

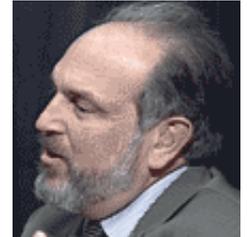
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Can Games Really Change the Course of History?

by Larry Susskind

[Consensus Building Approach](#) by Larry Susskind

At a recent meeting at Sciences Po in Paris, scholars and practitioners from a number of countries heard about a very elaborate game in which more than 150 students played the parts of climate change negotiators from all over the world. We watched a video highlighting their intense and emotional interactions on the "last night" before their version of the Copenhagen climate change negotiations came to an end. Some of the students were present; recounting their frustration at not being able to come up with an agreement that would demonstrate to the real climate change negotiators (one of whom was present) what they could have and should have accomplished. The person behind this game, Professor Bruno Latour, had convinced the students that their simulated success might influence subsequent rounds of actual climate negotiations. No wonder they were frustrated.



There are various ways games can be used to inform, and even alter, high-stakes policy negotiations. I'm going to describe several of them below, but this only works when the actual negotiators take part in the game in advance of undertaking their own "real life" interactions. I'm not convinced that the results of role-play simulations involving students or other stand-ins will mean much to senior government representatives. I say this for three reasons. First, real life negotiators are under enormous pressure to "stick to the script" worked out in national capitols before they are sent off to an international venue. Every word in the formal statements they present is carefully measured to satisfy competing constituencies at home. Negotiators do not have the authority to depart from these scripts. Students, on the other hand, are under no such pressure. Even when games provide Confidential Instructions meant to mimic "back-table" demands from various internal constituencies, students don't feel the same pressure that real negotiators feel. Second, real life negotiators care about their long-term careers. They are less likely to get caught up in the spirit of a last-minute or all-night negotiating session in which students throw out the rule book in an effort to reward everyone's hard work or show (their teachers) they can reach agreement. Experienced negotiators have been down the same road many times. Larger principles -- like national sovereignty and the obligations of the North to assist the nations of the South before asking the developing world to take on more responsibilities -- outweigh any short-term considerations or the pressures of the moment. Finally, particularly articulate and persuasive students can win over a crowd, regardless of the (relatively less politically powerful) role they have been assigned. In real-life negotiations, this is much less likely to happen. However creative the agreement might be that students are able to reach at the end of a role-play, it is not likely to be taken seriously by the

real-life negotiators in such situations.

Role-play simulations can be used in three ways. First, they can be used to give students a chance to experience situations in which they might someday find themselves, offering a quasi-realistic chance to apply what they have learned in class. When used properly, with the help of skilled instructors, role-play simulations can be very effective educational tools. Role-play simulations can also be used as part of a research agenda (especially in the negotiation field). In the same way carefully structured laboratory experiments (involving students) are often used to test psychological hypotheses, role-play simulations, run repeatedly with similar sets of players -- some of whom are instructed behind-the-scenes to try different negotiating techniques -- are being used to determine the efficacy of various negotiating strategies. In my own work, we are using role-play simulations in coastal communities to see whether a particular approach to adaptation planning is likely to change public perceptions about the best ways of responding to climate change risks. (Susskind and Paul, "Winning Public Support for Addressing Climate Change, *Solutions Magazine*, 2010, pp. 44-48). Role-play simulations work as a research tool when a game creates a context that can be held constant, while carefully instructed (and matched) participants try different negotiation strategies. The third use of role-play simulations, that I want to focus on in the rest of this piece, is as an intervention tool in real-life negotiations. While there may be some overlap with the first two uses, interventions of the sort I am about to describe take an enormous amount of work to arrange and are almost always "one-off."

The United States Environmental Protection Agency decided to experiment with a new way of involving stakeholders in the process of drafting regulations. They called this Negotiated Rule-making or "Reg-Neg." (Phillip Harter, "Negotiating Regulation: A Cure for the Malaise," 71 *Georgetown Law Journal*, 1: 1982) Without going into too much detail, their basic idea was to recruit a cross-section of relevant stakeholders, with the help of a professional mediator, and see if all the parties likely to complain about any new environmental regulation the Agency issued, could reach agreement on what they thought the new regulations should require. After a quite a few successful experiments (Jody Freeman and Laura Langbein, "Regulatory Negotiation and the Legitimacy Benefit," *New York University Environmental Law Journal*, 9 (2000) pp. 60 - 151), the U. S. Congress decided to change America's Administrative Procedure Act so that negotiated rule making is now a normal option. Along the way, several of us made a game called Dirty Stuff (downloadable from www.pon.org) for the participants in each new negotiated rule-making to play the night before their first formal negotiating session. The game takes several hours to play. Participants are asked to begin by reading both General Instructions (that set the stage) and Confidential Instructions (to ensure that they play their assigned role in the same way that "real" participants in that role would proceed). Typically, they are asked to play a role quite different from their real-life role (so no one has to worry that they will inadvertently reveal what they intend to do when the formal negotiations begin the next day). The results are profound. During the debriefings of the Dirty Stuff game, participants almost always note the opportunities for cooperation (and not just competition) they now see on the horizon. During the actual negotiations, I have often heard participants refer to what happened in the game. They do this when they want to gently chide

their real-life negotiating partners to work harder to reach a mutually advantageous agreement. The game provides a common language. It allows newcomers to get a sense of what lies ahead, thereby increasing their comfort level. It hints at a range of possible options that the parties might never discover under normal circumstances, in much the way that Bruno Latour was hoping the Climate Change game would. The key, though, is that the actual negotiators must play the game together and talk together about the results with the help of a trained facilitator.

Here's a second example. The participants in a global treaty negotiation concerning Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) were convinced by one of their members to meet before the official opening of their formal talks, to play a game. We had designed a game, called the Global Management of Organochlorines, otherwise known as the Chlorine Game (which can be downloaded from www.pon.org with the relevant teaching notes) simulating a treaty-making effort a lot like the POPs negotiation. While I was not present at that event, it is my understanding, from talking to several of the participants, that the game helped those unfamiliar with the dynamics of global treaty-negotiation to get their footing. It also made clear that the negotiators, even though they were under strict orders from their home countries, could find room to maneuver if they shifted into an informal problem-solving mode prior to making formal demands or commitments. (For more on global environmental treaty-making see Lawrence Susskind, *Environmental Diplomacy*, Oxford University Press, 1995.)

The Consensus Building Institute, the not-for-profit mediating organization in Cambridge, Massachusetts that I founded twenty years ago, has run role-play simulations for a variety of national and international agencies and organizations preparing to engage in national and global treaty negotiations. (David Plumb, Elizabeth Fierman, and Todd Schenk, "Role Play Simulations and Managing Climate Change Risks," Cambridge, MA, Consensus Building Institute, <http://cbuilding.org/tools/bpcs/role-play-simulations-and-managing-climate-change-risks>). In my new book with Shafiqul Islam, entitled, *Water Diplomacy, Resources for the Future*, 2012) we include four linked games we use each year at the Water Diplomacy Workshop (www.waterdiplomacy.org/workshop) to train senior water professionals so that they can use these games in their countries to help those involved in upcoming transboundary water negotiations approach them in a more collaborative way.

Role-play simulations can be used as a means of intervening in real-life negotiations, but only if they are (1) crafted in a very realistic way; (2) presented by a skilled instructor who can help the participants reflect on their results together; (3) include both General and Confidential Instructions so that participants feel the strong pressure to stick with the script that they will feel in real life; and (4) invited by the participants in real-life negotiations because those individuals want an opportunity to explore options that might otherwise never get considered.

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