</i>	Unit 3 / SDG 4
9	Topic #4 – Education	Unit 4 / SDG 5+10

	Class	Homework
10	Topic #5 – Gender	Unit 7 / SDG 8
11	Topic #6 – Work & Economic Growth	Discussion questions
12	Discussion and reflection	Role Play prep
13	Preparation for role play 3	Role Play prep
14	Role Play 3: <i>An Urgent Issue!</i>	Role Play prep
15	Final discussions and reflections	Reflections

As in 2019 and 2020, I registered the MUN group again for the Washington DC conference. In 2021, we were assigned to represent the *Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*. Due to successes in past conferences, two full-time teachers were scheduled to assist the MUN group committee meetings, and we prepared ourselves to represent a country with two leaders: President Maduro and Western-backed President Guaido. It was a fascinating educational assignment, and we had a student leader who would have (with the use of a fake moustache) passed as a double for Nicolas Maduro! Unfortunately, we were unable to perform in DC that year: the conference was in-person, and the university's COVID-era school policies were not revoked in time. We had our costumes; we knew our lines – but we could not perform that year. In 2021, though, some of the MUN group participated in an online Harvard Model United Nations (HMUN) conference.

DEVELOPMENT ACT 4 - YEAR 3: A KINSHASA CURTAILMENT

In 2022, the course was taught again in the classroom at the two universities following a return to face-to-face classes after the pandemic. As in the first two years, class one saw students choose a country to represent. For the rest of the semester, students studied topics through activities that led to three role plays. Again, the role plays were based on and designed around current global issues that were in discussion at the UN and, if possible, related to the NMUN-DC conference. Alongside the use of the textbook, I continued to create worksheets that simplified UN News articles and made more use of other resources, such as Jeremy Sachs's annually-updated SDG Dashboard (see Sachs et al, 2023) and various other news databases. Students were now evaluated on class performance and written reflections. There were no vocabulary tests. Post-course evaluations showed that students were happy with the course.

In April 2022, for the fourth time, I registered to represent a country at the NMUN-DC conference, and, because of a student request, we applied and were accepted to represent the *Democratic Republic of the Congo* (DRC) at NMUN-DC 2022. Immediately, the student group held weekly meetings with a focus on the possible committees we would sit on. However, because of issues related to COVID-19, the student group was unable to secure funds, but having already registered for the conference, we sought to attend a separate NMUN conference in Kobe (NMUN-Kobe). We were allowed to do so, but on the condition that some students represent the *Republic of Madagascar*. Representing the DRC and Madagascar was a challenge that exceeded our capacity, but the experience was memorable, and the course was more popular than ever.

DEVELOPMENT ACT 5 - YEAR 4: A FINE FINNISH?

By the end of 2023, the elective *Introduction to UN Studies* had had four iterations, and the compulsory same-content *English C* courses three. They were working better than ever. *Introduction to UN Studies* attracted almost 30 students for an evening class, and the *English C* courses had just over the same number. It seems that the format (of putting students into country groups) and the topics that I had chosen were popular. For the fourth iteration, I changed the course textbook to Yoshihara et al's (2022) discussion-based SDG text because the text provided a stable and engaging base for

a wider group of students. I still designed my own material though and one self-designed activity is referred to in the *Tangible Benefits from Intangible Practices* article in this volume.

In November 2023, MUN students from my university were able to participate in the NMUN-DC conference for the first time since 2020. The impact of COVID-19 had grave financial implications for the group, but through the determination of students, the group survived. Without my role as Faculty Adviser for this group, there would have been no impetus to create the course covered in this paper, and the cessation of the group may have led to the end of *Introduction to UN Studies*.

If the end was nigh for the group (it isn't), then the finale was a fantastic one. Fantastic in the sense of extraordinary and exceptional. After registering the university in April for a country that required four students, the organisers met our request to represent the *Republic of Finland*. After Syria, Argentina, Venezuela, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Madagascar – we now had Finland, the newest member of NATO. Compared to our previous assignments, this was a country with a broadly similar geopolitical orientation to Japan, but as with all of the above – we had to act. We had to play a role. We had to rehearse our lines. With the support of many teachers, including Bladimie Germain and Chelanna White, the students had a great team that helped them prepare.

The university did everything within its power to help us, and with a student crowdfunding campaign (Campfire, 2023), four students and the faculty adviser were able to attend the DC conference in November 2023. The students prepared exceptionally well, and their performance was extraordinary. The four students (or, as I christened them, the 'Finnish Four') worked together to make an impact in discussions and the production of conference Working Papers. They achieved the university's best-ever performance in DC (RU 2). The four won a *Distinguished Delegation Award* for the first time and three papers were given *Outstanding Position Awards* (NMUN-DC, 2023). All of these students had at some point in their university lives taken and/or assisted in *Introduction to UN Studies*.

THE LD30 CONFERENCE: SUSTENANCE SUPPLIED

In July 2023, I distributed questionnaires to students from the three courses, and through their responses I obtained sustenance. Below I shall discuss the findings of the questionnaire and add my comments together with input from participants at the LD30 Conference. My questions sought to discover if students were very satisfied, satisfied, or not satisfied. I had been satisfied with the way the course had evolved, and through discussions at the conference I realised that I unknowingly used many of John Hattie's (2012) recommended practices for teachers – such as having high expectations (p. 81), focusing on effect over method (p.83), and working to activate and evaluate learning (p. 86).

I shall now briefly comment on student evaluation of the textbook, the topics, and Google Classroom, and afterward discuss student satisfaction, role-plays, and speeches in more depth. There was almost unanimous satisfaction reported for the choice of textbook and topics. 77% of all students were very *satisfied* with the topics, which is rewarding as in 2023 I used challenging topics such as anti-gay laws in Uganda (Madowo & Feleke, 2023) for the class on gender, and the situation in Haiti for the class on poverty. To make these classes work, I had to make sure students used Google Classroom to complete homework before class and after class. This may have been one reason why a majority of students were *satisfied* (49%) more than very *satisfied* (44%). Possibly I need to reduce the amount of homework that I give students.

i. Student satisfaction

I was happy that almost 80% of students from *Introduction to UN Studies* and an average of 71% of students from all three courses were very satisfied. I placed a lot of demands on myself in creating material, and on students in preparing for class and in writing reflections: to see such a positive response is pleasing. The overwhelmingly positive responses show that the course was worthwhile for a wider community. The vast majority of students took the course to further their knowledge and improve their English skills while doing so. They benefited because they studied topics that

deepened their understanding of global issues, and in the case of the Politics, Economics, and Law students in the English C courses this connected to their major studies in Japanese.

ii. Role plays and discussions

I was satisfied with the organisation of role plays and discussions. Before discussion and role plays began, students worked in pairs on questions based on their homework. Role plays and discussions began after students had the time to understand the basics. In the case of anti-gay laws referred to above, the question 'How should we respond to anti-LGBTQ laws in Uganda?' was used as a source for discussions - and for a role play. Students were given up to five 'sub' questions that would allow them to consider their responses. The questions were discussed within country groups at first, and, afterwards, as a role-play, between the country groups. Before the discussions and the role-play, the teacher encouraged students to consider their country contexts and to use the homework worksheets together with additional data put on a PowerPoint. Over three-quarters of students were *very satisfied* with such role plays and discussions, but I think there is room for improvement by spending more time attending to questions arising from homework. In other words, I should spend more time answering the students' questions following their homework assignments. By doing this, more students will understand the topics more clearly and feel more confident when they move on to discuss the topic and finally take part in the role-play.

iii. Giving speeches

Speeches followed the discussion and role plays and were based on an opinion that I introduced about the class topic. For example, in the case of our lesson on anti-LGBTQ laws in Uganda, I informed the class that the Lao People's Democratic Republic had a proposal that, while respecting Ugandan sovereignty, called to protect and promote human rights for all and called for the rescission of discriminatory laws. Each country had the opportunity to respond to the opinion and create a short 'position speech'. They were informed that they should spend between 30 to 90 seconds on their speeches.

The majority of students, again, were *very satisfied* but 40% were merely satisfied with the speeches – and 1% were not satisfied. The speeches were a part of every role-play class (and sometimes regular classes) and could be written about in their reflections. To make students even more satisfied, perhaps there is a need to standardise the speech component of the course and enforce total participation. However, doing that would take away from student agency and make teacher authority a little too overt: I believe that asking students to volunteer to make speeches promotes student empowerment.

THE SEARCH CONTINUES

To make the course work, and meet the demands of the student group, there has been pressure to consider contemporary topics and new situations. This will continue if the course and my responsibilities continue. However, it has been rewarding to see students thrive and empower themselves in situations that I helped engender. The courses that I have written have been successful in various iterations, and it seems that the right mix of activities and topics has been used. The cross-pollination between the course and the student group has been mutually beneficial, but perhaps now is the time to refine my approach and the activities. I know how to sustain the development of such courses, so perhaps I am well-placed to teach in a way that ensures that no one is left behind.

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