



## Advising a Model United Nations club: A scaffolded youth-adult partnership to foster active participation and political engagement



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Advisors provided students with intellectual, administrative, and personal support.
- Over time, advisors shifted many responsibilities to skilled student members.
- Advisors and students co-designed many club activities and conference strategies.
- The club exemplified a youth-adult partnership with developmental relationships.

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### ABSTRACT

Model United Nations is one of the world's most popular civic education programs, but there has been little research on how adult advisors of such programs support students' participation and political engagement. This study begins to address this research gap through a case study of one Model UN club. By analyzing data from over 150 h of observation and from interviews with advisors and students, the author found that advisors facilitated the club as a scaffolded youth-adult partnership and provided three major types of support: intellectual, administrative, and personal. Findings have implications for various extracurricular and classroom-based educational programs.

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“Democracy has to be born anew with each generation, and education is its midwife.”

- John Dewey, *School and Society*

In many democratic countries around the world, citizens' involvement in political activities, such as voting and protesting, has fluctuated widely over time (Franklin, 2004; Pintor, Gratschew, & Sullivan, 2002; Putnam, 2000), and young people tend to vote less than their older counterparts (Bouza, 2014; Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013). Policymakers have undertaken various efforts to support political engagement among youth, including mandatory coursework on government, but these efforts have had mixed results (Langton & Jennings, 1968; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003).

Prior research indicates that when young people are involved in interactive political experiences, such as political simulations and discussions, they are more likely to become politically engaged (review to follow), and scholars have begun to closely analyze how teachers manage political discussions (e.g., Hess, 2009; Parker & Hess, 2001). However, there have been few studies examining how educators manage students' participation in complex political simulations. The study described in this paper begins to address this research gap by exploring advisors' practices in one high school's Model United Nations club. Model UN, a program in which students have opportunities to learn about diplomacy and international relations (National Model United Nations, 2016; United Nations Association of the United States of America, 2013), is one of the world's most popular extracurricular programs, with about 400,000 participants from around the world each year (Williams, 2009), but little research has examined adult advisors' roles and strategies. By analyzing the pedagogical processes and mechanisms that support students' participation and political engagement, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature on

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educating for youth political engagement.

## 1. Political simulations and Model UN

Originating in the 1940s, the Model United Nations program includes a loose network of independent student clubs that participate in interscholastic conferences organized by local, regional, national, and international organizations. Although the first conferences were held in the United States, they now occur regularly in numerous countries, including Australia, China, Germany, India, Lebanon, Peru, and South Africa. Conferences are organized at the middle school, high school, and college levels (occasionally with students from various levels) and can include anywhere from a few dozen to several thousand students. During these events, students represent the policies of their pre-assigned countries in debates about a range of international challenges, such as nuclear proliferation, border conflicts, trade disputes, and natural disasters. These experiences provide young people with opportunities to learn about international issues and political negotiation through a variety of interactive experiences.

The specific formats of these large gatherings vary, but most conferences divide students into committees for the majority of the experience. To prepare, students are expected to conduct research that will enable them to appropriately represent their assigned countries' positions on the topics their committees will address. Then during committee meetings, students strive to design and pass (by majority vote) resolutions aimed at addressing the challenges under discussion in their committees (see [Appendix A](#)). For high school conferences (a focus of this paper), at least one adult advisor must accompany each team, but at these gatherings their involvement is usually limited to supervision and support.

Although historically Model UN programs have been most prevalent in middle-class and affluent areas, over the past dozen years there has been a concerted effort to make Model UN available to a broader range of young people. With the goal of reaching traditionally underserved communities, the UN Association of the USA has launched the Global Classrooms program, which has supported Model UN programs and related classroom curricula in urban secondary schools around the world ([United Nations Association of the USA, 2015](#)), including New Delhi, Beijing, Johannesburg, and Los Angeles. In the US, more than half the students attending conferences sponsored by the UNA-USA are from high-poverty Title I schools (T. Wolfe, personal communication, Feb. 12, 2013). Although UNA-USA conferences represent a minority of the overall Model UN gatherings, their inclusiveness nonetheless signifies the expanding diversity of Model UN participants.

Prior research on classroom-based political simulations suggests that students' experiences in Model UN can support their political efficacy and political interest, attitudes that political scientists have found to be reliable predictors of political participation (e.g., [Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995](#); [Leighly & Vedlitz, 1999](#)).<sup>1</sup> For example, [Dressner's \(1990\)](#) examination of students participating in a simulation of a town hall conservation effort concluded that the activity supported students' political efficacy. Likewise, numerous other studies have found that participating in simulations in government classes can support young people's development of political efficacy (e.g., [Bernstein, 2008](#); [Boocock, 1968](#); [Vogel, 1973](#)) and political interest (e.g., [Ganzler, 2010](#); [McAvoy &](#)

[Hess, 2013](#)).

Meanwhile, in a retrospective study, [Patterson \(1996\)](#) found that students who had participated in Model UN several years earlier attributed their political engagement to their experiences in these simulations. This and other research led the [Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools \(2003, 2011\)](#) to identify simulations as one of six "best practices" for fostering civic engagement. More recently, my research (20xx; 20xx; under review) indicates that participating in Model UN activities with advisors' guidance and scaffolding can support adolescents' political interest and efficacy. These earlier analyses considered the experiences and outcomes of 36 student participants in the club whose advisors are explored in this paper.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the growing popularity of Model UN and the educational potential of such political simulations, no previous published research has closely examined how adult advisors support students' participation. This study fills an important gap in the research literature by contributing to our understanding of how advisors can structure the Model UN experience to strengthen students' participation and increased political engagement. Findings have implications for not only leaders of Model UN programs around the world but also for advisors and facilitators of other educational programs in which youth and adults work closely together over time.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Like many learning experiences that require creative problem-solving, Model UN programs often involve collaborative interactions among young people and adult advisors. The tasks of building a school club and developing sophisticated, targeted political arguments can benefit tremendously from integrating diverse perspectives. In an educational environment where one's students may be widely dispersed, each pursuing different but inter-related sub-goals, providing relevant guidance requires careful listening and customized feedback.

Thus, this study builds on previous research that analyzes and identifies the mechanisms involved in educational collaborations with both youth and adults. Educators in New Zealand and elsewhere are increasingly encouraged to learn collaboratively with youth rather than foster unidirectional learning from teacher to student ([Sewell, St. George, & Cullen, 2013](#)). Recent research suggests that these experiences can be most successful when they include developmental relationships ([Li & Julian, 2012](#)) within structured youth-adult partnerships ([Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013](#)). Ultimately, these contexts can provide unique opportunities for youth to practice the skills that support their increased organizational participation and political engagement.

[Li and Julian \(2012\)](#) found that developmental relationships are central for positive youth development and empowerment. These relationships enable adults to support youth learning first by providing deliberate guidance and scaffolding and then by gradually removing this support. Throughout the process, decision-making and learning are bi-directional, with adults listening and attending to the needs and interests of the youth rather than

<sup>2</sup> Drawing on survey data at the beginning and end of a six-month period, I found that students who participated in this Model UN club were more likely than a demographically similar comparison group to develop greater political efficacy and political interest, controlling for age, grade, GPA, and parental education levels. Survey items were adapted from the American National Election Study ([Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990](#)) and studies of the expectancy-value model ([Eccles, 2005](#)). Data from numerous student interviews and observations of club activities supported these findings and indicated that advisors played a central role in supporting and scaffolding students' increasing depth of participation over their time in the club (Author, 20xx).

<sup>1</sup> Political efficacy is commonly defined as "the feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" ([Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954](#)), and political interest is political interest is conceptualized as "citizens' willingness to pay attention to politics at the expense of other endeavors" ([Lupia & Philpot, 2005](#)).

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