

Social Security: A Pending Crisis A Leadership and Politics Debate

Brent J. Goertzen, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Leadership Studies
Chapman Rackaway, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Fort Hays State University
Hays, KS 67601
bgoertze@fhsu.edu
crackawa@fhsu.edu

Abstract

Leadership is a social process that brings together the interests of multiple stakeholders for mutual benefit toward the common good (Burns, 1978; Rost, 1993). In an effort to engage individuals to understand the complexities of the leadership and public policy making processes the authors developed a simulation-debate exercise designed to target such learning outcomes as influence, ethical issues, empathy leadership, and critical thinking. The authors created an in-class simulation examining the issue of Social Security reform. This article explains the administration of the debate, describes the learning goals and assessment methods, and offers insights into the broader application of the simulation to other courses.

Introduction

Students are often reticent to think expansively about issues related to leadership and public policies, particularly ones that can seem like distant abstractions to young men and women aged eighteen to twenty five. Social Security might, then, seem like a strange choice for a classroom simulation. However, it also presents some crucial benefits for use in a classroom setting for the discussion of ethics, leadership and public policy. In this work, we use Social Security as the basis for an in-class simulation that has proven very effective at engaging students with each other, the material, development of leadership capacities, and the creation of public policy.

One of the benefits of using Social Security was that it can galvanize students toward engagement through generational identity. The generation of students currently in college, commonly called Generation Next (GenNexters) or The Millennial Generation (MilGens) are smaller in number than the aging Baby Boomer population that are only now beginning to draw from Social Security. MilGens tend to react strongly when presented with the idea that the payroll deductions from their paychecks subsidize today's retirees. The level of negative interest aroused can translate into a committed discussion on the topic of Social Security.

The model of experiential education is established as promoting higher order thinking skills (Ives & Obenchain, 2006). In leadership and political science particularly, numerous examples exist of simulation's effectiveness in providing student motivation, critical thinking, and assessment (Goertzen, 2005; Guenther & Moore, 2005; Jefferson, 1999; Kathlene & Choate, 1999; Gosen & Washbush, 2004; Hardy, Rackaway, & Sonnier, 2005). Simulations serve to not only deviate from traditional lecture and seminar discussion formats, but require students to exercise leadership in a small-group context, make real decisions regarding public policy issues, and test higher-order thinking skills.

Higher-order thinking skills can be defined in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom, 1956) as comprising the analytic, synthetic and evaluation categories of learning objectives (Granello & Underfer-Babalis, 2004). In an effort to stimulate student development toward furthering their higher-order thinking skills, the authors developed the current simulation exercise.

The Social Security simulation exercise was based on current political issues regarding the American public's discussion on how best to "fix" Social Security and is intended to help students recognize and understand the complexities of the leadership and decision-making processes. Solution-centered debate requires students to represent specific stakeholder groups and influence a legislative body to "fix" social security based on their concerns.

Having described the context of the learning objectives for the exercise, the next section briefly identifies the assessment methods for the simulation. The third section describes students' experiences and reflective connections between theory and the experience and the final section offers the authors' experiences facilitating the simulation.

Learning Goals

The authors identified five general learning goals for the current exercise that directly pertained to the learning goals for students pursuing degrees in either Organizational Leadership or Political Science: Influence, Ethical Issues, Empathy, Leadership, and Critical Thinking.

Influence was generally considered as the “change in a target’s attitudes, values, beliefs or behaviors as a result of influence tactics” (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2005). The primary goal of each stakeholder group is to assure that their issues are to be the primary considerations of the Legislative Representatives. Students are to use strategies from their respective coursework (Interest Groups and Lobbying and Ethical Leadership) to develop strategies for influence over the Representatives.

Ethical Issues: As a case in ethics, essentially every consideration occurring in the simulation can be examined. Students often debate at length obligations to reduce, or eliminate, human pain and suffering against costs and other consequences.

Empathy was defined as the ability to read others’ emotions and accurately putting yourself in their place (Goleman, 2004). Students are randomly assigned to represent stakeholder groups contrary to their initial personal perspective on how best to address the scenario. To effectively create persuasive arguments to the Legislative Representatives, students must “enter into” the perspective of the assigned stakeholder group.

Leadership: For purpose of this exercise leadership was defined as a social process that brings together the interests of multiple stakeholders for mutual benefit toward the common good (Burns, 1978; Rost, 1993). Effective decisions integrating the interests of relevant stakeholders require students to synthesize the concerns expressed during the simulation.

Critical Thinking: This dimension was defined as the ability to “effectively identify, analyze and evaluate arguments and truth claims, to discover and overcome personal prejudices and biases, to formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions, and reasonable and intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do” (Bassham, Irwin, Nardone, & Wallace, 2002). Similar to the notion of leadership which is to bring together multiple stakeholder groups, the experiential education activity challenges students to creatively develop integrative solutions to complex problems through cogent reasoning.

Connecting the Exercise to Learning Goals

Students' reflection papers offered insightful comments to the breadth and depth of learning during and after the exercise.

Leadership

Throughout the reflection papers students consistently articulated the links between the exercise and leadership, particularly to that of James McGregor Burns' (1978) perspective of transforming leadership. Burns defined leadership as the process that "occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (p. 19). One student described the connection between the exercise and this perspective of leadership as "Burns believes leaders should engage citizens in the United States to change the Social Security format by letting them 'own' the ideas. By allowing them to feel like everyone has a common interest in the change of Social Security." Further Burns' theory of transforming leadership requires that leaders not to shun conflict, but in fact "they confront it, exploit it, (and) ultimately embody it" (p. 39). One student noted that a "leader engages followers in a discussion of values and uses conflict to build consensus and a better understanding of values and common goals. I think the Social Security Simulation is just like a discussion of values, through the debate, we can understand the conflict clearly." Yet another student drew the intellectual connection between the exercise and leadership theory, the student remained grounded in a pragmatic reality by describing that "[Burns] suggests that the groups engage in debates and try to work out their problems. I think that for the problem of Social Security, Burns would have his hands full."

Ethical Issues

Similar to the process of critical thinking, the notion of ethical issues refers to the links between recognizing relevant stakeholder groups, assessing how those stakeholders would be affected and considering various ethical theories to the Social Security exercise. Students reflected upon and articulated the connection between ethical issues and the activity. For instance, a student described that "this exercise is very good for us to understand ethical dilemmas, and it lets us practice making ethical decisions." The activity even further challenged students to consider the intricacies involved in resolving the problems with social security. One student commented, "The Social Security simulation reveals the complexity of the conflict between different interest segments on specific issues...No matter what the final decision on the Social Security reform is, there would be some

segments [that would] benefit from it and others not. It is always difficult, even impossible, to satisfy all the needs from diverse social groups. However, it is true that the program is in need of long-term measures to keep it in fiscal balance so that it will be able to pay full benefits to every generation of Americans. The longer we wait to adjust the system, the more difficult the adjustments. So from my point of view, it is advisable to act sooner rather than later.”

Empathy

Empathy refers to the ability to “enter into” the thoughts and feelings of another person(s). Student comments revealed the exercise challenged them to examine the issues associated with Social Security from perspectives contrary to their own. For instance one student explained “the hardest thing was trying to side with AARP, but now I get how tough it is to live on a fixed income.” Another student noted “in this model of leadership, everyone identifies common values. In the case of the Social Security exercise, the UAW, the Bankers, and AARP must all decide what basic principles, values, or virtues they believe in.” However, perhaps the most indicative comment that challenged students’ empathic capacities was described by another student. She described “one thing that really struck me was how I’m now more open to hearing different sides of debates. For example, the UAW is just one big union that’s out for their own interests, and who trusts bankers? Yet, I was able to hear their sides, and I appreciated *some* of their arguments.” Clearly this student does not agree with the perspectives asserted by other stakeholder groups, but her comment expressed that she was actively engaged and listened intently to the different viewpoints.

Positive Affect

Research indicates that participants of experiential education programs report tremendous enjoyment (Dedeke, 1999). Students participating in the current activity responded as having a similar positive affect. While positive affect was not an explicitly defined learning objective for this experiential exercise, students reported as having a very positive experience. One student commented “the Social Security simulation was really an exciting exercise that I was totally absorbed in it during class. At the end of the class, I found out that not only did I really enjoy the debate, but most students had a great discussion as well.” This comment suggests that the student noticed a dual affect from the exercise that not only did the students become engaged in the activity but also noticed that many other students were also engaged in the debriefing discussion that followed.

Experience Administering the Simulation

The experiential education activity has been conducted with several undergraduate courses including an Ethics in Leadership course and an Interest Groups and Lobbying course, as well as a graduate level course in Ethical Leadership. It has been the authors' experience that three rounds of debate are necessary to achieve the level of desired outcomes.

Students are randomly divided into four primary stakeholder groups: American Association of Retired Persons (AARP); United Auto Workers (UAW); Third Millennium; and, American Bankers Association (ABA). The Legislative Committee, a fifth group of students, served as the final decision making authority for the given situation. Each of the other primary stakeholder groups is provided additional information relevant to their respective stakeholder group no less than one class period prior to the simulation exercise so as to give students time to prepare reasoned arguments.

In the first iteration of the course, the authors combined a Political Science course in Interest Groups and Lobbying with an Ethics in Leadership course. Primarily the combination was to have enough students in a group activity that can support 20-25 people. Roles were divided among the two classes and students were given two weeks to prepare for their roles. The exercise was divided into two separate, 75-minute class sessions, as well. The first day was spent on a discussion about ethics and the responsibility of political leaders to be ethical, particularly in this context. Discussion centered on the different ways the issue can be framed by political actors, and then we closed the discussion with a conversation about the ethics involved in providing money for retired persons.

The simulation was conducted in three rounds of debate. During the first debate round, each stakeholder group was allowed three minutes to present their argument to the Legislative Committee in the presence of all other groups, so as to encourage the stakeholder groups to offer counter-arguments to ideas presented. Similarly, stakeholder groups were allowed three minutes to further present their arguments during rounds two and three of the simulation debate. Prior to round two and three of the debate simulation, groups were given two minutes to reformulate arguments. Based on the strength of the arguments, the simulation was concluded by providing the Legislative Committee four minutes to determine the appropriate course of action.

Commonly, students appeared reluctant to engage in the spirit of the debate during the first round of the debate. Students begin to effectively "enter into" the

stakeholders' perspective during the second debate round. By the third round of debate students were able to develop and articulate more effective counter arguments to the other stakeholder perspectives.

Following the simulation the facilitator began to process the experiences of the groups. Initial discussion was directed toward the Legislative Committee group to describe their perspective as to the effectiveness of the arguments presented during the simulation. Additionally, students were presented with theoretical concepts associated with leadership and strategies for change. Students often described the strength of the "stable guard" members who seek to resist change because of the adverse consequences (whether real or perceived consequences) of the decision outcomes. The processing typically took a minimum of 30 minutes, but it can also include much longer in-depth analysis of the learning which occurred in each group.

While some students have spoken of difficulty identifying with the specific stakeholders within this simulation, students commonly reflect on experiences of interacting with others who have been greatly affected by Social Security. Therefore, these issues are salient with many students.

Limitations

The authors did encounter several limitations of the exercise. This activity has been subsequently facilitated as part of an MBA course in Ethical Leadership. A majority of the participants in the course were international students, all of whom were native of China, and appeared less knowledgeable about issues regarding Social Security in the United States. While the preliminary information about the exercise was provided to students approximately a week before the in-class debate, the international students appeared to have a difficult time understanding and articulating some of the nuances regarding social security issues. One international student commented that "in my opinion, more background information might help." Other domestic students observed that several international students may have found the exercise to be challenging as "many of the foreign students were at a disadvantage for not having the background the U.S. students had on our culture/government system." Another student noted that while he enjoyed the exercise overall, "the only problem with the simulation was the inability to have a thorough discussion of the situation because of the lack of knowledge of our Social Security system by the (international) students."

Conclusion

Simulations provide excellent classroom environments for application of theoretical learning. Care must be taken in choosing the right topic for debate, the interested parties, and limits on the scope of the topic. We found Social Security to be a surprisingly effective policy for discussion among college students. Student feedback was quite positive about the simulation, and our assessment rubric allows us to point to specific learning outcomes that were satisfied.

The multi-disciplinary nature of the simulation was particularly useful for faculty at small institutions, where the student numbers in upper-division classes may inhibit the ability to do simulations. On campuses where interdisciplinary learning and cooperation are valued, the simulation provided an excellent method of assessing cross-disciplinary learning outcomes. Finally, the simulation can be used exclusively in leadership classes, at almost any level. While we chose upper-division courses to be sure students were properly prepared for the simulation, it could be adapted to an introductory leadership theory or leadership behaviors/skills courses as well.

The Social Security simulation provides us with an engaging new method of activating student learning. As simulation and role-play become more regular elements of college teaching we believe that this one, with embedded assessment models tied to learning outcome goals, provides solid evidence of results.

NOTE: A copy of the Social Security Simulation can be accessed by emailing the lead author or it can be downloaded from the following URL:
<http://www.fhsu.edu/leadership/Includes/Social%20Security%20Simulation.pdf>

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Biography

Dr. Brent Goertzen is an Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies at Fort Hays State University. His primary research interests include leadership theory, leadership development, ethics, and team dynamics.

Dr. Chapman Rackaway is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Fort Hays State University. His primary research interests lie in campaign finance, campaign procedures, and political organizations.