Small Island States

Contact:
Mary Thorpe
The Open University
m.s.thorpe@open.ac.uk
0044 (0)1908 655204

Abstract
Students prepare for an online group role play as members of the Association of Small Island States, by searching and analyzing information from the Web on one small island state. Each student makes proposals to their group about the requirements of their small island for actions and reparations by the United Nations. The group has to agree on a statement made as if to the UN about actions and reparations that would be sent from AOSIS representing the needs of the small island states in the group. This promotes evaluation of data and synthesisation of competing views and priorities around sustainable development.

Description
Students towards the end of their degree in Environmental Studies study the mandatory course U316 The Environmental Web. Students study online for the majority of the study time and interact within tutor groups from the first week of the course. Over the first two months of study students are directed to using the Web for study tasks and these feed forward into an online role play which is the culmination of work for the first assignment. Students are assigned one of the small island states, follow instructions for collecting and documenting data about their small island, formulate the environmental situation for their island and upload that to their tutor group online. Within the group, they role play a meeting of the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) in order to construct a consensus around a statement to be made to the UN for reparations and priority actions for Small Island States. 35% of the marks in the first assignment are given for reflection on the process of constructing this statement and the student's own role in doing that. The activity overall, including the individual work before online discussion, takes around ten hours, with approximately three hours for the role play discussion as part of that.

Audience/Group size
Approximately 450 students study this course and work through a carefully designed sequence of individual activities and study, integrated with online discussion. The online role play activity involves about 20 students, with a tutor in the background but not taking an active moderating role unless problems arise. The main group may be split into smaller groups to role play AOSIS if preferred.

Time and Setting
The role play is not freestanding but part of a sequence of designed activities where individual preparation is essential for the online role play stage.
Students are experienced, usually undertaking the course towards the end of a degree.

The design of the activities is not dependent on a strong tutor moderating role, although tutors are present if support is required.

Assessment is important for student engagement but the design of the role play ensures that students do learn as a result of the interaction.

Learning Opportunities

Participants have identified learning outcomes as follows:

o Identification with a small island state and its needs in depth
o Skills in clearly communicating the relationship between data and environmental issues for particular states/geographical areas
o Ability to argue effectively and present reasoned proposals
o Reflection on the learning process and one's own role
o Understanding of the benefits – as well as the time constraints - of working collaboratively online

Resources

The Environmental Web course team constructed the role play activity as part of an online course designed to represent half a full-time university year of study, for students studying within the UK Open University. The role play is completed as part of the build up to the first assignment during the first few weeks of the course. Students study environmental sites on the web but are not required to contact the Association of Small Island States or other organizations.

Assessment

Students upload their assignment, which is prepared and marked as for each individual student by their tutor, electronically. Students are required to produce the group consensus (there is a let out 'clause' if they cannot agree) but this does not count towards the marks. 35% of the marks are given for each student's personal reflection on the process of the online role play and the part that they personally played in that and the construction of a consensus.

Learning Activities

Step 1: Assign a different small island state to each student. Students gather data on the topography and main features of the island and input that into a prepared table online
Step 2: Students gather information from the web about the likely environmental impacts on their island and write this up as a text summary.
Step 3: Students collect data on the carbon dioxide emissions of their island and the energy sources used, adding this to their data table.
Step 4: Each student uploads to their online study group a statement about the claims that would be appropriate for their island to make to the UN.
Step 5: The online study group role plays a meeting of the Association of Small Island States in order to reach a consensus on a statement that can be sent to the UN covering the reparations and actions required by small island states.
Step 6: Completion individually of the first assignment on the course, drawing on the role play and preparation activities.

Facilitator issues

The design of the sequence of activity is the responsibility of a course team. Each student group has a tutor who is a resource if required, but does not lead the activity with their group. The interaction, including the role play, is very well scripted by the course materials.

Reusability

The design of this combination of individual and group online role play could be adapted to many other subject areas. The design is tightly linked with course learning outcomes and individual preparation plays a key role in the quality of the role play activity that follows.

References

Thorpe, M. (2008) Effective Online Interaction: mapping Course Design to Bridge from Research to Practice, *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*