

Venezuela Simulation

KEYWORDS

Venezuela, Oil, Chavez, US, Democracy, Grassroots, Elites, Negotiation, Confrontation, Polarisation, Media



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ABSTRACT

*This Role Play Simulation on Venezuela arose almost as a surprise in response to the dramatic events of the coup staged in 2002, and an account of the events in an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Thanks to my adventurous former colleague, Ian Clegg, now retired, and formerly of CDS (Centre for Development Studies) at Swansea University, we decided to use the Venezuela role play simulation in the Foundation course for new Masters students. This Quixotic enterprise was then 'carried' over to the ISS (Institute of Social Studies) in The Netherlands. Here the Venezuelan Embassy soon became involved and things turned too real for my liking. The simulation was last run in 2007, and proved so polarised as to allow almost nobody much room for manoeuvre. With Obama in power, we may just wait a year or two and run it again, however.*



Nora Castañeda of the Women's Development Bank:
One of the most active roles in the RPS



Quixotic adventures in Venezuelan politics:
Through the Looking Glass

Description

"We had a deadly weapon: the media" announced a journalist just hours before the temporary coup against President Chavez in 2002. The Venezuela: Justice and Rights in Development Role Play Simulation explored how social justice could be realized and reconciled with respect for human rights in Venezuela. Economic and social as well as civil and political rights were central, as were efforts to protect, promote and fulfil all basic rights of Venezuelans. The backdrop was the highly contested nature of democratic politics in the country. Students played actors from across civil society, from the government, other Latin American countries, international community roles, and national and global media. To experience how different actors and institutions might (or might not) maneuver within this middle- to high-income Latin American country, was the main purpose of the exercise. Highly polarised

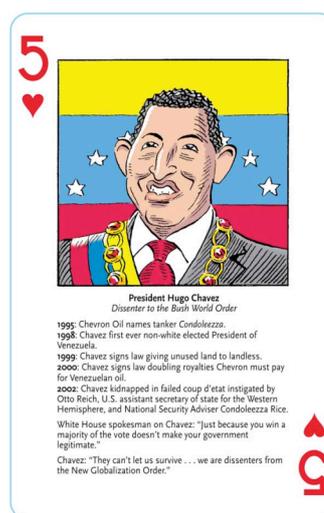
political discourses between the Left and Right in the country imply that ‘human rights’ may clash with ‘social justice’.

The Venezuela Simulation used the Fablusi platform, which includes Sim-mail, chats and posting of messages to forums, as well as regular media reports and possibilities for uploading shared files. Over a two week period, students use mainly sim-mail and chat, as well as special forums. Their ideas about how conflict can undermine rights and justice evolved. Evaluations tended to see this exercise as fun, and a good way of learning about complexity even in very polarised situations like that in Venezuela. Over four years, there was positive student feedback. This can be illustrated in polarised devil-hero images found on the web, like these:



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Chavez as villain



Chavez as far-sighted leader

Audience/Group-size

In both Swansea University and the Institute of Social Studies, postgraduate Masters students were asked to work, mostly in pairs. Some preferred to work on their own. The number of simulation characters was flexible so that there could be some choice of roles. We noticed that each year fewer and fewer students were interested in taking on the role of President Hugo Chavez, until in the end we had to draft candidates for that role, who then found it overwhelmingly difficult. The simulation ran several times, with between 25 and 55 students each time.

Play Organisation & Assessment

The simulation is set two or three weeks in the future, and runs for two weeks, plus a week preparation and a week debriefing. The characters are played in the students' own time. A real-time conference of two to three hours ended the Simulation, based on issues students discussed throughout. Assessment was based on adequate participation (required) and an end-of-sim set of reflections (total 500 words).

Reflections on Learning Opportunities

Participant students taking on a role could:

- Learn about how government and social actors relate in a context unlike most others.
- Gain insights into local dynamics of rights and how they interact with justice also regionally
- Acquire generic teamwork, creativity, public-speaking and stress-management skills

Links

A key resource, which stimulated this choice of topic in the first place, appeared in Le Monde Diplomatique in 2002. This can be accessed on: <http://www.zmag.org/znet/viewArticle/11691>

For reflections of instructor: <http://www.leagueofworlds.com/quixotic-moves-online>

The demo can be accessed at: http://www.fablusi.com/renderer/launch.asp?simID=rps2_314uxq-2jpk