



Global Crisis Group: Using a Fictional Narrative in a Global Issues-themed English Course by Kevin Ballou (Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan)



Introduction

Colonel Patrick's video transmission appears on the monitor and begins, "Good afternoon, team. Thanks for your help assigning operatives to both the mission to deliver relief supplies in Africa and the mission to mediate conflicts in South Asia. The action teams have been deployed and are beginning their missions as we speak."

The recipients of this message are not special agents, but university students in a global issues-themed English class. The seasoned veteran on their screen is their instructor in a clever costume. They are spending their semester acting out roles in an interactive story-based curriculum that weaves together issues ranging from solar power as a development tool for rural villages to reasons behind attacks on shipping lanes by Somali pirates.

This style of story-based syllabus can be a fun and motivating way to engage students in language learning while also expanding their understanding of the world around them. The basic concept for this course rose out of research on motivation that supports the use of many elements found in fiction writing, and group story telling.

Motivation

For decades, the most widely accepted model had divided motivation into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. If an activity is done mainly because it is enjoyable or interesting, the motivation is "intrinsic." If an activity is performed mainly in light of external influences, such as avoidance of punishment or the desire to receive a reward, the motivation is "extrinsic" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In education, grades could be seen as an extrinsic motivator while an engaging lesson that appeals to the students' interests or curiosity would be making use of intrinsic motivation.

In general, students acting with high intrinsic motivation show greater and more resilient gains, while extrinsic motivators, although powerful in the short-term, have been shown to decrease interest in tasks in the long-term or when rewards are removed (Deci, Ryan, & Koestner, 1999). Although most research seems to advocate promoting intrinsic motivation, more recent understanding of motivation points to the use of a mix of motivators, for example using extrinsic rewards to practice skills necessary to achieve competence needed for more intrinsically

motivating tasks. We now have better understanding of the key components necessary to promote intrinsic motivation: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000), also referred to as mastery, autonomy, and purpose (Pink, 2011).

Traditional extrinsic motivators, such as point systems, can be used to help learners feel a sense of competence or mastery. Allowing students a greater degree of choice in their courses and assignments promotes autonomy, and working toward completing a course or degree that the student feels is necessary for their own life goals provides a sense of relatedness or purpose.

Malone and Lepper (1987) combined a large body of research on motivation to create their taxonomy of intrinsic motivations. Some of the key motivators, which the current project seeks to utilize in the form of an interactive narrative, are challenging tasks, curiosity, control over one's own choices and progress, fantasy, friendly competition, and recognition for one's achievements. Each term will be discussed further in the context of the course.

Global Crisis Group

The *Global Crisis Group* is a series of content-based lessons woven together by a fictional narrative and related tasks that involve students working together to make decisions about both a story, its characters, and real world issues. The course was created by the instructor as part of the curriculum at a Japanese university in the department of international studies, and involved students with upper-intermediate to advanced English ability (TOEIC 720 to 850), who had completed three years of study in the fields of linguistics, business, economics, development, and cultural studies.

The course objectives included practicing academic research skills, writing fiction and nonfiction, actively participating in discussion, and giving an effective multimedia presentation. The course was to make use of a content-based language learning approach with an overall theme of global communication.

The students in the course act as members of special research teams, working for a fictional organization called the *Global Crisis Group*. As they learn about various global issues, they provide intelligence for operatives in the field who developed are responding to fictional incidents related to what

the students are studying. The students provide this intel in the forms of wiki articles, essays, and presentations. They also engage in fiction writing to help fill out the details of the narrative, for example creating character profiles and back-stories. Along the way, the students are also given opportunities to make choices that will affect the outcome of the story and the success or failure of their operatives. Although each unit is unique, they share common elements.

First, the students watch a video message featuring the leader of the *Global Crisis Group*, Colonel Patrick. He tells them about some kind of potential or imminent crisis and asks the research teams to provide a particular kind of intelligence that will help the operatives deal with the crisis. For example, anticipating trouble from right-wing extremists at an international language teachers' conference, Colonel Patrick asks the students to create a collection of wiki articles about the area around the conference, cultural activities and sites the conference attendees may visit, as well as the history of local right-wing groups who may have an anti-internationalization agenda. As they work with their team to write and edit these articles, they are also learning about related issues such as language policy, linguistic imperialism, world Englishes, and the anti-globalization movement.

Global Crisis Group

The fictional aspect of the assignment helps provide a fun fantasy element to the project, while working with their team on the wiki makes use of an engaging cooperative work environment. Letting students choose their own article topics allows for the autonomy that is so essential to motivation. Finally, competing against the other research team to provide the best intel for the operatives in the shortest time adds a friendly, competitive element, making what could be seen as an easy task a more challenging activity.

As each team finishes their wiki, they're given a puzzle: decoding an email from the suspected terrorists that makes use of content from various websites. In order to solve the puzzle, the students must work together, synthesize information, and demonstrate understanding of target content and vocabulary. Once the wikis have been uploaded and evaluated and the puzzle solved, the students watch a follow up video from the Colonel. He thanks them for their intel and explains how instrumental it was in thwarting a potential tragedy.

In a later lesson, students assume roles from the semester's story and join in a forum discussion of the issues involved. Related to the previous example are issues of language policy and fears of linguistic

imperialism. Some participants explain the need for drastic action to protect local culture and language, while others argue for the need to embrace diversity and join the global community.

Student Feedback

Student feedback on the fictional narrative aspect of the course was generally positive but offered some insight into problems with its execution. Several students found the unique course style enjoyable, with one remarking, "It was fun. Just following a textbook can be sometimes boring. So I think this global crisis group activity was good for a change." After the final forum, one student commented, "to state [an] opinion as a role which is given is easier than saying [an] opinion myself." Another stated, "today's roleplaying discussion is helpful for us to speak opinions and think creatively."

Suggestions for improvements to the course included, "There [was] some confusion, complex story. Please, make it easy to understand." Other comments pointed to the need for more background information so students could better understand the issues surrounding the storyline.

Conclusion

Overall, the *Global Crisis Group* provided an interesting, motivating way for students to practice English while learning about global issues. The project was also a fun creative outlet for both teachers and students to engage in valuable content while making use of academic skills and content relevant to an international studies program. Although creating a course like this is a great deal of work, it can be extremely rewarding.

References

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