

Zooming Into Focus: Effective Strategies for Virtual Negotiation Simulations and
Online Model UN Delegate Training

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Abstract

Virtual simulations of global diplomacy are not simply face to face conferences thrown online. They have unique challenges as well as new opportunities. Similarly, effective online delegate preparation requires more than continuing face to face methods in a new modality. In a context where MUN programs may not be allowed to regularly meet face to face, online delegate preparation must be carefully considered. This paper will explore the lessons learned by our efforts to develop and administer virtual negotiation simulations with participants from multiple institutions. It will also share strategies for effective online delegate preparation for those simulations.

Over summer and fall of 2020, I organized a group of advisers to meet weekly to discuss the transition of our Model UN programs during the pandemic. We had two parallel conversation threads: preparing to host an online conference and best practices for training delegates online. Advisers who had expressed an interest in the past in using the *Engaging the United Nations* textbook were invited to participate.

Around 90 advisors responded to the invitation and asked to be included in the calendar invites. Between 10 and 20 came to any given meeting, but many watched the videos and read the meeting notes, which are available on the Engagement Learning website, the publisher of the *Engaging the United Nations* textbook. This paper is a synopsis of the lessons learned from these conversations. It reflects a collection of our discovered best practices for online delegate training and running online conferences.

We can hope that we will not see a repeat of the lockdowns of 2020. These lessons are still relevant though, as some of the practices learned are improvements on older traditional methods. Also, we have learned from the past year that virtual settings can lower the cost of participation, enabling schools to attend additional conferences and opening up the model UN experience to students who might have been excluded due to financial barriers. We can therefore expect these lessons to continue to be useful even as the Model UN community returns to live conferences and face to face training.

Delegate Training

I have been a Model UN advisor for over twenty years, and I have taught online courses for over fifteen years. But I only attempted to train Model UN delegates online when forced to by the 2020 COVID pandemic. Like many of my colleagues, I struggled to adopt the experiential practices I was used to using to the virtual environment. To help discover best practices, I hosted a series of conversations with other MUN advisors in the summer and fall of 2020. These were attended by schools that had adopted my textbook, *Engaging the United Nations*, as a resource for training their delegates.

Through these conversations, three themes developed: training online is not just a different modality, the nature of the training itself changes; intentional instructional design is critical; and advisers must find a way to build team spirit and replace what has been lost by our students. This section of the paper will explore each of these themes and share the insights and best practices gleaned from these conversations.

A Different Modality

Teaching online is not just a different modality. This is something that took me a few years to realize. About half of my teaching load any given term is typically online courses. Over the years, people have asked me, “Do you enjoy teaching online?” I always respond by pointing out that teaching online is all of the work and none of the fun. You create and grade assignments, prepare and record lectures, all of the normal parts of teaching, but you don't get that personal interaction with students that enlivens teaching and makes it so rewarding.

It is the same with our students. Their interaction with the instructor and with their classmates and team members is different in an online setting. This of course is obvious, but as course designers we need to think that through. The interaction between you and them and between each other is mediated. That mediation means it is difficult to set pace and tone. The form of engagement is different, so you can't just import a face-to-face simulation into an online setting and expect it to actually work. With delegate training, the kinds of things an advisor may have done in the past simply may not work anymore because the change in modality has a real impact.

One core part of preparing for Model UN is practicing through simulations. The online setting creates a barrier to participation because the interaction is mediated. At the same time, being online creates an opportunity for better interaction because the barrier makes it harder for extroverts to dominate, a common occurrence in a classroom setting. This means introvert participation in the simulation can be higher than normal.

The presence of a barrier does not mean this tool is not available to us, just that we need to think about the barriers and design simulations that accommodate them to use them as a resource. We might think of the difference between a 5K race and a “Tough Mudder” race. The former has a clear running path and the objective is to finish in the fastest time. The latter has multiple obstacles, and the fun is in climbing over and under them. Likewise, we need to think of ways to turn the differences in online simulations into assets, not liabilities to be overcome.

For example, an online simulation needs more structure to work. You need to give participants their materials ahead of time and build in time for them to construct arguments and strategies before actually speaking. You can assign roles to delegates so they come knowing what they will be talking about. You can do a dry run through the material to ensure that website links are unbroken and mentally walk through the sequence of the simulation. You could consider using a low-stakes check-in assignment immediately prior to starting a simulation, such as a one paragraph summary of their position, provide a list of relevant agencies, or submit a country profile. However prepared you are, it is only a starting point, you will undoubtedly have to fill in lots of details once it begins (Hilaiel). This kind of flexibility is key when using online simulations.

All of these efforts would help an online simulation succeed. Experienced readers might guess that these same strategies would improve an in-class simulation as well, which is the point. If you acknowledge and embrace the barriers, they may cease to be barriers.

Intentional Design

It is more important than ever to set up a learning environment where students are intrinsically motivated, where they understand not only what they need to do, but WHY they need to do it. To help students be successful, you can engage in intentional design, as opposed to habitual (doing things that have worked for years) or hereditary (doing things your predecessor or mentor did).

There is no flying by the seat of your pants when you're doing things online. In a face-to-face team meeting, we might be scheduled to practice speeches. When we begin, I may realize that there's a lot of angst because they are behind on their issue papers and that right then is not a good time for speeches. I can tell them "Never mind, today is going to be a research workshop." Everyone then opens their laptops and we spend the entire team meeting doing research and writing. This kind of flexibility is difficult if not impossible in an online setting. Everything has to be set up ahead of time. Before a meeting begins, you have to know exactly what is going to occur so you can have the materials prepared. This requires a lot of attention and effort and time. An advisor can't just show up and help with the team meeting.

Part of this intentional design is being explicit in your learning objectives. This way students know why they are doing what they are doing. When students attend team meetings, they come for the camaraderie, but there is also a certain level of trust that if they come to the meetings and follow the training regime, they will be successful. This implicit trust is harder to gain online. Students need to know why they are supposed to be doing something, and they need to gain intrinsic motivation to do it because it is really easy to ignore program requirements online.

The next point to consider with intentional design is the need to scaffold learning. One way to train Model UN delegates is to give them an early challenge, to put them in a simulation where they are expected to do some things they may not be ready for. The exhilaration of that experience can addict them though, which makes them willing to put in the work to get ready for the next one. It is hard or impossible in an online setting to replicate that sort of "thrown in the deep end" experience. Instead, if you scaffold learning, you help them gain one skill, which enables them to gain the next skill, and then the next. This scaffold of learning works better in an online environment. In addition to low-stakes assignments, consider having them work in teams to complete assignments (Pace).

The last point to consider is increasing your assessment of learning. With online training, you have to find a way to replace the accountability that is inherent in a live team meeting. No one wants to show up and be embarrassed in front of their peers. But in an online setting, that embarrassment is mitigated because it is a mediated experience. You may want to have some actual assessments, such as quizzes over rules or turning in low stakes writing samples. The purpose is to help get them started and assess whether they are actually learning or not.

One way to guarantee you are using best practices in online instructional design is to adopt the Quality Matters rubric standards. These standards are designed for online courses, but can be usefully adopted to provide a structured learning environment for delegate training. These standards lead to eight guidelines to consider.

1. Instructions and expectations are clear. Surprises are rarely welcome in an online setting. Consider creating or linking training videos so students are not limited to simply reading the material. Let them know what the training regimen is so they can plan their lives accordingly.
2. Learning objectives are communicated and measurable. Students need to know what skills and content they are expected to master. This enables them to track their own progress and also helps set clear expectations.
3. Learning is assessed and measured, with multiple measures taken. With online instruction, it helps to have multiple, low-cost check-ins and scaffolding. Having a few, large-stake, capstone-like assignments does not work well because it is easier to ignore things online. Multiple check-ins provide opportunities to provide corrective feedback early when it is more useful, and encourages a sustained attention span.
4. Instructional Materials are current, and their purpose is clear to the student. The real UN is shifting its practices in response to the COVID pandemic. As a simulation of the UN, it is quickly becoming unworkable to use the same Model UN training materials you may have relied on for years. My own children were excited to join Model UN at the college they attended. They were handed a pile of photocopies that were over 10 years old, then given a multiple choice test several weeks later. That was the extent of their preparation materials. Students deserve current materials presented in engaging ways.
5. Learning activities support learning objectives and student interaction requirements are clearly articulated. Strike a balance between the need to have multiple, low-cost check-ins and scaffolding with the need to avoid busywork. If you are intentional about connecting activities to learning objectives, students will be more motivated to do them.
6. Students have access to the technology needed to achieve objectives. Don't make assumptions about competence with technology, up to date hardware, or internet access. Your students are probably OK, as they have to be proficient in technology to survive their other courses. As an advisor though, your relationship with your students is probably closer than most. If you don't ask if they are having difficulties, who will? Training videos can be useful with this, showing how to use online tools effectively.
7. Students have access to any needed support services. Know the data privacy policies of the various communications tools you use. Model UN relies on peer review to train delegates properly. You may need to assign mentors as peer groups may not form organically in a video conference setting.
8. The training program or class employs accessible technologies. During preparation, use software that allows assistive technologies. I used to use "track changes" in MS Word to edit student work until I had a blind student who relied on a digital reader.

The edits I made on her papers came out as gibberish on her reader, so I no longer use that tool. During conference, demand that the conference provide an interpreter for the deaf if needed.

Building a Team

The last theme concerns the decline of accountability in an online team meeting. Advisors have to find some way to build team spirit during virtual training. With online meetings, there is less peer pressure to do what you said you would do. It is easier to fail and hope nobody notices. Students can just turn off their camera or mute their microphones and check out emotionally from the consequences of their failure. This is harder to do in a live meeting where failure feels more public.

It is difficult enough in a face-to-face setting to convince students to do the hard work of MUN preparation. When successful, it is usually because they are socialized into it by the veterans. That socialization is hard to do in a mediated format like a Zoom session.

A related concern is the ease of quitting in a virtual setting. In Model UN, there is always some attrition on a team when the real work begins. One thing that prevents quitting, particularly late in the game, is that people don't want to leave their teammates in the lurch. They know that if they walk away, their teammates are going to have to pick up the slack they create, and that's just not a nice thing to do to your teammates. To replicate that kind of peer pressure to succeed, team spirit has to be there, and advisors have to find some way to build it up online. Friendship is one of the more important aspects of Model UN. People laughing together is how you grow close, so be sure to create space for that (Gussin).

Advisers had several tips for team building. One is to have on-camera meetings rather than relying solely on email or shared document drives. This enables the team to get to know each other (Wolfe). One program held a virtual international film festival, watching a different film together each week to build a shared experience in a fun way (Seltzer). Team meetings can open with a question of the day to bring in humor, or use interactive pedagogical tools like Pair and Share or Jigsaw to encourage engagement through small group interaction.

To foster a sense of community and belonging, a program could provide trust-building opportunities with peer-impacting commitments. These could be public-facing assignments or activities that are done early and often. An example might be giving everyone a question to answer and they must return and report at the next meeting. These activities can also be seen as failure opportunities. Learning cannot occur unless failure is possible. For this reason, these activities need to be low-stakes so failure can be instructive and not catastrophic. One advisor used this method by giving students prompts and then having them record their response and share the video file with the team. Teammates then watched and left comments (Wolfe).

Another strategy is to have students work together on the position papers, in real time in zoom breakout groups. There is no punishment for writing less, the point is to write together and be willing to accept the criticism of others. The issue papers become group projects, which creates a venue for bonding. The team knows what they are doing and why they are doing it (Holtslag).

And then there is my favorite suggestion, to “appeal to their nerdiness” (McCartney). The point in all of this is that Model UN is fun because it creates an opportunity for students to interact with others who care about what is going on in the world and actually know what they are talking about. If an adviser can create an online framework that enables meaningful interaction, provides sufficient structure for them to acquire the skills they need, and forms a bond with others on their team, then being the policy-wonks nerds that they are, delegates will respond to that framework and structure and have a meaningful experience.

New delegates have no idea what they are getting into when they sign up for Model UN. They don’t know the life-altering dimensions until they are in the middle of it and see what it is like (Gussin). As advisors we need to help them stay in the program long enough to find this out.

Running an Online Conference

Conferences are the heart of Model UN. The academic stuff is just getting them ready. The actual participation in conference is where experiential learning happens. When that experience becomes virtual, it fundamentally changes. The challenge is to think through how to design a virtual conference so that the experiential benefits are still realized. The first step in doing that is to recognize the key differences between a live conference and an online conference.

While many conferences cancelled their 2020 sessions after the world shut down in mid-March, some conferences experimented in the late spring with virtual sessions. Other programs transitioned their fall conferences successfully to fully online. Fall conferences are typically smaller, often focused on training and seen as practice sessions to prepare for the larger Spring conferences, making them an ideal environment to pilot ideas and practices for virtual conferences. The lessons and experiences for each of the areas of difference are summarized below.

Location

With a live conference, the main difficulty is finding a location that has a physical space big enough to handle everybody. With virtual, the location issue is much more about finding the right technology tool. Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet, and Discord are some of the popular options. Each one of them have pros and cons. Most of the conferences held in 2020 were hosted on Zoom. An institutional account is required for most of these platforms to avoid shutting down after an hour or so. This means each conference will need to adopt to whatever platform their institution supports. Southern Regional Model UN, a student-run conference in Atlanta, used delegate fees to pay for enough one-month subscriptions for each committee to have its own Zoom address (Oleaga).

One advantage to hosting a virtual conference is that anyone can participate from anywhere. This complicates matters though as time zones come into play. One advisor in Alaska described the time zone issue as “horrific” when they participated in a conference in Florida (Pace). It is not all bad though. The MCC high school conference had a chair unexpectedly withdraw at the last minute, so she was replaced by an alumna from Cote D’Ivoire. This meant that chair was working through her night in Abidjan, then sleeping all day. This was difficult, but she was thrilled to be able to participate and help out the conference in a pinch. The plenary speaker at

MCC's Sonoran conference in November shared his comments from Medellin Colombia. The time zone problem is probably more than offset by the opportunities to internationalize the program. MCC plans to take further advantage of the global possibilities by using a rolling schedule at its next collegiate conference so participating US and international programs take turns being inconvenienced by the time zone issue.

Attendance and participation

In a regular live conference, delegates are assigned by country teams. Each school brings a group of students representing the country. It is tempting to think solely of the challenges that attend a shift to online conferences, but we should also recognize the opportunities they bring as well. There are no travel costs to a virtual conference. There are far fewer conference overhead costs, so conference organizers can dramatically decrease the delegate cost. These lowered costs will expand the range of attendees. For example, I organized a conference held in November 2020 that was originally intended to be a regional, Southwest conference. Due to its virtual nature though, the conference had attendees from around the country, from Maine to Alaska! In addition to expanding the reach of our conferences, decreasing the travel cost and opportunity cost enables individuals to enter conferences and relax the traditional paradigm of funneling registration through participating schools. Allowing individuals to represent NGOs and other non-state actors will be easier to handle virtually than in a traditional conference setting.

There were several lessons learned in 2020 about the virtual conference experience for delegates. The first is the disconnect between registration and attendance that accompanies virtual conferences. As faculty have no doubt learned in the past year, signing up for a free or cheap conference in no way means you will attend the sessions or actively participate. How many faculty meetings have we experienced where most of the "attendees" are using the meeting time to clean out their email inboxes? This problem is mitigated if delegates pay to attend, but even then, attendance may be spotty. At the Florida conference mentioned above, less than half of those registered attended (Pace)! That is high compared to the no-show rate of other conferences, but every 2020 conference participating in our conversations reported less than perfect attendance. One reason this is a concern is that with few people in the room, four or five delegates dominated the conversation (Pace, Gussin). This is not unheard of at live conferences, so quality chairs can guide conversation and help delegates feel welcome and participate.

Another aspect that was raised by advisors is that in a virtual setting, it's hard to read the room. There is no way to read body language to see if they are uncomfortable (McCartney). Part of any successful conference is maintaining decorum, so most virtual conferences maintained the professional dress code standard to Model UN. Some conferences provided standardized backgrounds for attendees to use. These provide a uniformity to the conference experience, and also mitigate the impact of socio-economic disparity for delegates who do not have a private space at home to log in from. Care should be used however, as some video conference platforms have algorithms that struggle to differentiate people of color from backgrounds, which can result in embarrassing glitches.

Another aspect of decorum is maintaining diplomatic demeanor. Occasional rudeness happens at any conference with hundreds of college students, and chairs are responsible to respond to them and mitigate their effects. A virtual conference can have unique forms of rudeness, such as

raising hand icons in an effort to be recognized before a speaker is finished (Gussin), which chairs can gently remind delegates to avoid. In addition, the near anonymous nature and lack of physical proximity can invite rudeness, and some advisors noted that interactions between male and female delegates were worse than in live sessions, and that some delegates created group chats on a non-conference platform, which led to unmonitored rude comments (Oleaga, Pace, Parson).

Monitoring inappropriate notes can be easier in a virtual conference, as chats can be monitored. As one advisor suggested, at least delegates can be told they are being monitored whether or not the conference tool allows for it (Gibbons)! One advantage is the chair can take screenshots of offending remarks to share with advisers (Oleaga). Some video conference tools are developing bots to catch chats for certain words to filter out sexist or racist notes (Ehinger). A good practice is for chairs to simply announce that cyberbullying is unacceptable at the beginning of the conference and encourage delegates to screenshot offending notes and submit them to the chair (Gussin).

Advisors were mixed on whether or not cameras should be on at all times. Some argued they should be on so that chairs can maintain quorum and delegates can stay engaged in the debate (Centeno). Others pointed out that some delegates may not have a reliable video stream, making this a socioeconomic issue. Delegates are often logging in from their houses, and not all have broadband access (Behnke). A compromise was suggested to require delegates have their video on while speaking and during votes, otherwise they could have their video off (Parsons).

There were several observations regarding the mechanics of conference interaction. As one advisor noted, Zoom allows some things that are less complicated than live processes (Gussin). Delegates who are not recognized to speak are simply muted. Quorum is easily determined by who is present in the committee. Chairs can disable the chat function in voting bloc where debate is not supposed to occur. Speakers can be tracked and resolution drafts can be edited using spreadsheets and documents easily shared with delegates. One conference used a website called MUN Coordinated to facilitate speaking times and committee votes (Long). These tools gave chairs more control over debate than expected.

As with any Model UN modality, quality chair training is essential to success in a virtual setting. If chairs are not trained adequately, delegates become quickly frustrated with constant rule explanations and variances (Pace). A competent, confident chair can make all the difference, with one adviser calling the ideal chair a “benevolent dictator” (Pace). One good practice is to designate one chair as the person for delegates to reach out to if they have technical difficulties or other concerns. This chair could also occasionally just ask “is everything OK?” (Gussin).

Plenary and Expert Speakers

An important learning component of Model UN is creating a venue where students can interact with professionals in the field and experts on the subjects they are discussing. With a live conference, organizers have to book speakers and cover their travel costs and perhaps pay a stipend. Desired speakers may not be able to participate because they have to schedule a full day probably on their part if not a couple of days with travel time.

However, virtual conferences present an opportunity in this regard because a speaker is only engaged for the duration of the plenary. This lowers the financial cost to the conference since there are no travel expenses. It also lowers the opportunity cost to the speakers, who may not have been willing to devote a few days to the conference but can provide a couple of hours. This lowered cost to both parties means a conference could bring additional speakers. Experts could address students not only in the plenary session, but a conference could have speakers open up each committee or periodically check in to share their expertise. A virtual conference can also allow for a more meaningful question and answer session. When there is a giant room of people at a live conference, personal interaction is limited to a few at a time, whereas in a virtual setting, experts can interact with students more freely.

As already mentioned, MCC conferences have used this advantage to have a speaker from Colombia and an extensive Q&A session with a doctor in another state who is an expert on epidemics. One innovation being piloted by the Model UN Far West (MUNFW) conference in San Francisco is to offer delegates opportunities for interaction with expert speakers by scheduling events in the fall and spring prior to conference. They are also offering virtual training workshops prior to conference and planning expert attendance at each committee during conference, similar to a hearing or actual UN conference on a topic. In this way, a Model UN conference can become an academic program, not a single event. When a school signs up for the MUNFW conference, they subscribe to an entire learning sequence.

A virtual plenary session may not be that different in the mechanics of an opening plenary, as it is mainly a spectator event anyway in a live conference. Some virtual conferences have chosen to skip the plenary entirely and just send delegates straight to committees (Gussin).

Committee Work

In a live conference, the delegates are all in a room together talking, a chair controls that interaction, and delegates use rules of procedure to structure speech and debate. A virtual setting is similar, with a dedicated space for each committee to attend and a chair is still needed to structure the interaction. The role of the chair is perhaps even more important in a virtual setting because of the ease of interruption. For example, moderators of online discussions have to constantly mute people whose dogs are barking in the background. Enthusiastic delegates may likewise need to be prevented from blurting out interruptions. Chairing is difficult in a live setting and requires even more emotional maturity in a virtual setting to control the room. The rules of procedure for each conference will likely need to be reconsidered. Rules that have been used to facilitate personal interaction may just complicate or bog down virtual interaction, arguing for less rules. Perhaps situations that could be handled with norms in a face-to-face setting may require more formal rules to operate virtually. Part of preparing for a virtual conference therefore should be considering whether to tighten or loosen the rules.

To illustrate, the MUNFW conference suspended one procedural rule since the real-time nature of online document sharing meant it was not necessary to move from one topic to the next while waiting for paper copies of resolutions to be delivered to the committee. Another conference chose to disallow roll call votes in voting bloc. This rule is often tiresome in a live conference, but nearly impossible to manage in a video conference (Gussin). Such creativity and flexibility is important when moving an established conference with all of its legacy rules to a virtual setting.

Caucus

Thinking through how the caucus can function in a virtual setting is perhaps the most important thing to consider when moving a conference online. The caucus is the heart of Model UN, for it is where the experiential learning happens and is often the reason students get addicted to the activity. Without the caucus experience, Model UN is just an academic seminar, as boring as a professional political science conference, which we would not want to inflict on an undergraduate! Caucus is where the magic of Model UN happens. In a live conference, there is moderated and unmoderated caucus, where the voting blocs physically separate to work on their resolutions together. They go to halls and sit at tables or even on the floor, which is part of the fun.

An online setting is quite different. Delegates need multiple pre-established rooms to meet in, with the ability to move freely between those virtual rooms, yet prevent others from barging in and disrupting their work. An online setting necessitates one person speaking at a time, otherwise neither speaker can be heard. This lack of spontaneity can complicate the negotiations that need to occur in caucus. This could mean that chairs need to moderate more than normal in order to mediate the conversation, or at least monitor it.

The advisors who shared their experiences had a variety of approaches to caucusing. The College of the Canyons conference used the Discord platform for caucus. They created a bunch of rooms in Discord so that delegates could talk to each other freely and move from room to room. They could see who was in which room and know when a country enters or leaves the room (Gussin). In 2020, to use Zoom or Webex for caucus, chairs had to manually move delegates from one breakout room to another. In early 2021, Zoom updated their software so delegates can now move freely between breakout rooms, leading conferences like MUNFW to use it for caucusing.

Another tool that worked well for some is Gatherly, which is a spatial-based conferencing tool. Gatherly charges \$12 per delegate and it has to be arranged ahead of time, but they do all the work of setting up the virtual meeting space. Some advisors thought this service was worth the charge despite the increased per-delegate cost. One negative is that their Gatherly groups are limited to 15 people, which is probably enough for caucus, but problematic if there is a large bloc trying to negotiate (Pace, Parson, Ruback).

MCC used its institutional service of Webex for committees, but used Google Chat for breakouts in its April conference. This was a bad idea, since participants had to be allowed into each room by the chair. This confusion was eventually resolved, but half of the caucus time would often expire before a conversation had begun. For its November conference, MCC switched to Wonder, which is a spatial-based tool like Gatherly, but currently free of charge. This tool worked very well, although it also has a 15-person limit to any given conversation grouping.

One common concern among the advisors was the timing of caucus. It takes less time to complete collaborative work in a virtual setting, so most felt that between 15 and 30 minutes were ideal lengths for caucusing. There was also a recognition that “Zoom fatigue” was a real thing, so conferences needed to build in small breaks that could serve as caucus time whether or not it was formally recognized as such (Oleaga, Pace, Gussin, Centeno).

Resolution Writing and Document Management

There is not a large difference between live and virtual conferences in this aspect, because almost all conferences have already moved to digital document management. This means there is at least one thing that doesn't need to be rethought as existing practices should be able to transfer seamlessly to a virtual setting. Some conferences just used the chat function of their video conference platform to move back and forth between Google Docs and working papers (Pace), others used a split screen (Gussin) or shared drives with templates, which is what MCC did. The SRMUN conference developed its own online hub to track speakers lists, resolutions, and participation by committee (Oleaga).

General Issues

There were other good ideas shared that were not directly connected to the running of conference, such as maintaining a virtual faculty room to facilitate advisor interaction and sharing of best practices. One key takeaway is that Model UN advisers need to train themselves on these technical tools if we expect to be able to instruct our students on their proper use (McCartney). It may be a good idea for conferences to hold "office hours" prior to the conference to answer technology questions and help programs make the transition to the virtual setting (Gussin). Since everything is new for everyone, it will help to focus on attitude, not aptitude. Mistakes will happen, we need to just roll with it, don't pout. Lots of people are doing things they are not confident with right now (Pace, McCartney).

When setting up a virtual conference, we have to replace the lost benefits of personal interaction. For both recruiting purposes and the student experience at the conference, we can highlight the value-added opportunities that online interaction offers, things not possible or feasible at an in-person conference. We should make an effort to include these things, not just hold a regular conference on Zoom.

Conclusion

Phil Gussin, an advisor for College of the Canyons, reminds us that transitioning programs online presents an opportunity to help prepare students for a professional future where telecommunications will be more and more important. Model UN has always been a tool to prepare students for leadership, so it makes sense to include virtual interactions as part of that training.

Whether face to face or online, the heart of Model UN is the interaction between students. As advisers, we need to ensure that this interaction is meaningful by intentionally structuring delegate training and the conference experience in such a way that the strengths and opportunities of a virtual setting are realized, and the disadvantages of that setting are mitigated. Once face to face instruction and live conferences are restored, we can decide to maintain virtual elements, making our programs stronger and more resilient than before 2020.

References

I must thank the many voices that contributed to the conversations that this paper is based on. Those who are cited in the paper and listed below contributed specific, unique ideas they deserve credit for. Many more advisers participated than are cited. I appreciated the expressed desire of the participants to be part of a community of Model UN advisers. We were all making things up as we went in 2020, and I am grateful to so many who followed my invitation to “fail spectacularly” so we could learn from each other.

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