Virtual total immersion

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Each September semester a keen cohort of students enrol in a subject simply titled ‘East-West Diplomacy’. They do so, now, knowing that they will work long hours, individually and in groups, for this subject. The students know they will lose sleep as the semester winds down, and their class exercises come to a crescendo of multiparty negotiations – negotiations which will affect their personal and social lives at University. They know the class structure (and embedded assessment) will demand them to formulate arguments to embed in complex negotiations, which will need to be articulately and skilfully delivered in order to politically neuter other nations’ ambitions: be they nuclear ambitions or power politics ambitions. All the students know they will struggle with the mountain of historical and current reading, and subsequent analysing, that will need to be done to get-up-to-speed to perform well in the early stages of the semester. They are all acutely aware that they will have to maintain a frenetic pace of data collection and analysis throughout the semester. All these keen students also know that the traditional rules of a University have been thrown out the window: they will no longer be judged as students, but rather their performance, from week one, is assessed purely along the lines of professionalism as demanded within all vocations where diplomatic skills are paramount. Essays, reflections pieces, exams and tests are replaced with the holistic testing of one notion: Professionalism. Professionalism need not be a slippery notion to students, it is simply the opposite to amateurism and, as such, sets a comprehensive benchmark against which all their skills can be tested.

East-West Diplomacy ensures that all the students understand the demands of ensuring they are professional in every sense. From the second week of class they intuitively know to arrive to class appropriately dressed. There is an unspoken “2B” rule: no bras or boxers (should ever be revealed). But more than that, pride and self-confidence comes from wearing business clothes in all settings, and students rapidly understand the advantage of being comfortable in formal clothing. Addressing their peers is also monitored. Slang and profanity will initially attract a stern look from the teaching staff. Interestingly, that behaviour is also quickly ostracised by all members of the class who strive for the professional posture. Physical postures improve with the more formal dress and behaviour codes, which the cohort establishes and maintains throughout the semester. At no time in the history of the class, has the teaching staff needed to force these behaviours. Rather, positive, but non-verbal, support on the emerging standards in the classroom is usually sufficient as the standards are set by the students themselves seeking to practice professionalism, and have grades awarded for their own modelling of professionalism. To ensure holistic notions of virtual immersion, class assessments are set to mimic the paper trails needed in an office dealing with such complex negotiations, and again, the professional nature and language produced is a key assessment criterion, along with the quality of the information. Quality information is paramount in any professional setting. No employee remains long if they produce inferior work – and students in class are reminded of that throughout the semester and told when their work is not sufficient to maintain their employment. Consequently the demands of East-West Diplomacy are onerous. Students know they will work many long hours behind the scenes to shine in their weekly three hour meetings.
To coin an advertising phrase: *and don’t the kiddies love it!* The students who sign up for East-West Diplomacy do not simply engage with the subject, they immerse themselves in it. Their relationships with their peers in the class spill over to daily and social life of students on campus. During September semester, it is not unusual for university staff to report out-of-class animated debates/negotiations, somewhere on campus, between members of a class cohort as they thrash out some of the finer political points before making a presentation in class. Teaching staff from the class find walking across campus a negotiated and occasionally treacherous path in September through December – not because of any prevailing weather conditions, but rather the encountered clusters of students representing different nations who are deeply engaged in the political machinations of any negotiation, and who will attempt to gain a leading edge by extracting intelligence from the teaching staff.

By the end of semester, all the students know more about the 6-Party Talks and all the protagonists involved, than they ever thought they should rightly know. An in-depth knowledge of the 6-Party Talks is not going to directly assist them gain a job in a commercial Bank is it. Or is it? Students rarely do this subject for fun; they know it is too much work to be the traditional sense of ‘fun’. Rather they recognise that there is a very serious side to this subject that will assist them to be a valuable employee, regardless of their career field.

In essence, the students who take this class recognise that the learning experience is not random. The class and the exercises therein, have been carefully crafted to ensure that learning pedagogies are sound for the student. The students also recognise that the class reflects a changed world for international relations and diplomacy; a world where practitioners in this field need to be equipped to deal with externalities that have hitherto not been imagined. The preparation and training of practitioners for such ‘real world’ contexts is the focus of my teaching in the International Relations and Diplomacy studies offered in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Bond University.

Contemporary conceptualisation of global politics and diplomatic methods has changed radically since the events of 11 September 2001, and whilst the threats to global cohesion are not necessarily any greater, they are now viewed through new lenses that amplify the role of Diplomacy in International Relations. With this in mind, Diplomacy and International Relations studies in Universities should now be charged with the responsibility to explore beyond the traditional domain of state-qua-state power politics and bi-lateral Embassy relations. Indeed the area studied needs to include an analysis of the broad range of official and non-official diplomats that now permeate government, business and private sectors of any nation. No longer are international relations only impacted by the official States. The individuals that flew civilian aircraft into New York’s Twin Towers ensured that teachers and theorists of diplomacy and international relations would never again ignore the power of individuals and non-state participants in the 21st century global politics.

Diplomacy studies carry another legacy that also needs to be eradicated in order to deliver best-practice methodologies. Diplomacy studies have traditionally worn the shroud mystery with areas of interest such as espionage, counter-espionage, codes, and the James Bond-esque cocktail parties with an agenda, highlighted in spy literature and movies. While the glamour of such activities is enticing for students, there are few practical vocational outcomes attached to those novel representations of the practice of diplomacy. Graduates of Diplomacy studies require practical training in daily work of diplomats and the state, or non-state, organisations they represent. Consequently the challenge for the Diplomacy teaching staff at Bond University has
therefore become: to facilitate learning that embeds the theoretical and practical skills in a vocational area that is traditionally closed to investigation by non-practitioners and theorists.

To overcome such limitations, I have developed a teaching and learning methodology that has become known as VTI, Virtual Total Immersion. VTI utilises a combination of case-study, role playing and action research methodologies whereby the student becomes the virtual diplomat. By assuming the diplomat’s role through VTI, students are provided with opportunities to intellectually engage with a ‘real world’ issue and work towards a ‘real world’ solution. In order to achieve the above outcomes, the VTI experience relies on the investigation of a real world, complex, near-unsolvable, multi-party issue.

The Six-Party Talks on the denuclearisation of North Korea provide near perfect conditions for VTI. Firstly, the negotiations involve multiple nations (USA, North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan) each with distinct political and cultural forms of organisation and practice. Second, all the individual nations have respective bi-lateral relationships that occur in distinct forms, and which occur concurrent with the multi-lateral fora of the Six-Party Talks. Third, all the nations have historical bi-lateral conflicts that have directly affected the current multi-lateral negotiations, and all the historical conflicts involve state and non-state actors. Fourth, and possibly the most important for the success of VTI, is that there exists a plethora of public documents regarding the historic and current Six-Party Talks, along with copious public statements by each nation regarding their position in the current Talks, and media coverage promulgating each nation’s posture for the Talks. Through this array of documents students can grasp a holistic, or virtual, understanding of the role of a diplomat and a nation in the Talks. Each student in the class is Virtually and Totally Immersed into diplomatic theory and practice as they adopt the role of their particular diplomat for their particular nation. Fifth, the real work 6-Party talks have a clear end-point demand of ‘verifiable’ and ‘irreversible’ disarmament. A clear point of optimum outcome is practical, and provides the students with a goal. However, the goal needs to be somewhat abstract, and the paths to the goal need to be multi-lineal and pot-holed with many historical, economic, ethical, and social dilemmas, otherwise students will shortcut to the optimum end-point. The 6-Party Talks are a perfect case-study for VTI as the optimum ‘verifiable’ and ‘irreversible’ end point of disarmament by the North Korean nation is an unlikely short-term outcome, guaranteeing future utility of the case in future classes – and yet, the shifting nature of the Talks ensures that no two concurrent classes have identical issues to negotiate through.

The implementation of VTI ensures that each student encounters a holistic and innovative experience where the principles of International Relations and Diplomacy are learned in tandem with the development of critical skills in negotiation, conflict resolution, public speaking, independent research, group work and reportage. Moreover, students develop these theoretical and skill knowledges with a cross-cultural framework, integrated into a crisis scenario that incorporates many features of Problem Based Learning (PBL).

The critical difference between PBL programs and the VTI project lies in its relevance to contemporary global challenges. PBL can pick and choose its problem from a wide variety of historical, theoretical, and current issues. VTI does not have this luxury. Historical global issues, for example, are often resolved to the satisfaction of the global community. This means that students within a VTI program would be able to research the problem and the outcome, divorcing the student from any motivation to fully adopt their role: the outcome is predetermined and the victors
and the losers predestined and the students’ role fated. Moreover PBL tends to have defined parameters around the issue under investigation. The PBL issue is often a real life situation, but some of the elements of the problem are missing. The task of the students is to establish the missing part and hypothesise as to how this solves the whole problem. VTI takes this idea one step further.

VTI embeds the imperatives of project management into the process of scenario-building, specifically because the nature of the presented problem, or global scenarios, requires careful consideration of the effects on broader populations beyond the direct mandate of the protagonists. Consequently, while PBL often focuses on issues in isolation, VTI necessitates a global view, and careful attention to the multiple contexts within the prescribed scenario.

The reasons the inaugural VTI program at Bond University adopted the 6-Party Talks are due to these constituent elements of the problem:

- **Multiple nations:** North Korea, South Korea, USA, China, Japan, and Russia. This ensures the activity is whole class-based rather than small group work.
- **Currency and longevity:** the issue remains unresolved with periodic official meetings (fortuitously in the Northern Autumn, and coincides with out September semester). The Talks are a protracted issue not likely to disappear mid-semester, leaving the class unable to continue.
- **Resources:** students have no trouble accessing historical and current reportage on the Talks from both governmental and non-governmental sources. Broad reportage is essential.

The 6-Party talks also allow the specific teaching methodology associated with VTI to be deployed.

At the beginning of each incarnation of the subject East-West Diplomacy, and the deployment of the 6-Part Talks VTI project, I choose to broadly assume that certain limitations regarding prior knowledge and biases will be present within the cohort. Whether accurate or not, such assumptions serve to facilitate the foundational teaching essential to effectively engage with the subject materials. They include:

- **A closed-mindedness (narrow thinking)**
- **A lack of skills (no exposure to the diplomatic world)**
- **A lack of global thinking (predominantly Western thinking)**
- **A lack of real world experience (insular nature of secondary education)**

The list above does bring challenges to a personal and professional desire to foster learner-centered pedagogies that reshape the theoretical and practical preconceptions of the students in diplomacy and international relations studies. However, it is my contention that students are open to novel challenges. The trick, for the teacher, is to ensure that learning is deeply embedded in the learning program, no matter how novel it would seem at face value.

There are multiple direct benefits to students as a result of participation in the VTI program both in the short and long term. In the short term, students benefit from the subject by the development of skills that enhance the student’s core competencies in diplomacy and international relations area studies, including:
1. Independent and ongoing research. This occurs as students need to keep current with the constant and real-time flow of documents being produced by the key stakeholders in the 6 Party talks.

2. Analysis of official and public documents. Students are required to not only read the flow of documentation, but also effect diplomatic practice in the analysis of these documents. For example, adopting responsibility for a forensic investigation as to the true parentage of all documents, and estimating the effect each document will have on the negotiations and public opinion.

3. Critical interpretation of disparate information. This is yet again a practical diplomatic tool whereby the students enact the function of analysts looking for bias in all information presented. Student capacity and motivation will determine how broadly across the key stakeholders each student will analyse documents.

4. Dexterity in verbal responses. This skill is one required by all potential employers, not just the diplomatic service. The ability to be articulate under pressure is a skill that rarely comes naturally. Engagement in country briefings and the formal negotiations within the VTI environment, fosters confidence and allows students to practice their own particular style within a safe environment.

5. Cross cultural empathy versus National Interest. All the protagonists in this exercise need to locate shared solutions that can conflict with their national interest – which is traditionally heralded as paramount in realist international politics.

6. Interdisciplinary knowledge bases. Students rapidly realise that to negotiate their way through the many bi-lateral and multi-lateral issues they will need to borrow knowledge from other fields of study to understand the complexities of the issues and then to offer solutions. For example, the use of light-water reactors as a power source, as is suggested in many negotiations, requires students to rapidly gain a rudimentary knowledge of physics.

In the long term, through their participation in this subject, students will be better prepared to represent their employer with confidence, assured that they have prepared themselves and their materials well, with:

1. increased critical awareness of problematic issues
2. skills to rapidly synthesise key material
3. ability to deploy appropriate cross-cultural awareness
4. ability to be empathetic to the requirements of all parties
5. skills to engage with peers from a position of being well informed and confident
6. ability to respond to emerging issues with competence
7. abilities to engage in interdisciplinary analysis

In essence, the subject implants the behaviours of diplomats in the students, all of whom are assessed on how well they perform as an employee who is required to exhibit and interrelate with others in a professional manner. The opportunity to practice the prerequisite skills in a safe environment with supportive peers and a teaching staff who can both model and mentor the roles, provides the students with an invaluable opportunity to gain constructive and critical feedback without the
consequential ramifications of a workplace. However, VTI ensures that all the students experience the mental and physiological responses to the real-world workplace by placing them in a virtual stress situation, with total engagement and immersion, in a complex issue with no easy or straightforward solution, that is occurring in the parallel real world.

East-West Diplomacy has now been deployed for three years in the September semester. Students who have not yet reached the latter stages of their degree, and where they are advised to undertake this class, constantly seek affirmation that East-West Diplomacy will remain in the teaching schedule. Those students who have successfully completed the class often request that VTI become standard methodology in all diplomacy subjects. The former request is far more achievable than the latter. VTI is a sound and practical teaching methodology; however its value is in being part of a suite of teaching methodologies that ensure the learning capacity of all students is taken into account. Not all students are comfortable with the public form of learning in VTI, and those students do tend to self-select out of East-West Diplomacy. As a result, the teaching staff needs to ensure there are more traditional teaching classes on offer for all students to benefit from. Diplomacy and International Relations studies at Bond University do ensure all the learning styles of students are catered for, while offering all students the opportunity to learn in the most effective methodology for themselves.

To be sure, the most telling accolades for VTI have come from now graduated students. Regardless of their chosen career, almost all have sent emails of thanks for the preparation VTI gave them in professionalism. Some of these graduates have joined the diplomatic service of Australia and other nations, and they have commented on how life-like the VTI experience was – even working with non-official documents, the psychological effect of VTI mirrors that of the real-world. As educators, I believe the reward is in preparing students psychologically with appropriate content and skills to represent themselves well in their chosen careers. VTI is one strategy to assist that process.

As an aside, but tellingly, almost without exception they also comment on how following the 6-Party Talks has become part of the news and current affairs habit.