Chapter 6

Using Role Plays and World-building Exercises to Challenge Misconceptions of Africa

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Introduction

Students often have partial and almost entirely negative pre-conceptions about African politics that are simplistic and monolithic. These pre-conceptions derive from popular and media portrayals and a political science curriculum in which, if African polities feature at all, it is to provide examples of bad governance and political 'pathologies' that are explicitly or implicitly contrasted with Western models of 'good governance'. Although the current generation of students are more aware of Eurocentricism in knowledge formation and the curriculum, and engaged with issues of structural racism, they lack the analytical tools and pedagogic space to deconstruct what they know and rebuild their perceptions in light of a more complex and nuanced understanding. This chapter suggests that creative exercises can be an effective means to enable students to do so.

The reflections presented here are based on the experiences of using creative world-building exercises and role-plays to challenge negative pre-conceptions about African politics in a final year undergraduate module that I have been teaching for the last ten years at Trinity College Dublin. The class size has varied from 12 to 40 students and is taught via a two-hour seminar over 24 weeks. The majority of the students

are white and Irish, with very few students from minority or specifically African backgrounds. While some students have travelled to, volunteered in or have family connection to some part of Africa (for example, in the Irish context, relatives who are missionaries), very few have any in-depth prior knowledge or understanding.

To begin the process of making their preconceptions visible to them, in the first class of the module, students are asked to write down the first three words that come to mind when they hear the term African politics. I use an online platform, like Mentimeter, to create a word cloud capturing the class's collective perceptions. These give students the anonymity needed to honestly express their perceptions and emphasises that the process of uncovering and examining them is a collective one. As illustrated in Figure One, invariably, the words that dominate reflect the preconceptions that they have been exposed to: corruption, colonialism, conflict, underdevelopment, poverty. We repeat this process at the end of the module, by which point the most commonly used words have changed, with complex, diverse, nuanced, contestation dominating and neopatrimonialism replacing colonialism as their main analytical framework for understanding politics.

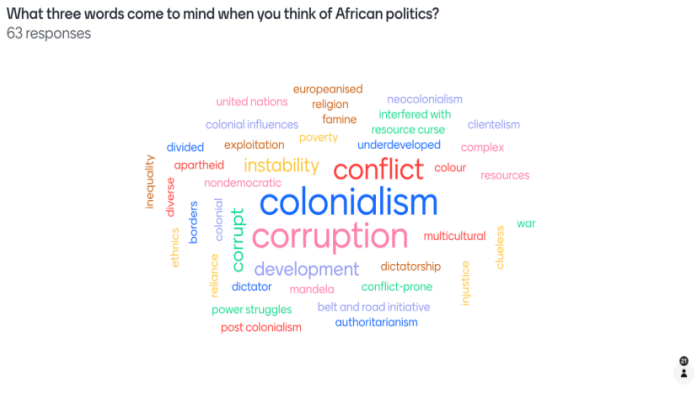

Figure 6.1: Word clouds created by students in the first (left panel) and last (right panel) week of the module in answer to the question 'What three words come to mind when you think of African politics?'

How do students get from one point to another? From perceiving African politics in a series of negative cliches to adjectives that reflect less on what they perceive but how they perceive it? While not denying the prevalence of corruption, conflict and inequality, the course aims to look beyond these issues and place them into a broader and more historically informed context. To achieve this, the course uses curriculum design, assessment strategies, reflection and, in particular, role plays and world-building experiments. The chapter describes the design and experiences of a world-building exercise which asks students to design a fictional African country or world in which African states are hegemonic and a role play that simulates a negotiation between a local community and a foreign multi-national in Sierra Leone. It describes the pre-requisites needed to make these active learning exercises work, and reflects on how they aid the process of challenging pre-conceptions.

Simulations and role-plays 'recreate complex, dynamic political processes in the classroom, allowing students to examine the motivations, behavioural constraints, resources and interactions amongst institutional actors' (Smith & Boyer, 1996:690). They are well-established within political science as effective active learning tools (McCarthy, 2014) and are used in sub-disciplines such as international relations (e.g., Stover,

2007), international political economy (e.g., Boyer et al., 2006) and comparative politics (e.g., Marsh & Bucy, 2002). While some use fictional countries, these are usually pre-designed (e.g., Enterline & Jepsen, 2009). While there are some examples of role plays in African contexts in the literature (Youde, 2008; Langfield, 2016), they are usually embedded in broader survey courses that do not concern Africa specifically and therefore generally focus on using these cases to understand more general phenomena, like democratic transitions or ethnic conflict, rather than deepening students' understanding of African states specifically. Some role plays of 'fictional' states bear resemblances to African states and even though supposedly fictional, use the name of a real ethnic group (Shaw, 2006). Collaborative world-building is a more novel pedagogic tool, more commonly used in design and creative settings (King, 2007; Hergenrader, 2019).

While these interactive exercises are often the catalytic component in challenging pre-conceptions, they depend on being embedded in a curricular design that gives students the knowledge that they need to make them meaningful and a continual process of reflection fostered by in-class discussion, an assessment design that promotes student ownership and a classroom culture of trust. The next section describes how these aspects are designed and fostered. Following that, I describe each exercise in turn: its goals and design; and the experiences of conducting and refining it iteratively over the last ten years. The chapter concludes by reflecting on why these exercises may be particularly effective in challenging misconceptions.

Curriculum design

The exercises are embedded within a curriculum design that is aimed at exposing students to the complexity of politics in African states and to a discussion of how knowledge production itself can be distorted by stereotypes. After an introductory class that makes the theme of uncovering and interrogating stereotypes explicit, the course begins where popular and student preconceptions of the origins of African politics begins – with colonialism. Using canonical texts and standard arguments

(Amin, 1972; Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996), the experience and legacy of colonialism is examined, followed by independence and the character of post-colonial regimes. Students have a strong pre-conception that colonialism is almost solely responsible for the challenges that African states face today and an uncritical and romanticised view of the pre-colonial period. While not denying its influence, in the discussion I push students to more precisely locate its effects, how its legacy persists and the agency of African actors.

We then return to the pre-colonial period, using different means of learning in order to disrupt their expectations and challenge their misconceptions. Knowing very little about the pre-colonial period, students usually assume, in common with influential arguments in the literature (Herbst, 2014) that politics in this period was dominated by stateless communities. Sometimes, in line with a worldview that has emphasised colonialism as the key negative turning point for post-colonial states, they assume pre-colonial politics was 'better' than what came after: featuring more prominent roles for women, more gender fluid identity, greater harmony, less destructive human relationships with nature. Despite their sensitivity to coloniality, their pre-conceptions of pre-colonial politics reflect 'noble savage' tropes used by colonial powers to legitimise their rule (Bonsu, 2009; Gabay, 2018). These pre-conceptions obscure their ability to understand the complex political realities of this historical period. Finally, their understanding of slavery reflects the focus of contemporary debates: they know more about its consequences in the Americas, than its effects on African states.

To challenge these pre-conceptions I show students extracts from documentaries about the Zulu kingdom and the Asante empire that demonstrate how these polities engaged in extensive political centralisation. We discuss the drivers and dynamics – trade, slavery, warfare, identity formation – noting how similar these are to state-building dynamics in Europe. I then ask each to read a different chapter from the UNESCO History of Africa (Niane & Ki-Zerbo, 1998; Ajayi 1998), with a view to identifying the political features of the polities in a particular region. In groups, they discuss their region with

others who have read different chapters. This serves to illustrate the diversity of political forms and developments in the pre-colonial period. Finally, we look at the effects of slavery on Africa, on enslaved individuals within Africa and on the global economy. Students are often surprised to learn that slavery was a common indigenous institution, that it had profound effects on political centralisation and fragmentation, and gendered dynamics and consequences. A central aim of the discussion is to nuance their prior understanding and demonstrate the complexity of the issue. In order to prevent the discussion from becoming an abstracted analytical topic disconnecting from individual lived experience, we also read and discuss first-hand accounts by enslaved people.

Having disrupted their pre-conceptions and misconceptions of pre-colonial politics we then reconsider the legacy of colonialism. While this does not necessarily lead to a total revocation of the importance of colonialism, they no longer see colonialism as the 'beginning' of African politics. The non-sequential structure - starting with colonialism and then returning to the pre-colonial period allows for an explicit discussion of the biases in knowledge production and popular perceptions. The rest of the course then follows the political trajectory of African states through the post-colonial period and then in the latter stages, spotlights particular issues such as China's role, environmental crisis, migration, and gender. These topics are deliberately chosen to avoid issues such as conflict, that play into common stereotypes. Further, as these issues are live and are currently unfolding, without a settled literature or interpretation, they offer students an opportunity to fully confront the complexity of politics in African states as it is happening today. Throughout the curriculum there is an emphasis on: identifying both common themes and diverse experiences; examining the relative power and agency of both external and internal actors; and identifying pre-conceptions and examining them.

Assessment strategies

The module contains both standard and alternative assessment strategies, and formative and summative assignments designed both to allow the students to demonstrate what they have understood and to apply it in ways that push their analytical and communication skills further. Reflection on their own positionality in relation to the material is embedded in the assessment design.

The formative assessment consists of weekly response papers that usually take the form of a critical overview of one of the key readings which they have signed up for the week before. This component, marked on a pass or fail basis, is mainly used to encourage the students to take a first step at internalising the content for that week. In class, we then work towards a synthetic understanding. First, students work in small groups, with one person who has performed each reading, and peer teach the key points of their reading to the others. We then come together as a class to discuss the readings in relation to an overarching substantive question. However, the formative assignments are also used to introduce students to the alternative forms of assessment that they may not be as familiar with. For example, after watching documentaries on the Asante empire and Zulu kingdom, students are asked to write a reflection piece with their thoughts on pre-colonial politics, their own preconceptions, and the canonical readings on colonialism in light of what they learned.

There are three pieces of summative assessment, at different points in the term, fulfilling different purposes. The first is a more standard essay asking students to discuss an overarching statement on one of the key periods in African political development in light of a detailed case study. This assignment aims to, first, provide students with a chance to consolidate and demonstrate what they have learned in terms of the broad patterns of development. Second, it aims to enhance their understanding by going beyond the necessarily high degree of generalisation involved in the delivery of the

material and in this way challenging their misconception of undiversified polities.

Having tested their broad basic understanding in the first piece of summative assessment, the subsequent assignments aim to achieve the higher-order goals of the course: to provide them with pedagogic space to reflect on their misconceptions, and how what they have learned changes or challenges their broader worldviews; and to demonstrate how what they have learned enables them to understand African politics as it is playing out today in greater nuance and complexity than standard media accounts.

The second summative assignment is a reflection piece linked to the in-class exercises described in the next section. The assignment asks students to reflect on their experience in the exercise – how they designed their country or world; how they approached their role; what they took from the exercise in terms of understanding; what surprised them and what it uncovered about their own attitudes; whether it prompted to see any of the readings or issues studied differently; and how their experience would have been different if they had undertaken this exercise at the start of the module. In other words, the assignment asks students to make clear what they have taken away substantively and personally from the exercises.

The third and final assignment asks students to identify a contemporary event or news story happening in any African state and use what they have learned to explain why it is happening, firstly in an academic essay and secondly in an accessible format. Over the years, students have chosen a great range of events and stories, from climate justice protests in Madagascar, to China's vaccine diplomacy during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic to women's villages in Kenya. They have chosen an impressive array of media through which to communicate their arguments in the second part – from podcasts to illustrated children's books, video games to graphic stories and poems. The key challenge of the second part is to communicate a complex academic argument in a way that is

accessible but does not resort to stereotypes or simplifications that could reinforce misconceptions.

As a whole, the assessment strategy provides students with opportunities to regularly internalise the course material, consolidate and deepen their understanding, reflect on their positionality, and practice understanding and explaining the rich depth of African politics to themselves and others.

Classroom Culture

While some have found that role plays can lead to greater interactivity between students in the longer term (Oberhofer, 1999), and suggest using these exercises at the start of modules to establish classroom culture (McCarthy, 2014:402), my experience has been that an already-established level of trust and interactivity is essential. The thought experiment happens in week 14 of the course and the role play in week 17. By this point, students are familiar with each other, especially as each week they are placed in groups with different peers depending on the reading that they have signed up for. It also gives me the chance to build their trust in me by creating a non-judgemental environment where they feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable. This is important as the exercises are asking them to not only leave their comfort zone but engage in a process of revealing and examining their own biases.

In order to do this, I use active listening, share my own experiences of confronting bias, and encourage collaboration. Active listening involves trying to drop your *reactions* to what is said, focusing instead on what is being communicated - both the words and non-verbal communication - and responding by first reflecting back to the speaker what you have heard. This looser, more attentive approach enables a more equal dialogue and first reiterating back to students what they have said builds their confidence and trust that they can speak without meeting judgement. Second, as I am asking students to confront their biases, I also share my experiences of uncovering my own. I make visible to them the ways in which I have tried to

implement decolonisation in the curriculum, making changes from the one which I inherited when I first started teaching.

Finally, these exercises work because they are embedded in a constructivist approach to knowledge and learning and a classroom culture of collaboration. This approach sees learning as a collaborative act of co-creation between students themselves, and between the educator and the students. It is guided by 'the idea that expertise does not rest with a single individual such as the teacher, rather, it is spread throughout the classroom' (Brown & King, 2000:246). This idea is realised through the repeated structure of asking students to peer teach each other in small groups, then synthesise their collective knowledge in the facilitated discussion. It is further reinforced by the collective production of class notes: each group fills in a table with their notes in a shared file that everyone in the class has access to. Cumulatively, these small acts help to foster a classroom culture where students feel safe enough to take the leap outside their comfort zones that the exercises ask them to make.

World-building exercise: Design and Goals

The world-building exercise is usually conducted mid-module when the students have already completed the part of the curriculum which follows the broad commonalities in the political trajectory of African states from the pre-colonial period to the present. The week prior, I introduce the exercise. I show students clips from popular media and the Afrofuturism movement - for example the *West Wing* episode on Kundu (Sorkin et al., 2003) and a clip from *Black Panther* (Coogler et al., 2018) - in order to stimulate discussion of the common tropes used to make fictional countries identifiably African and the embedded power relations that they portray between Africa and the West. This pre-briefing, as well as the debrief discussed below, is important in order to frame the experiment and to not push students into their panic zone. As Tosey has discussed, the 'learning zone' lies between students' comfort zones and the 'panic zone' (Tosey, 2006). As the exercise pushes them

considerably outside of their comfort zone, it is important to give enough support so that they do not feel overwhelmed.

I then ask students to divide into groups of four to five students and introduce the challenge: to create either a fictional African country that is recognisably African but avoids stereotypes or to create a fictional world in which African states are dominant. For the first, students have to give their country a geography, a history, and a contemporary political context and have to think carefully about design and the interactive effects of their choices. Students are instructed to try to avoid stereotypes for two reasons. First, because of the classroom context, with the majority of students being non-African, it is important to avoid subjecting African students to harmful stereotypes. Adjusting the instructions to each particular class context is an important part of creating a context conducive to meaningful discussion of sensitive topics. Second, the challenge deliberately sets the students a very difficult task as there is an inherent tension between avoiding stereotypes yet making their country realistic. In doing so, it provides them with a chance to experience this tension, rather than simply being told about it, and sets up a meaningful discussion about why this tension exists and what is problematic in stereotypical portrayals.

For the second exercise, students have to change something in world history and identify how it would lead to an alternative world where African states are not dependent, as well as explaining what politics in African countries looks like in this world. It is designed in the spirit of Afrofuturism, challenging them to use creativity in order to imagine alternative futures, but here for the goal of identifying more clearly the roots of dependence. In order to determine how to arrive at a different outcome, students need to pinpoint what they think were the vital factors or moments in leading to our current reality. As with the first exercise, this one also makes them more aware of what they do not know, and better able to identify the gaps in their understanding – and their ability to imagine different futures – because of Eurocentric stereotypes in African knowledge production, perception, and consumption. In both cases, students have to present their fictional country or world

to the class through a creative medium. There are no limits to what this can be, but cannot entail a PowerPoint presentation. The second option – of building a fictional world – itself grew out of discussions where we recognised that it was difficult to imagine different outcomes for African states without imagining an entirely different world. The exercise emphasises the interconnectedness of African and global political development.

The goals of this exercise are both analytical and reflective. Analytically, this is a challenge in design thinking and counterfactual reasoning. I have given students an outcome and they have to figure out what factors would be needed in order to arrive there. It illustrates the interlocking nature of challenges: if students give their country a geography that is arid and hard to rule, in order to make it less attractive to colonial powers, it will have food security issues in the post-colonial period. Reflectively, the challenge directly holds a mirror up to their conceptions of African states – they have to identify them, discuss them, try to avoid them. The assignment reinforces this process as it is a reflective piece, written after the exercise.

The creative element of the exercise was included to enhance both of these learning goals. Students have used a wide variety of media to present: short plays, mock news items, re-enactments of key events, political cartoons, mock TV quiz shows, haikus. By asking students to engage their imagination, they are more inclined to think holistically. It is also part of the 'decentring' of the students' perspective that is designed to help them unlock alternative ways of seeing. Further, by having to present it in a creative way, they encounter the constraints of mediums of communication that can often lead to stereotyping. For example, in presenting a mock *Newsnight* special on their country, they have to confront the challenges of presenting their country in an engaging, newsworthy way to audiences that have little prior knowledge. Finally, the creative aspects makes the exercises more fun, which enhances their learning.

In order for students to integrate their experience in the exercise and begin the process of reflection, careful debriefing is needed. The threats of simplification in role plays have been

noted (Alden, 1999). Students have put themselves out there and there is a need for delicate inquiry in order to hold up a mirror while recognising that they may feel self-conscious. Therefore, after all the presentations, we have a collective discussion where each group explains the reasoning behind their choices and reflect on the experience. I try to keep to straightforward questions probing their design thinking and invite others in the class to provide feedback to clearly defined questions.

Experiences and outcomes

When I first designed this thought experiment it was itself a teaching experiment. I did not know what to expect. I did not know whether the students would embrace the challenge or if it would be a pedagogically useful tool. I was inspired by one of my colleagues who had used creativity in teaching science. I simply decided to have a go. Over the years, I have refined the set-up, expanded the premise, updated the media clips that we discuss, and added the reflective assignment. What is now a carefully thought-through class design, came out of my own process of creative experimentation with the students.

Over time, from observation, I have slowly come to understand why it works to achieve the analytical and reflective goals that are outlined above. I quickly came to see its utility as an analytical tool, as it elevated students' reasoning and integrated their understanding in ways that would have been difficult to achieve through other pedagogic approaches. Simulations and role-plays are well-established as ways to encourage students to draw on their experience from across the course and integrate it holistically (Alden, 1999). In some cases I could see that students had not only achieved understanding, but also insight. For example, one student commented that they did not want their country to have conflict – to avoid a common stereotype of African states – but the factors that would prevent conflict (such as lack of resources, and a fragmented ethnic structure) would also make famine more likely. Students have talked about drawing on countries that they knew something about as inspiration, but were surprised at how little latitude they actually had to imagine, given the factors that had to be

there for their country to be believable. Some students said that the exercise made them less sure that colonialism was the root cause of economic underdevelopment in Africa, while others said the opposite, and some felt that it made them realise that no one factor could be identified as the singular cause.

The exercise has revealed interesting insights, as the students confronted their own pre-conceptions. In many cases it has revealed layers of pre-conception even amongst students actively seeking to combat their own internalised stereotypes. For example, one student commented on the reluctance of some students to engage with the exercise out of fear of stereotyping, but based on assumptions that were themselves problematic:

> I was interested and surprised by my classmates' scepticism of this assignment. Their scepticism was rooted in professions of a lack of understanding of African cultures and a fear of perpetuating cultural stereotypes. However, the assignment focused on African state formation and political structures, which we had spent the prior 14 weeks discussing. The linking of African politics with 'African culture' is in and of itself stereotypical and common. Although there is certainly a link between culture and politics I would be surprised to learn that anyone would collapse political structures into culture in either America or Europe. I understand my classmates' hesitation, given the rampant stereotypes that persist in Western depictions and understandings of Africa, however I think this hesitation to engage in discussions on African politics further excludes these states, and treats them as some kind of an anomaly.

Many groups have tried to avoid stereotypes by inventing countries that were not colonised, but this has sometimes led them into deeper reflection on questions of internal and external agency. For example, one group created a country that had avoided colonisation because of its impenetrable terrain and military prowess. They tried to imagine what politics would look like today, and in doing so realised that they had leaned

in to 'noble savage' tropes of pre-colonial politics as a kind of utopian alternative political reality. As one student observed:

> Paradoxically, our idealism in the attempt to design the alternative, itself reproduced African stereotypes. Namely, the stereotype of an organic, idyllic, utopian pre-colonial past, that if only had been free to grow in its own fashion, might have preserved its values of fairness and co-operation at the modern national economic level. Our idealisation of precolonial African politics took agency away from political actors who in a more realistic account, may have been more prone to error than our assumption of their predestined 'libertarian-socialist success''.

Confronting their biases about African politics also enabled students to reflect more broadly on the Eurocentricism in their entire worldview, and in their very conception of concepts such as development. As a student observed:

> Overall, what struck me most in completing this exercise was the fact that our temptation to equate a world in which Africa is a superpower to one in which Africa "looks like the West" had to be consciously and consistently combatted. This illustrated quite strikingly my own internalisation of Western superiority in my conceptualisation of development.

Another pointed out how the exercise led him to a more general understanding of the determinants of political development:

> I questioned whether some common assumptions are perceived as particular to Africa or whether they are essentially most visible there (e.g. degree of neopatrimonialism). Consequently, the process of determining the features/characteristics of our country made me evaluate what factors contribute to the creation of a country in general which we attributed in our context to the country's geography, trading practices, social composition and character of politics.

I believe that one of the reasons why it works as a tool of self-reflection is that it enables students to position themselves more clearly in relation to what they have been studying. For example, over the years a couple of groups have invented a country colonised by Ireland and had to think through what that would have looked like. As Irish people generally identify as coming from a country that was itself colonised, putting Ireland in the position of coloniser directly challenges their self-perceptions. However, one of the interesting outcomes has been both to spotlight blind spots – students often reported in the response papers that they found it very hard to avoid stereotyping – and to led them to question the basis of a particularlistic sense of identity. In the above example, students concluded that Ireland would have ruled no differently, given the prior conditions. In the world-building exercise, by noting the difficulty of creating a hegemonic power without recourse to coerced labour, it opens space for a more universalistic understanding of the underlying drivers of power. It enables discussion both of how our current global power hierarchy emerged, and how any power hierarchy emerges.

While we might hope or expect a decolonising research design, such as in the world-building exercise, to encourage ways of thinking that avoided recreating colonialism, this has not been my practical experience. Frequently, students struggle to find a path to an alternative reality that does not mimic aspects of our current world, with power hierarchies simply inverted. As one student outlined: '*we made Africa the epicentre for economic innovation and we continued to choose capitalism as the process by which the African industrial revolution took place. I was particularly surprised by how difficult it was to envision an alternative economic system to capitalism.*' Others have imagined a world where African states colonised Europe and created a causal story as to how and why this happened. Their struggle in imagining non-capitalist, non-colonised worlds could be seen to indicate how entrenched this way of understanding modernity and politics is and therefore illustrate the scale of the decolonisation challenge. However, it could also be interpreted to illustrate the universal dynamics of politics, that are not specific to any

one culture. The debrief provides an opportunity to discuss these themes.

An unanticipated outcome that identified with my broader teaching goals, was that it allowed different students to shine. While highly analytical students who perform very well in standard academic essay writing sometimes struggled with the assignment, overthinking and overdesigning their countries and worlds, the inclusion of the creative component allowed students with other strengths to play a more active role and use their creativity. For example, the first time that I ran the exercise I noticed that some of the students who are normally quiet in class were all in the same group, and worried that they would find the performative aspect challenging. However, they ended up doing one of the most creative presentations: they invented a country that had been colonised by Japan and presented the history of their country entirely through the medium of haikus. Their choices enabled a deep discussion on the differences between Japanese and European colonialism.

A further, somewhat unanticipated outcome, was the almost existential questions that the exercises raise. For example, the world-building exercises have led to discussions on; what drives history – chance events, or structural predeterminants; whether we are capable of imagining a non-capitalist modernity; whether hierarchical global power relations are inevitable; the nature of politics and how our understanding of it is shaped by the ways in which we have been taught. If using decentring is a powerful means of teaching African politics, it has the potential to not only disrupt their pre-conceptions about Africa, but also to challenge their worldview, and understanding of politics itself.

Simulation: Goals and Design

The second in-class exercise involves a simulation of a meeting between a community in Sierra Leone and a European palm oil company that wants to renew its lease on a large amount of community land. It happens as we are approaching the final quarter of the module, after a number of weeks devoted

to studying topics such as aid, environmental crisis and gender that relate to the substance of the simulation.

The simulation was originally designed by an NGO (non-governmental organisation) worker based on her experience of working in Sierra Leone. It involves dividing the class into a number of groups, with each one representing a village, and assigning each student in each group a role (e.g., the paramount chief chairing the meeting, the district councillor, the deputy minister for land, a member of a local community-based organisation). Each village contains representatives from the palm oil company and from different levels of governance – traditional authority, local and national politics – and therefore from both formal and informal institutions. Some villages contain civil society representation, others do not. Students are sent a character description summarising their actors' incentives and attitude towards the meeting. Knowing the personalities of the students well by this stage in the course, I assign roles bearing in mind what will be needed to make the simulation work and the role that I think might be interesting for that student to examine. For example, I often assign students who I know aspire to work in the development sector to one of the civil society roles.

In putting together the participants in each village and assigning the roles, I deliberately vary the composition, gender balance, and leadership incentives in each village so that we can examine their effects on the outcome of the meeting. The students are asked to read a briefing document beforehand, which outlines both the institutional context in Sierra Leone, and the background of the hypothetical situation. They are asked to think in advance about what their character would want out of the meeting, how they might achieve it and who their allies and sources of opposition might be.

When students arrive in class they are given ten minutes for pre-meetings where they can speak to their potential allies. The paramount chief then convenes and chairs the meeting. They are given forty to fifty minutes to try to conclude a deal on whether or not the lease will be renewed and under what

conditions. The literature has emphasised the importance of debriefing in order to allow students to express their emotional reactions, insights, group processes and to allow the instructor to relate the material back to the course (Wedig, 2010). In the case of this exercise, this is achieved by comparing the deals reached in each village and discussing the factors that influenced the outcome.

The learning goals of this exercise are to give students a chance to reflect on some of the overarching questions from the course and the immediate weeks prior from an experiential perspective. These questions included: the differential sources of power and legitimacy in formal and informal political institutions, and how they interact to produce political outcomes; the agency and power dynamics between internal and external actors; the influence of personalised power on community welfare; and the extent of NGO influence over development outcomes at the local level. As with all simulations, by allowing students to step into the shoes of actors in a realistic scenario it is hoped that this will 'decentre' them and enable them to see the issues from an alternative perspective.

In terms of challenging pre-conceptions, students often approach the material with quite an uncritical approach to traditional authority, underestimating the agency of internal actors, and over-estimating the ability of international NGOs to have a positive effect, irrespective of local power dynamics. The role play is specifically designed to enable students to confront these preconceptions.

Experiences and outcomes

While in some years it has been a struggle to encourage students to truly embrace the challenge of 'embodying' their role (for example, continuing to use their laptops to take notes rather than actively taking part in the meeting), generally they embrace this opportunity to 'practice' politics rather than simply learn about it. As with the thought experiment, this exercise gives different students a chance to shine – for example, those with more practical experience of negotiation and persuasion

– and gives all students a chance to practice real world skills that are often overlooked, such as how to advocate, negotiate, compromise, and strategise. Role plays have been shown to improve skills, such as communication, public speaking, as well as students' sense of self-efficacy (Krain & Lantis, 2006; Kensicki et al., 2022).

The set-up of this simulation, compared to the thought experiment, is more controlled and therefore the outcomes have been more predictable. The different constellations of village actors produce reliably similar agreements year to year that provide the basis for interesting discussion. The villages with self-interested leadership and no NGO presence produce the agreement with the least concrete benefits for the community, while the agreement with the best terms for the community is usually produced in the village with the most pro-social leadership and no NGO presence. The village with self-interested leadership and strong NGO presence produce agreements between these two points – with some concessions but far less than the NGOs aimed for. Better outcomes for women are more likely where villages have a specific representative of a women's village group. Through comparing the drivers of these outcomes and comparing the villages, in the discussion we are able to explore where and on what power resided in each village.

These outcomes challenge their pre-conceptions in a number of ways. First, students often have a simplistic, generally positive view of traditional authority, rooted in respect for indigenous institutions. The role play forces them to confront a more complex reality than traditional authority, in representing a more personalised form of power, can be both capable of more pro-social outcomes and open to capture, depending on the personality of the chief, and in all cases is in essence patriarchal. Second, given the outsized role that they give to external actors in their understanding of African politics, students are often surprised at the limited extent of NGO agency. This identifies with Youde's findings that an unanticipated outcome of role plays can be their effect in tempering student idealism (2008), an important outcome given

that some students taking the module wish to pursue a career in international development.

One striking feature of this simulation has been student's emotional reactions, and in particular the frustration of the women and those placed in civil society roles when faced with the strength of patriarchal authority embodied by the paramount chief. To reflect reality, the paramount chief and head of the secret society are always male. While students are often highly aware of analytical framework of patriarchy, the simulation gives them a very concrete and concentrated experience of it. As a latent concept that is often hard to measure and see clearly in operation, the role play gives students a lived experience of power dynamics on a micro-scale.

As with the world-building exercise, the role play, both deepens their knowledge of African politics specifically, and of politics in general. An interesting observation is the frequency with which they recognise aspects of their own experience in different institutional settings in their experience in the role play. Drawing parallels like this helps to give students embodied experiences of universal aspects of politics, particularly at local levels. Therefore, it 'de-exoticises' African politics and spotlights what is common. As one student wrote in their reflection piece:

> The reality of our negotiations was that they were far more informed by the incentives of the individuals at the table than almost any other factor. The interpersonal took precedent over the institutional. Significantly, this has largely been my experience of chairing meetings elsewhere. Although not disconnected, who one likes tends to be a better indicator of behaviour than who one agrees with. To me, this challenges the assumptions we have about 'African Politics' being radically distinct from any other kind of organisation in its operations.

Overall, my experience has been that students were more open to changing their minds and shifting their views in this class than in others, where I have used methodologies like moving

barometers at the start and end of class to try to give students space to re-evaluate in light of discussion.

Concluding discussion

Role plays and simulations have been noted in the literature and have many pedagogic benefits (Shellman & Turan, 2006) that can last longer than other active learning approaches (Bernstein & Meizlish, 2003). This chapter has suggested that an overlooked aspect of their value lies in their role in challenging student misconceptions about parts of the world outside of the West. Part of the challenge of teaching African politics at a European university is that the students and the curriculum that they have been exposed to comes from a Eurocentric perspective. They can, consciously and unconsciously, project their values and assumptions onto politics in other parts of the world. How can we enable students to move beyond these limitations? While learning more about the complex contextual realities of African politics is obviously fundamental, I suggest that using creative world-building and role plays such as the ones described in this chapter can be very effective tools in both allowing students to integrate their knowledge and reflect on positionality. By decentring students and engaging their empathy and imagination, they enable misconceptions to become clearer, make space for self-reflection and create an emotional connection to abstract issues. While this chapter has focused on Africa, the problem of misconceptions is a broader one that most, if not all, educators teaching about regions outside of the West will face. The potential of these pedagogic tools may equally travel to teaching area studies on other regions.

Why do they work? So ingrained are Eurocentric perceptions that there is perhaps no fully effective way to make misconceptions clear without decentring students, as the media and curriculum that they have been exposed to so firmly centres on the West. Decentring involves pushing students outside of their comfort zone. First, the role play and world-building exercises intrinsically do this as they disrupt the normal ways in which they are used to learning, asking them to use skills

not usually engaged in a social science classroom. They are, in their format, a visceral 'disruption' to the norm. Second, they ask students to put themselves in the position of African actors, seeing the world from their point of view and understanding their motivations and perspectives on their terms. As one former student expressed it in relation to the world-building exercise, it forces students to strip everything back to basics, put themselves in the position of states or world-builders and figure out what is possible and what is not, how one choice informs and constrains the next. In the role play, students are directly assuming the roles of people in a fictional village in Sierra Leone.

The process of decentring enables students to take a further step - empathy: 'the ability to experience the values, feelings, and perceptions of another' (Stover, 2005:207). There are a few ways to give students the opportunity to practice and experience empathy within standard social science pedagogic approaches, that focus on knowledge acquisition and critical thinking skills. While imperfect, simulations and role plays offer a way to provide students with this opportunity, although this has most often been applied in relation to conflict negotiations (Baylouny, 2009; Stover, 2005). The long-term benefits of engaging empathy were made clear to me in a follow-up conversation with a student who took the class two years ago. She was working in the European parliament when a representative of the African Union (AU) was being subjected to heated questioning by MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) asking the AU to align more closely with the EU (European Union) in supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia. She said she identified with the AU representative's perspective, rooted in an African worldview, more than she did with the European point of view, despite being European. She linked this back to the world-building exercise where her group had invented a new world, and drew a map of their world 'upside down' compared to the typical orientation with Africa at the centre. The emotional resonance of this act of inversion lasted longer than the details of the exercise, or even the course as a whole.

This identifies with what has been noted in the literature: if the role play has gone well, one of its outcomes is that students are 'emotionally involved' (Smith & Boyer, 1996:693). For example, Stover uses a historical role play of the Cuban Missile crisis to give students a sense of the emotional experience of the Cold War (Stover, 2007). When students are emotionally involved, they are more likely to care, take interest, and, as the example above illustrates, this can last longer than the knowledge that they retain from the course: Africa comes to matter more to them.

While role plays, simulations and alternative world-building exercises are powerful pedagogic tools, it is important to note the challenges in undertaking them and the particular conditions needed to make them a success. These exercises rely on a high-trust, interactive classroom culture and an educator who is engaged in the process of reflective anti-misconception work themselves. They may be more challenging to undertake in large classes, where the students do not know each as well and consequently where the trust may not be as high. Crucially, students need to be willing to take a leap of faith. Group dynamics can play a significant role in this, and with some cohorts, more explanation and engagement with the terms of the exercise may be required. For the educator, there must be a willingness to drop the role of 'expert' and meet the students in the place of inquiry into the entrenched ways in which they too may be influenced by and holding misconceptions.

Overall, this chapter has suggested that creative exercises, such as world-building and role plays, are a valuable pedagogic tool that function on a number of levels to challenge students and achieve higher order teaching goals. They decentre students, challenge their worldviews and can cultivate empathy. When embedded within a curriculum and assessment strategy that encourages reflection, and are encountered in a classroom context of trust, they can have a catalytic effect on understanding and perception and enable misconceptions to be identified and deconstructed.

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