STRUCTURED DELEGATE TRAINING: WADING IN OR JUMPING IN THE DEEP END?\*

Abstract

Students who are new to Model UN often express self-doubt and hesitance when faced with the large informational task of policy research, policy statement writing, and speech preparation required. There are two schools of thought on how to overcome this hesitance. One is to build a lattice of smaller assignments to help the student gradually acquire the skills and confidence needed. The other is to place the student as soon as realistically possible into a simulation that requires rapid skill acquisition. This paper recounts the trade-off between a go-slow approach that builds skills but may not inspire, and a go-fast approach that requires tremendous effort but delivers rewards large enough to foster motivation.

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WHAT IS MODEL UNITED NATIONS?

Model United Nations is a very popular program for students, especially those majoring in international relations. This paper examines two different approaches to training students to participate in a Model United Nations conference. Before getting into these approaches, it may be helpful for the uninitiated to explain what Model United Nations is and why students need training to do it well.

Model UN is a simulation of a meeting at the United Nations. Students attend a conference to participate that typically has hundreds of students participating. The students pretend to be a diplomat for a given country and research a few issues that are prominent in the global community today. At conference, the student is a delegate in a specific committee room with 30 to 50 other students, each of whom is pretending to represent a different country. The students discuss the issues they have prepared and negotiate with each other to craft a UN resolution on each topic that reflects their country's national interests.

A Model UN conference presents an immersive, experiential learning experience for students. They are able to put into practice the concepts of international relations they learned through books in class. They also develop important life skills as the conference is conducted on a professional level, using rules of procedure and maintaining diplomatic decorum. Most students who participate find this experience deeply rewarding. They return again and again to attend additional conferences. A mature MUN program harnesses this energy and provides opportunities for students to demonstrate leadership and organizational skills as they help to train new delegates. “Addicted” is not too strong a word to describe many students' passion for Model UN once they are introduced to it.

That is not the experience for all students, however. Some students are ill-prepared for the academic and social demands of a Model UN conference. They may struggle to produce the written work necessary prior to conference or to be able to engage in the public speaking and vigorous negotiation that occurs at conference. These students may be drawn into their struggle, resulting in their Model UN experience being defined by embarrassment or frustration. These students are unlikely to return to future conferences or help train new delegates. Avoiding this outcome is one of the main reasons a Model UN advisor should be intentional in constructing the training environment for delegates.

THE SKILLS NEEDED TO SUCCEED AT MODEL UNITED NATIONS

Model United Nations is an academic program, so it is quite demanding of students. While MUN certainly has a social element, it is more than simply a student club or competitive team. In order to guarantee that everyone in the room has a minimal level of competence, most MUN conferences require delegates to submit written work prior to attending. The form this work takes varies from conference to conference. They typically involve writing a policy brief or statement that demonstrates understanding of the issues the students will debating. These policy briefs include the history of UN involvement on that topic, foundational resolutions that govern UN action, lead agencies, and current initiatives dealing with that topic. In addition to understanding the issue being debated, the brief also requires an understanding of the country being represented. Included in the brief is information about how the topic effects a given country, that country's domestic law related to the topic, and current domestic and regional initiatives the country is participating in. Finally, the brief includes the country's position on that topic. Model UN briefs are not creative writing, the students must learn their country’s actual position on a topic so that they can accurately reflect that position when role-playing in committee.

In order to complete this policy brief, students need to have a solid understanding of the United Nations as an institution. They also need to have excellent research skills to discover historic and contemporary details of the issue as well as the country-specific information relating to that topic. Once they have successfully researched the country and topic, they then need to be able to write professionally at a high level in order to integrate all of this information into a concise statement of policy.

After the preparation materials have been submitted, the students need to learn how to navigate procedural rules in order to be able to speak and be effective in a formal committee setting. They also need to know how to construct and deliver persuasive speeches, something that is terrifying to most students. In addition to formal speeches, they need to master the give-and-take of negotiation. Finally, all of these skills and tasks need to be delivered in a mature, diplomatic tone and demeanor.

This is quite the skill set for anyone to master, especially new delegates who may be just beginning their program of study and have not had the coursework to acquire competency in written and verbal communication or critical thinking. The task before a Model UN program advisor is how to help students acquire these skills where they are lacking and finely tune them if they already have them. Of course, Model UN is not unique among academic programs in the need to train participants. Speech and debate or academic decathlon have their own set of skills that are required to succeed. One thing that sets Model UN apart from these other programs though is that students often find their way into the program after taking an intriguing course or talking with a classmate. They often did not do MUN in high school, so they have not had any prior experience or training, yet they are expected to participate alongside veterans and experts at conference.

This steep learning curve is even more pronounced at the community college or junior college level. At institutions with open enrollment, there is no guarantee that students have college-level skills in reading, writing and critical thinking. At Mesa Community College where I teach, many of the students who would like to do Model UN have never written a paper using formal English, have never given a speech in front of an audience of a couple of dozen people, and often have never needed to wear professional business attire, such as a tie or dress skirt. In addition, typically half to a third of the Model UN team at MCC are international students. The Model UN program has acquired a reputation among these students as an effective vehicle for learning to speak and write in professional English. This means that they are doing the required research and writing in a second language.

So given the high need for training required in order for students to have a successful experience, how can a program advisor meet this need? As an adviser with 20 years of experience, the short answer is to pair high expectations with a high tolerance for failure. That combination quite often leads to a level of success that is surprising even to the students themselves and also mitigates the inevitable failures that accompany poorly-prepared students who are attempting to reach beyond their ability. A platitude like this may be true, but it's not particularly helpful. A more detailed answer will examine specific training strategies and approaches used by successful program advisors over the years.

These strategies can be lumped into two broad categories: go fast and go slow. To use a swimming analogy, what is the best way to get used to cold water? Do you slowly wade in, or just jump into the deep end. One approach condenses training into a very short period in order to quickly get the students to the experiential part of the training, since that is where most of learning occurs. The other approach is to gradually introduce new skills over a longer period, which allows students to acquire and practice the skills they need so their initial conference can be a success and not a failure experience. There are pros and cons to both approaches, and I have tried both over my years of experience. The remainder of this paper will examine each approach and tease out the impact of these approaches on student learning.

THE GO-FAST APPROACH - JUMPING INTO THE DEEP END

The first approach is fairly common. It is to hurry up the training rather than spread it out. In this approach, after introducing students to the requirements for Model UN along with some minimal amount of orientation with expectations and training, you immediately give them the assignment to write their first policy brief. A Model UN policy brief is often the hardest paper students have ever written. Unlike most undergraduate work, it has to be written at a professional level, meaning there can be no mistakes.

Students scramble to do research and then submit a draft brief. This draft is then ripped to shreds as every single mistake is identified and suggestions for improvements are shared. The student revises the draft and resubmits, whereupon it is again shredded and every possible mistake is pointed out. Draft after draft is submitted until the work is perfect, or as close to it as possible. The student then starts in on the second policy brief and the process continues.

Meanwhile, at the team meetings or class, students are also introduced to the committee rules and negotiation strategies. Students begin giving public speeches, even as their research is not yet complete. For many students, public speaking is stressful and traumatic, and speaking in a professional setting is an entirely new skill set. With luck and skillful coaching, this experience will not be so humiliating that the students abandon the effort.

This intensive, demanding level of work will consume several hours a week, more if the students are less prepared for college-level work. This tremendous effort is usually done on top of their normal school load. Model UN typically attracts A-level students, so they are already working long hours to maintain their grades. In this approach, the two or three months prior to attending a conference can be consuming for students who are new to the program. It can also be an intensive time for the veterans, as they also have to write to their own briefs and practice their speeches while also mentoring, coaching, and in some cases hand-holding the less experienced delegates.

This is the approach that I used for my first 15 years as an adviser. It can be done successfully, and in my experience had a very high level of student satisfaction. When you set high expectations and demand a lot from students, more often than not they will try very, very hard to meet those expectations. By asking so much from them, they will often reach levels of success that they themselves did not know they were capable of. There are definite pros and cons to this approach however.

**Advantages**

1. Team Unity. The most obvious advantage to this approach is that a strong cohort is formed. A team develops a sense of camaraderie that comes with the shared trauma of the conference preparation experience. By the time they go to conference, Model UN students have spent hours working together. Deep friendships can form when people help each other get through a difficult time. Through sharing research, reviewing each other's drafts, and giving encouraging words during difficult speeches, a Model UN team can form a cohesive bond that continues beyond the conference they are preparing for.

For example, in my program, most of the international students who join the team live in an apartment complex near campus. When it was time to travel to the conference, as an advisor I worried about how to arrange transportation for these students to the airport. The flight left early in the morning and this was before there was an Uber or Lyft service in our city, and taxis or a professional shuttle service are cost prohibitive for many of them. A week or so before departure, I started talking to them about possible solutions. They quickly reassured me that there was no problem at all. They had already made arrangements with their American teammates who were going to pick them up and provide transportation. This is a small thing, but it is indicative of the connection between team members and a friendship that had formed that increased the resilience of these international students.

Another example of this was a Serbian immigrant named Maja. She struggled with both written and spoken English, and just barely was able to complete her preparation for conference with a lot of help from her teammates. At the conference, the team was recognized for an award, and they asked her to represent them by going up to receive the award. She had felt insecure in her role and in her contribution to the team, but when they gave her that place of honor, she realized that she belonged, and she counted them as some of her best friends from then on. These connections helped both the international students and their American counterparts succeed in their other classes as difficulties arrived.

1. Student Engagement. Another advantage to the shortened time frame approach that is less obvious and is difficult to quantify is its boost to student motivation. Given the condensed time frame, it is unlikely that students will lose interest or forget about their delegate training. Completing the work in a short period of time requires an intensity of effort that sharpens focus and ensures involvement. Sometimes in a regular academic course, students who are having issues that prevent them from succeeding may escape detention by the instructor or classmates. A student can stop attending class or turning in homework and it may take a couple of weeks before the absence is noted and the student is approached to try to find out what is happening. With Model UN preparation on a short time frame, the team advisor and the student’s teammates will immediately notice if a meeting is missed or work is not turned in. Peers can get involved quickly to help resolve concerns or overcome barriers.

Aside from getting help, the intensity of effort can help maintain a focus on completing the task at hand. As with most things, with Model UN, students get out of it what they put into it. As students make the tremendously high investment in time and effort to prepare quickly, they reap the rewards of that effort and feel a connection to the program. They remain motivated because they will be traveling to the conference in a short period of time.

One measure of this engagement is the willingness to meet outside of class to work on their preparation. In our program, we meet once a week for a couple of hours for two or three months prior to the conference. The written work has to be turned in a month before conference, so the policy brief writing has to be done over just a few weeks from the time that they decide what country and committee they are going to represent. It is almost always the case that students will meet at their homes or at coffee shops for several hours during the week between meetings. I rarely see this level of student engagement with the material in my regular classes, other than right before the final exams!

1. Addiction. A third advantage to point out is that in this preparation model, there is a fairly short time frame between a student joining the program and actually participating in a conference. Participation at conference is often such a positive experience that the students become hooked. Doing Model UN becomes a passion, and at that point it ceases to be work. Students who experience this transformation often become veterans who can be relied upon to carry the load of training new delegates. In a mature program, the advisor may actually have very little work to do as students do everything. They can't help themselves because they are having so much fun. When people invest a large amount of effort in something, their identity often becomes wrapped up in it. The sooner you can move students from joining the program to having the conference experience, the more likely it is that you will be able to harness that energy to improve your program.

An extreme example of this is with my former student Andrew. Andrew was not a political science major, but was talked into joining the Model UN program by his friends to fill a gap in their team which opened up when somebody quit at the last minute. In just ten days, and with a tremendous amount of help by his teammates, Andrew completed all of the research and wrote a set of very good policy briefs which were turned in on time. At the conference, which was just a few weeks later, he had a great time and discovered an aptitude for negotiation he did not know that he had. In four or five weeks, Andrew was transformed from a student who often missed classes and turned in C-level work to a highly motivated student that completed his degree program successfully. Throughout his time at the college, he continued to do Model United Nations, and as an alumni volunteered for several years at the High School conference we host. Given his rather lackadaisical study habits, Andrew may not have had the same transformation if he had been participating in a program that was not so condensed. Having to do a tremendous amount of work in a short period of time convinced him that he was capable of doing high quality work, which changed his outlook on his studies.

**Disadvantages**

1. High Attrition. The story of Andrew highlights the greatest disadvantage to the go-fast approach. The reason Andrew had to join the team and perform the Herculean task of doing all of his preparation work in just a few days is because the person who was supposed to do that work gave up and walked away from the program at the last possible minute. The go-fast approach creates a high-stress, high-demand environment that some students are just not able to maintain. As mentioned before, the written work is much more demanding than what is normally expected for a freshman or sophomore level course, and the pace is much faster than previously experienced. At some point, a student might look at this amount of hard work and ask “why and I doing this?” They may also tire of having multiple drafts returned, especially when asked to revise a policy brief that would already be earning an ‘A’ in a regular course. Some students who are used to quietly doing good work in classes shrink at the prospect of making multiple speeches on topics they barely have had time to understand. The go-fast approach asks a lot, and students are tempted to just withdraw from the situation. With the high school programs I work with, a twenty to forty percent loss in students is normal once the work begins.

There are unfortunately many examples of this in my own experience, some more heart-breaking than others. While a cohesive team might quickly identify and mobilize to help a struggling students, sometimes the program is just asking too much. A student I’ll call Mary was very interested in the program, having seen friends and acquaintances have a great experience. However, she struggled mightily with the research and writing. Her stress increased each week as the expectations continued to build. Finally, she told me she just couldn’t take it anymore. No amount of help from teammates or from me as an advisor could convince her to stay. She was becoming physically ill from the stress and needed to retreat. I could change the name several times over to tell essentially the same story, the go-fast approach leads some students to just give up rather than catch up when they begin to fall behind.

1. Reinforcing Privilege. One of the uncomfortable truths of Model United Nations is that it continues in practice to be a playground for the elite. Most of those who participate come from privileged backgrounds and excellent schools. Schools in poorer neighborhoods tend to not offer Model UN at the high school level. At the collegiate level, wealthier students are better able to find the money to travel to conferences and may come to college better prepared to succeed in a go-fast model. The high attrition rate discussed above is not experienced uniformly across the population of students who attempt to do Model UN. Students from less-privileged backgrounds are more likely to come to the program with deficient skills. While they may be very interested in international relations and seek a future that involves professional work and practicing diplomacy, the go-fast model creates a demand for high-quality work produced in a short period of time that may simply be beyond their current ability.

Defenders of this approach might argue that the program is just giving students an opportunity, they can choose to do the work needed to succeed. This argument ignores the reality that students are starting at different skill levels. Those who come to college from a school system that did not prepare them for college level work will struggle, while those who come from a school system that did prepare them are more likely to succeed the gauntlet of expectations that come with the go-fast approach. Without taking this disparity into account, the advisor risks having their Model UN program be yet another failure experience associated with education. Seen this way, presenting them with what amounts as an opportunity to fail is not doing them a favor.

As mentioned earlier, I teach at a community college, so we have a wide range of students coming to our program. When students from poor backgrounds go to conference, they can see that they are capable of interacting with students from elite populations as a peer. This realization is often transformational, it is one of the most rewarding parts of being a program advisor. But they have to make it through the preparation process before they can have this experience. The go-fast approach may place this experience out of reach, especially when it demands upper-classmen competence when they are just starting their college experience. In my experience, the vast majority of students who give up are those who come from a background that made them ill-prepared for the demands the go-fast approach placed on them.

1. Low Comprehension. One final disadvantage of the go-fast approach is that the focused attention required to get the work done in the shortened time frame does not lead to a more holistic understanding of the subject matter. Because they're writing a policy brief on topics within a single committee, their knowledge can be easily siloed. There simply is not time in the go-fast approach to explore the wider context in which the policy discussion is taking place. Nor is there time to look at the structure and history of the United Nations as an intergovernmental organization or the nuances of foreign aid. Students who have an academic background in these topics are able to include that information, there is nothing about Model United Nations that prevents gaining that knowledge. However, using a go-fast approach, it is much less likely that someone without that background coming into the program will be able to acquire that knowledge before attending the conference.

One year I had a student who was preparing to be a delegate for the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) committee. The student wrote great policy briefs dealing with women and development, empowering women in rural communities, and solutions for minimizing violence against women. In the committee debate on the final topic, the student proposed that UN peacekeepers be used to end civil wars around the world, since women and children are disproportionately victimized by these conflicts. Because the student had focused their research solely on CSW, they were unaware that CSW lacks the authority to establish peacekeeping missions, where the troops for those missions come from, or how to pay for those missions. Fortunately, the student raised their idea with their teammates before proposing it in committee, saving them the embarrassment of having their proposal laughed down.

The go-fast approach can be used effectively. For several years, I used this approach to great effect, helping to train students from a variety of backgrounds to succeed at conference. This experience expanded their worldview and prepared them to succeed in professional settings. Faced with the disadvantages of this approach, however, I transitioned a few years ago to a different approach in an effort to spread out the preparation time.

THE GO-SLOW APPROACH - WADING IN GRADUALLY

The second approach is less common since Model UN programs are not always connected to an academic course. Instead of spending several weeks to research and write the material for a conference, the go-slow approach takes several months, spreading out the preparation over the course of an academic year. The idea is to build a lattice of assignments to gradually acquire the skills and confidence needed to succeed at conference.

I moved to this approach about five years ago out of frustration with the academic outcomes of the go-fast reproach. While my students were successful at conference, I had no confidence they were learning the material adequately. I decided that a more structured approach could provide a thorough introduction to the United Nations as an institution as well as provide an opportunity to acquire the skills needed to succeed at a Model UN conference. I was unable to find instructional materials that matched both goals, so I began to construct my own. The result was the textbook *Engaging the United Nations*. This book provides the foundation of the go-slow approach that I'm discussing.

I moved the credit-bearing portion of our Model UN program to the fall semester. This enables us to spend an entire semester learning about the UN, writing policy briefs, and developing negotiation and speaking skills. The spring semester, which used to be the primary focus of preparation in the go-fast approach, is now spent preparing for our high school conference, practicing speeches, and learning the procedural rules of the conference we attend.

One reason this approach made more sense was the growth of international students in my program. These students are drawn to Model UN as a way to develop professional English writing and speaking skills. This means that they lacked the pre-existing skill sets to succeed in the go-fast approach. By going slow, we're able to give the students the ability to gradually acquire the skills so that they can be at a professional level by the spring semester.

Another difference between these approaches is that unlike the high stress, condensed nature of the go-fast approach, the go-slow approach enables students to complete low-stakes, incremental assignments before they begin writing professional-level policy briefs. By connecting these earlier writing and research assignments to the course content of an introductory course about the United Nations as an institution, students are able to acquire foundational knowledge at the same time they are acquiring foundational skills. They are also able to be assessed on their learning through traditional test and assignments, and practice their new skills through engaging class activities. By waiting to the end of the fall term to write policy briefs, it is less likely that those who come unprepared will have a failure experience. Instead, they can gain the abilities they need to succeed over the course of the term. Also, by spreading the skill-acquisition part of the training out over months instead of weeks, it greatly reduces the stress associated with putting together their written materials and preparing their speeches.

This approach has been appreciated by students who need to develop their skills. The international students in particular are able to gain the confidence they need. Those who already have a base-level of skills and probably would have been able to succeed in the go-fast approach also enjoyed the this approach, as they could take the time to learn more about the UN as an institution than they otherwise would have. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach as well. To a degree, these are simply the inverse of the advantages and disadvantages of the go-fast reproach.

**Advantages**

1. Increased understanding. Having a textbook that explains how the United Nations works and provides a basic introduction to intergovernmental organizations has changed the way my students comprehend the UN. The textbook provides a structure to introduce ideas and a sequence that builds a foundation of understanding. They now better understand the history of the UN, what the institution can and cannot do, and how negotiations take place among professional diplomats. When they role play diplomats at a Model UN conference, they are no longer simply guessing or portraying caricatures of countries. Instead, they understand the context of the conversations they are having in committee. In addition, this approach enables students to learn about other related topics beyond a single committee they might be preparing for.

Students now have opportunities in class to explore these ideas and practice them. Students who are learning make lots of mistakes. By providing students a semester of instruction prior to going to conference, they can make mistakes in class and not in public. This enables them to go to conference with more confidence in their abilities and in their understanding of topics they're discussing.

An example of the impact of this approach is a student I'll call Gamel. Gamel was motivated to learn the material and was very interested in international relations. However, his English was not particularly good and he had come from an educational system that relied on rote memorization. He really struggled with the concept of self-directed learning and critical thinking. There were several details of the UN structure that related to the topic he was researching that simply escaped him. He had to be told the same information several times before he understood it. He did figure things out eventually. While it took several drafts, his written work did reach the level of professional English and showed a clear understanding of the topic he was writing about. At conference in the spring, he was able to negotiate with confidence and was successful in committee. What enabled Gamel to succeed was repeated learning opportunities over time.

1. Assessment of student learning. This approach allows the time and opportunity to use assessment to determine comprehension. As students learn core concepts about the UN or are introduced different skill sets like negotiation and public speaking, it's important to make sure that a concept is mastered before moving on to the next concept. having a series of low stakes assignments enables an advisor to back up and redo conversations or reintroduce opportunities to demonstrate skills that are not quite at acceptable levels.

This approach allows time to assess the program itself, in addition to individual student learning. The purpose of assessment is to discover the level of learning that has occurred and identify areas where there are gaps in learning that need to be addressed. At its core, assessment involves a feedback loop where teaching is informed by the assessment of learning. We assess because we lack information. We need to know what is known and learn what has been learned. Without access to concrete assessment information, we are really just guessing about the impact of our teaching. When we guess about our impact, then we are also guessing about our teaching methodologies. With meaningful assessment, we can more clearly know whether our teaching style and learning assignments are having the impact that we think and hope that they are.

Once our Model UN program was a year-long course of instruction, I was able to conduct a formal assessment process. Assessing a co-curricular program like Model United Nations is different than assessing a course. There are the usual learning objectives that are associated with a course and institutional student learning outcomes that all courses at a college should connect with, but there are also program-level objectives and service area objectives shared across the institution that can also be assessed. The program assessment conducted in 2018 would not have been as meaningful under the go-fast approach used previously. This assessment established a baseline by which I can now evaluate program improvements moving forward.

1. Leveled playing field. One of the greatest advantages of this approach is it provides students who do not have the needed level of preparation a way to acquire those skills so that they have an opportunity to succeed. Because there are several low-stakes assignments and opportunities to demonstrate learning early, students are able to discover gaps in their knowledge and fill those gaps. By the time students are preparing policy briefs, which can be a crushing experience in the go-fast model, they are able to successfully perform that task. Students with poor writing get opportunities to practice writing. Students who don't understand how to research get opportunities to do research. Students who lack confidence in speaking get opportunities to practice speaking. Each of these opportunities comes with some instruction and a low-cost to failure. With a structured lattice of instruction, the adviser can set high expectations while simultaneously having a high tolerance for failure because students will get multiple opportunities to succeed.

The gradual, lattice-approach structure inherent in the go slow approach builds confidence. Confidence is one of the key attributes of a successful Model UN delegate. In order to negotiate effectively and portray a sense of competence, students need to believe in themselves. This sense of self-efficacy can be hard for inexperienced students to acquire, especially if they come from an unprivileged background that may have been characterized by struggle and failure experiences. The biggest risk of the go-fast approach is to compound a sense of personal inadequacy if an unprepared student fails. By gradually developing the skills that lead to success, students from these backgrounds can become the competent delegate they need to portray at conference.

An example of the effectiveness of this lattice is found in a student we will call David. David was a nontraditional student, returning to college as an adult with a family to gain skills he lacked. He came from a poor background with inadequate schools and no college attendance. He worked as a long-haul trucker, planning his trips to be back home in time to attend classes once or twice a week. He joined the Model UN team to learn how to negotiate. He took the fall United Nations Studies course. His work in that class was rough, as his written English needed a lot of work and research was a new adventure for him. He had a strong work ethic though, and refused to give up. Gradually, over the course of the semester, he was able to turn in professional level work. He continued his preparation in the spring, practicing the negotiation skills he was learning as well as honing his public speaking skills. He was able to attend the collegiate conference. His work there was not outstanding, but it was as good as most people in the room, which for him was a spectacular success. Given his skill deficits starting the program, he most likely would have given up in the go-fast approach, as the required pace would have crushed his efforts to learn the basics. The go-slow approach enabled him to build his skills to the point where he could succeed.

**Disadvantages**

1. Lower student engagement. The go-slow approach is not all-good, however. There are drawbacks to using it. The most consequential is that it delays the experience of attending a conference and thereby postpones some of the best experiential learning opportunities as well as the most fun part of the program for students. Unlike the go-fast approach, there is no adrenaline rush or sense of urgency. For the students, the program feels like a regular academic course, only harder. The lattice structure of low-stakes assignments, while building skills for those who need it, may produce boredom for students who already have the necessary skill set since they are not challenged. In addition to the dullness of plodding along through a set curriculum, there is the possibility that low stakes leads to low commitment. Students may feel emboldened to not turn in work or skip classes because the individual assignments are worth so few points in a lattice-building structured program. Overtime, such an attitude can lead to a disconnect between the simple work they are doing and the professional expectations of the conference that they will eventually attend. Simply put, it is difficult to maintain a sense of excitement over a several months training.

This has been a problem every year since the change to the go-slow approach in my program. Each year, students join the program seemingly eager and excited to learn about diplomacy and the United Nations. After a semester of turning in assignments and focusing on the preparatory work, without experiencing the excitement of a conference, that eagerness wanes. There has consistently been one or two students who did not return for the spring semester to finish their training and attend the conference, even after they had completed most of the preparatory work that used to stress students out in the earlier go-fast approach. They had simply moved on in their interests.

1. Diminished Team Unity. A second and related problem is that in the absence of the shared pain of the go-fast approach, it is more difficult for the students to unify into a cohesive team. Since most of the preparatory work occurs in a normal academic course, it is completed as individual assignments. There is no need for the frantic team meetings outside of class or the all-night work sessions that create environments where students forge friendships and become willing to make sacrifices for each other. Instead, while the program still is organized into country teams, students mainly see it as a vehicle for individual development and growth.

This lack of belonging has been evidenced a few times in my program. In the conference we attend, the country teams have to submit written work for all of the committees the country is assigned to, regardless of whether or not the committee is filled by a student delegate. This means that if somebody commits to cover a committee, and then quits the team, the teammates have to write all of the papers that missing student should have written. It's not a nice thing to do to one’s team to make a commitment and put them in the lurch like this, especially if the deadline for the papers is approaching. While using the go-fast approach, this situation happened very rarely because there was tremendous social pressure for students to keep their commitments. The students knew they would not just be letting down their teammates, they would likely be burning their friendships in the process. Even if they felt they had to quit, they usually turned in the work so is to not burn their teammates.

In contrast, every year since switching to the go-slow approach, teams have had gaps develop as people walked away. Those remaining have had to scramble to fill in the gaps. Granted, most of the work was done in the fall, so the gaps were smaller. The cost of quitting has been lowered, so people quit more often. It has become apparent that teams now are not really becoming cohesive units until immediately before the conference as they practice speeches together.

EITHER WAY, MAKE SURE THEY DON’T DROWN

The advantages and disadvantages of these approaches to training in an academic program like Model United Nations are to some degree the inverse of each other. The advantages of one approach are the disadvantages of the other. This is to be expected, of course, since the two approaches are different in pace and style but not content. This paper has reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches with the intent of enabling advisors to carefully consider the approach that will work best for them given their student population and personal teaching style. The relative merits of the two approaches are summarized below in Table 1.

Table1: The Advantages and Disadvantages of these two approaches

Adv DA

Go-Fast Team Unity High Attrition

High Engagement Reinforcing Privilege

Addiction Low Comprehension

Go-Slow Increased Understanding Lower Engagement

Assessment Lower Team Unity

Leveled Playing Field

Having been an advisor for many years, and experimenting with both approaches, I am reluctant to definitively argue for one approach over the other. I'm currently further developing the go-slow approach, but I used the go-fast approach for many years with great success.

Whichever approach one chooses, it is important to intentionally structure the training and instruction given to students in order to offset the known disadvantages to each approach. If using the go-fast approach, is it necessary to make sure that support structures and resources are available to students who come to the program less prepared or otherwise lack the necessary skills. These students will need extra help, so the advisor should anticipate that need rather than be surprised or inconvenienced by it. These extra support structures would include writing tutors (perhaps offered by veteran delegates), training videos, and personalized instruction outside of the regular class or team meetings.

If using the go-slow approach, it is necessary to provide experiential learning opportunities early in the training process to maintain interest, engagement, and motivation. This could be done with a series of simulations in class or other active learning method. There are some fall term collegiate Model UN conferences that provide a simpler, more brief conference experience so they require less preparation. Attending one of these conferences early in training may produce the desired effect of getting students addicted to the event so they are willing to complete the long preparation process inherent in the go-slow approach.

Clearly, whatever approach one uses, a program advisor still has to do the work of being an effective teacher. This means intentionally preparing learning opportunities, delivering those opportunities in an engaging way, assessing student learning after those activities, and adjusting the teaching methods as needed based on that assessment. Being aware of the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches will hopefully help advisors in making those choices.