

PACIFICA

A PLANNING COMMITTEE MEETING: PUBLIC HEALTH

ABSTRACT

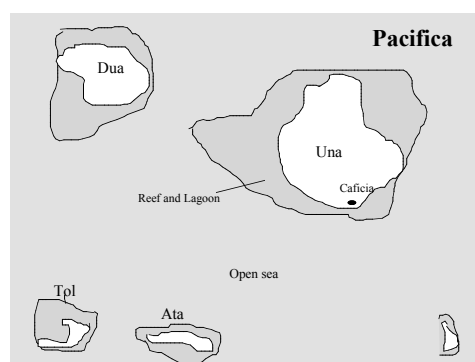
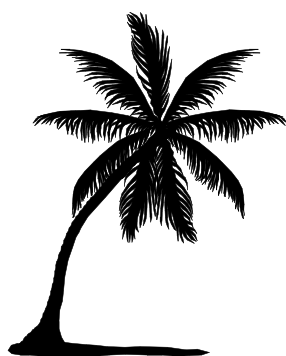
Post-graduate students participated in an online role-play in which they were assigned roles as members of an inter-sectoral national Policy Planning Committee in a distance Masters Degree course. A major course outcome was for students to appreciate the political dimensions of policy formulation and to understand that it is not just a matter of researching and analyzing relatively objective data. The online environment offered these distance students a real opportunity to learn about the complexity of policy negotiation.

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KEYWORDS

WebCT, policy, e-learning, public health, policy planning, health education, case-based learning, food and nutrition, policy formation, negotiation, EnRoLE.



DESCRIPTION

Food and Nutrition Policy Studies, is a subject in a distance Masters in Public Health course at the University of New South Wales. The subject introduced students to a staged model of food and nutrition policy development during which students analyzed the food and nutrition situation in a hypothetical community (the 'Pacifica' case study). Having practiced the steps of the model with the case study, their assessment task was to apply the same model in developing a food and nutrition policy for a real community that they have selected themselves.

An important outcome of the subject was exploring the complex negotiations that arise as players with different sectional interests engage in the process of policy development. Students were offered the opportunity to participate in an online role-play of policy development as part of their assessment, in place of a video- or audio-recorded oral defence of their written policy.

Players adopted a public persona which was defined by the case study and known to everyone; some additional aspects of the private persona were provided to each participant. Within these boundaries, participants were given a certain degree of freedom as to how they chose to develop their character.

AUDIENCE/GROUP SIZE

Groups from 5 – 10 seem to work well. Parallel 'committees' are possible for larger numbers. Each student was assigned to represent a different sectional interest on the Pacifica Food and Nutrition Policy Planning Committee. The 'Planning Committee' had two main tasks. They were to participate in a series of Committee meetings in which they were to:

- (a) prioritize six food-related health outcomes (the health outcomes were provided in the case study); and
- (b) propose strategies to achieve the first priority outcome.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Participation in the actual negotiations gives the students an appreciation of the complexity of the politics of food and nutrition.

TIME AND SETTING

Conducted over a 2 week timeframe (3-4 weeks recommended) among volunteer students in a fully distance elective course. All aspects of the role play (briefing, 'in role' participant interaction, debriefing) occurred online.

RESOURCES

Discussion board in WebCT or similar Learning Management System (LMS). It is possible to also use asynchronous/synchronous group discussion.

Student resources include instructions; role descriptors; case study; reflective essay instructions.

A facilitator may be required to intervene to prompt participation if slow at the beginning and/or to remind participants of the guidelines.

ASSESSMENT

Participation in the role play formed part of the assessment for this subject. Students were assessed by monitoring online interactions and from their written reflections on how participation in the role-play contributed to their learning.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Briefing (1 week)

Participants were briefed and introduced themselves and their assigned roles on the planning committee. A chair may be assigned or elected. Sufficient time was required to re-read the case study notes and to prepare themselves for their roles.

Role play of planning process (1-2 weeks)

The committee was asked to prioritize a set of key outcomes.

Once the first priority was established (or at least one outcome was agreed on), participants were asked to provide possible strategies and a time line.

The process was repeated for the second priority and so on as time permits.

Debriefing (1 week)

Once the role play was completed, participants were asked to reflect on their learning.

REUSABILITY

- Transferable across Learning Management Systems;
- As a policy development activity it could be implemented in other teaching contexts aiming to explore the complexity of policy formulation and negotiation;
- Additional triggers can be integrated, as and if needed;
- Could be utilized in undergraduate and postgraduate contexts;

REFERENCES

Craig P, Bloomfield L. An experience with conducting a role-play in decision making for a food and nutrition policy. ascilite 2006, University of Sydney: Sydney
http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney06/proceeding/pdf_papers/p207.pdf