

Petra Guasti, Wolfgang Muno and Arne Niemann (2015):
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resource: from teaching and learning tool to research
instrument'

In: *European Political Science, Vol. 14 (Thomson Reuters ISI-listed)*.

This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the article, which has been published in final form at <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/eps/journal/vaop/ncurrent/full/eps201518a.html>

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Introduction – EU simulations as a multi-dimensional resource: from teaching and learning tool to research instrument

Petra Guasti, Wolfgang Muno and Arne Niemann

ABSTRACT

Simulations, understood as complex role plays, are nowadays widely used in (university) teaching to actively engage students and promote content-specific interactive learning, understanding, and communication. There is a growing debate about the functions and benefits of simulations in the university teaching context. Simulating the EU is not yet as common as simulating the UN, but the use of EU simulations gradually increases. In this paper, we discuss several aspects of EU simulations. First, we briefly review the importance of the EU in current European politics, and to its growing complexity, which represents a challenge for teaching and studying European integration. Second, we indicate that simulations address new didactical demands that arose in the context of the Bologna Process and the so-called “shift from teaching to learning”. And third, we move beyond the debate of EU simulations as merely an active learning tool, and discuss the (underestimated) role they may play as quasi-experiments, which may constitute a valuable resource both for didactical and European integration research. Together, these three aspects make EU simulations a promising multi-dimensional tool.

Key Words: simulations, International Relations (IR), European Union (EU), European Politics, active learning, innovative teaching, decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Simulations have long been popular within Political Science and especially International Relations (IR), assisting lecturers to capture students’ imagination and fostering understanding of international affairs. Simulations are (more or less) complex role plays, allowing students to explore and experience first-hand the theoretical ideas and concepts, political processes and key political events through the imitation of real phenomena such as international negotiations,

decision-making, or crisis management. Simulations constitute an interaction with the real-world in an in-class controlled environment and function as complexity reducing and simplifying models of political reality. The underlining assumption of simulation approaches is the belief that real-life situations can be recreated in the classroom in order to actively engage students and promote learning, understanding, communication, and interaction (e.g. Taylor, 2012; Crossley-Frolick, 2010; Simpson and Kaussler, 2009; Van Dyke *et al.*, 2000; Zeff, 2003; Switky, 2004; Journal of Political Science Education, 2013; Fonti and Stevancevic, 2014; Goldsmith and Goldsmith, 2010).

Within the teaching EU debate, there is an on-going discussion on the benefits of teaching the EU both in-depth in specifically dedicated courses, as well as integrated into general IR and Political Science courses. The pedagogical debate encompasses the possibilities of teaching the EU *inter alia* as an actor, as a historical entity, as a decision-making system, or as a regional form of globalisation (Jabko, 2012; Saurugger, 2012; Usherwood, 2012). EU simulation as an interactive active learning tool can be included in multiple ways. Increasingly, the benefits of using simulations have been emphasised in order to reveal, highlight and exemplify the various aspects and facets of the EU. Simulating the EU is not yet as common as simulating, for example, the United Nations (McIntosh, 2001; Krain and Lantis, 2006), but the use of EU simulations is growing, as their potential to address complex issues with EU studies is increasingly recognised (Brunazzo and Settembri, 2012, 2014; Jones and Bursens, 2014; Baroncelli *et al.*, 2014, for general use of simulations in political science see Goldsmith and Goldsmith, 2010: 65-66, and in IR see Asal and Kratoville, 2013).

The aim of this symposium is to highlight three beneficial and inter-linked facets of EU simulations. First, EU simulations go beyond the provision of disciplinary and content-specific expertise. They present an opportunity to reflect and address the ever growing importance and multifacetedness of the EU in teaching European politics. Second, EU simulations allow lecturers to address new demands in the context of the Bologna Process and to contribute to the so-called ‘shift from teaching to learning’ within didactical debates. Third, considering the wide array of learning outcome assessment methods, EU simulation represents not only an active learning tool, but also an exploratory resource both for didactic research and European integration research (*cf.* Neimeyer and Neimeyer, 1993).

This introductory article proceeds as follows: first, we briefly refer to both the importance of the EU in current European politics, and to its growing complexity, which represents a challenge for teaching and studying European integration. Second, we introduce

the paradigmatic shift from passive to active learning and address the role of simulations in general. Third, we move beyond the debate of EU simulations solely as a teaching tool, and discuss the role that they may play as an instrument for research, an aspect that has so far not sufficiently been explored. We conclude by contextualising the articles of this symposium, and present EU simulations as a multi-dimensional instrument for active learning and research in EU studies.

THE EU IN CURRENT POLITICS

The relevance of the EU is beyond contestation. Important political decisions in many policy areas are made for the 28 member states and more than 500 million Europeans in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Luxemburg. At the same time, the European Union is frequently described as a contested polity (e.g. Banchoff and Smith, 1999; de Wilde *et al.*, 2013). This contestation relates to all levels of the EU's existence and is growing as the European integration process progresses. The academic debate reflects the multifaceted dynamic nature of the EU and its key characteristics that are very complex, sometimes irreconcilable, and often normatively charged.

At the ontological level, different actors both within policy-making circles and academia define the EU as an entity with differing degrees of agency/actorness (Føllesdal, 2004; Jupille and Caporaso, 1998). At the institutional level, a variety of different EU institutions are seen as the core of the EU's democratic character (e.g. Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2007; Hix, 2008). And at the normative level, there exists only partial agreement about the values on which the European Union is most substantially based (Héritier, 1999).

In order to understand the complexity of the EU, let us briefly address the contested (ontological) nature of the EU polity. The starting point is the problem of how to define the EU. Authors list 'international organisation', 'federal state', 'united states', 'superstate', 'confederation' and 'sui generis political system' as possible labels (*cf.* e.g. McCormick, 2005; Moravcsik, 2008; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Others find even more nuanced terms for describing the EU: 'the first non-imperial empire' (Barroso quoted in Mahony, 2007), 'unidentified political object' (Delors, 1985), 'less than a federation, more than a regime' (Wallace, 1983), 'the first truly postmodern political form' (Ruggie, 1993: 139-40), and possibly a 'Consortio' or 'Condominio' (Schmitter, 1996: 136).

The contested ontological nature of the European Union is also reflected by the various approaches conceptualising European integration. The intergovernmentalist approach defines the EU as an intergovernmental structure with a low degree of political autonomy that is dominated by strong and resilient nation-states (Hoffmann, 1966). Regulatory theorists such as Majone (2009) go one step further towards conceptualising the EU as a polity. Here the EU is an administrative and regulatory agency that derives legitimacy only from the principals of delegation, i.e. from the governments of the member states (Majone, 2009). Federalist theorists (Pinder, 1985) and to a lesser extent neofunctionalists (Haas 1958) conceptualise the EU as a polity evolving in the direction of a supranational state, meaning that an ever-increasing share of political and administrative competencies once held by the nation state are being transferred to the EU and its institutions. The complexity (and variability) of the developing EU polity is perhaps best captured by multilevel and poly-centric governance theorists (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). They highlight the dispersion of decision-making across multiple territorial levels (national, supranational, subnational) and emphasise the fluidity and interdependence between tiers, i.e. that the dispersion of authority is uneven across policy arenas.

These inherent and growing complexities of the EU represent a challenge for teaching and studying European integration. The answer to these challenges is increasingly found in the application of innovative teaching methods such as e-learning, blended learning, the use of social networks, and EU simulations (*cf.* Baroncelli *et al.*, 2013, Fontis and Stevancevic, 2014; Fontis and Stevancevic, 2014; Timus, 2014; Mihai, 2014; Jones and Bursens, 2014; for the discussion on the use of e-learning also see European Political Science 2010, in particular Craig, 2010 and Middleton, 2010). EU simulations, an example of interactive problem-based learning, can incorporate many elements of these methods: e-learning can be used to assist students in preparation for their roles and enable interaction resulting in blended learning; social networks can be used to connect future and/or past participants of simulation games. In this way, simulations constitute a complementary student-centred and problem-focused teaching method that enables lecturers to work with any or multiple above described conceptualisation(s) of the European Union in a controlled environment of a class and to reflect the academic debate without lecturers cherry-picking the (normatively) best ‘fitting’ ontology. In addition, as the subsequent section indicates, simulating EU negotiations allows students to get a better grasp and deeper understanding of European integration, for example by tackling the functioning of EU institutions as well as the content of policies, and by paying attention to aspects of formal and informal governance. During the simulation, students are inevitably exposed to the multiple facets of the EU: the multilevel dimension (EU simulations that include different levels of

governance: e.g. the supranational and national level); the multilingual aspect (in the case of simulations with participants from different language areas); and the multi-actor facet (where participants take on a large variety of roles, including representatives of various EU institutions, journalists, interest groups etc.).

DYNAMICS IN DIDACTICAL DEBATES ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

Having noted that using EU simulations in European Integration Studies represents an opportunity to understand the complexity of the European Union's contested nature, it is also necessary to highlight the complementarity between the contemporary didactical debates regarding teaching and learning, on the one hand, and EU simulations, on the other hand. We aim to position EU simulations within the Bologna Process reforms and the active learning paradigm as well as to underline its benefits and limitations.

In this symposium, we see EU simulations as an example of an experimental and cooperative learning tool changing in-class communication patterns, as an instrument bridging the gap between theory and practice, and as a contribution to a constructivist approach to teaching European integration. Based on constructivist learning theory (Dewey, 1916; Piaget, 1973, 1980), constructivist approaches to teaching are based on the premise that knowledge acquisition is a process of continuous self-construction. Thus, knowledge is constructed from a base of prior knowledge and best expanded by experiences (Perkins, 2006; Huang, 2002).

Knowledge construction based on experiencing and reflecting events requires active involvement of learners, a democratic learning environment, as well as interactive and student-centred activities. Lecturers are merely facilitators encouraging autonomous learning by students (Gray and Gibbons, 2002). In the constructivist view, both the process of learning and the outcome of learning are considered important (and the procedural aspect of learning is seen as more important than the acquired knowledge itself). We claim that the use of EU simulations in EU Studies facilitates a better comprehension of the complex nature of the European Union by combining the knowledge acquisition with experiencing and reflecting the simulated processes through active engagement, autonomous and interactive learning, and thus mirrors important challenges and requirements identified in the course of the Bologna Process (*cf.* Lightfoot and Maurer, 2014; Asal and Kratoville, 2013: 132-142).

In order to respond to multiple issues facing European higher education and research and to enhance its global competitiveness, the Bologna Process represented a major reform with its creation of the European Higher Educational Area. Principles of mobility, increasing global attractiveness of the European educational area and its compatibility with the Anglo-Saxon educational system as well as knowledge- and value-based learning are embedded in the Bologna Process. Focus on competitive and dynamic features of learning ought to ensure that the demands of a knowledge-based society are met and European citizenship and civic engagement fostered (Reinalda and Kulesza-Mietkowski, 2005; *Bergen-Communiqué*, 2005; Keeling, 2006; Fejes, 2008).

The Bologna Process integrated the so-called ‘shift from teaching to learning’, a phrase coined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which had considerable success and captured universities around the world (Wildt, 2003). It turned into a ‘new’ pedagogical and didactical concept. As a central element, the ‘shift’ changed the focus from input to output, from the content of teaching to ‘learning outcomes’. This included a changing role for the teacher, a definition of learning objectives, an emphasis on the organisation of learning, and above all a concentration on student learning, i.e. learning styles and didactical improvements.¹

The shift from teaching to learning represents a paradigmatic shift and profound transformation of the educational environment, transcending the passive teacher-centred pedagogical and didactical forms and moving to dynamic and activating forms of instruction (*cf.* Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Wildt, 2003; Silberman, 1996). At the argumentative core of this paradigmatic shift is the claim that active learning is more effective than its passive counterpart. A study by Stice showed that students retained 10 per cent of what they read, 20 per cent of what they hear, 50 per cent of what they hear and see, 70 per cent of what they say, and 90 per cent of what they do and say (Stice, 1987, quoted in Oros, 2007).

The Stice study was based on David Kolb’s ideas about learning types and learning styles, claiming that learning is facilitated in situations where reflection and abstraction follow personal experiences, hence active participation of students increases learning outcomes while traditional forms of learning in which more passive forms like listening are pronounced are less successful (Kolb, 1984). Although critics claim that neither Kolb’s theory nor Stice’s data are accurately validated (e.g. Raymond and Usherwood, 2013; Oros, 2007), the evidence on the

effectiveness of active learning is generally positive (Prince, 2004; Michael, 2006) and the active learning paradigm has become dominant in Political Science (including IR and EU Studies).

Table 1: Shift from passive to active learning

	Passive learning	Active learning
Paradigm	instructor focused	student focused
Learning	traditional passive modes of information delivery	active and/or experimental approaches to information delivery, fostering interaction among students and lecturer
Instruction	single outcome focus (replication of proven)	open space, open outcome, peer learning
Outcome	reproduction of instructor’s information	fostering higher cognitive skills – understanding, autonomous thinking, comprehension, linkages among topics and issues

Sources: Krain and Shadle (2005), Omelicheva and Avdeyeva (2008), Fowler (2005)

The main elements of the paradigmatic shift are summarised in table 1 above. It illustrates, that the new didactical paradigm is quite arduous, both for students and lecturers. Students are expected be more active in the knowledge acquisition process and acquire additional competences. For lecturers, the shift from teaching to learning implies a move away from lecturer as information and knowledge provider to that of an activator, moderator and promoter of learning processes - fittingly summarised as a move ‘from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side’ (King, 1993:30). This shift leads to the question of adequate teaching methods, hence in our case to EU simulations.

In the EU Studies context, simulations equip students with the specific knowledge about EU institutions and decision-making processes (disciplinary expertise), as well as various soft skills (generic competences), hence the use of EU simulation as an active learning student-

centred tool in curricula enables the transfer of knowledge and directly addresses and enhances many of the competencies identified by the Bologna Process, such as ‘learning to learn’, interpersonal skills, citizenship education, entrepreneurship, and cultural expression (*cf.* Lightfoot and Maurer, 2014). While systematic assessments of the learning outcomes of EU simulations are often missing and; at present, didactical and pedagogical evidence is still largely anecdotal (Raymond and Usherwood, 2013), there are many arguments that simulations can be beneficial didactical methods for active learning, as mentioned above.

However, the (potential) limitations of EU simulations to teaching European integration also need to be addressed: first, an EU simulation cannot replace traditional learning. It depends on previous solid knowledge of the European Union. EU simulations are knowledge-deepening rather than knowledge-acquisition tools. Second, EU simulations present the danger of over-simplification, as the dynamics reproduced in EU simulations provide only very simplified versions of EU decision-making. Hence, the tension between complexity-reduction and over-simplification ought to be acknowledged and reflected in all stages of the simulation. Third, EU simulations take place in contexts different from those of real-life EU negotiation: they take place in the controlled environment of the class or another academic setup over a limited period of time, and it is therefore very difficult to include the effect of political events such as elections, as this would lead to an unprecedented growth of complexity and possibly reduce learning outcomes (*cf.* Brunazzo and Settembri, 2012, 2014).

Most of these limitations are inherent characteristics of the simulation approach and not specific to *EU* simulations, and can be mitigated by the employment of reflexivity in the construction, implementation and evaluation stages of EU simulation. The potential limitations of EU simulations are out-weighed by the benefits of the active learning paradigm as well as the shift from teaching to learning, and are thus in-line with the requirements of the Bologna Process. EU simulations allow students not only to comprehend the contested nature of the EU, but also to develop and enhance both generic and subject specific competences and skills (*cf.* Muno *et al.*, 2013; Brunazzo and Settembri, 2012, 2014).

BEYOND TEACHING: EU SIMULATIONS AS RESEARCH TOOL

After having presented EU simulations as a valuable tool for teaching European integration and employing didactical methods of active learning, we would like to partially break with the general perception of simulation as a teaching tool. We argue that simulations can also be used as quasi-experiments, offering a new perspective for both EU and didactical research.

While the didactical and pedagogical value of simulations is increasingly accepted (Van Dyke *et al.*, 2000; Asal *et al.*, 2013), so far simulations have rarely been considered as a research tool. And although simulations do not qualify as experiments, due to the lack of random assignment of participants and control groups, they can be seen as quasi-experiments (Campbell and Stanley, 1971; Asal *et al.*, 2013). This is in line with the current trends in the Social Sciences, especially Political Science, where the use of experiments is growing – addressing a multitude of issues including decision-making, voter and candidate preferences, and media effects (Druckmann *et al.*, 2011: 6).

However, as the papers in the symposium indicate, a rigorous assessment of EU simulations provides us with data, which can be used for more than mere reflection of simulation designs. We can potentially use the data for both didactical and pedagogical research (e.g. measuring learning outcomes, the role of settings for learning) and within EU Studies (e.g. construction of EU citizenship and identity, evolution of EU support, civil engagement).

The key features to be considered for *didactical and pedagogical research* are the degree of interaction between the simulation designer (lecturer) and the simulation participants (students), and the degree of reflexivity employed throughout the stages of simulation (the simulation design, implementation and process). The Social Sciences offer a wide variety of research methods and techniques (quantitative as well as qualitative) to turn EU simulation into quasi-experimental research. Methods and techniques for gathering data include surveys (face-to-face, by phone or online), written feedbacks (individual or group, report or essay format), oral feedbacks (interviews or focus-group discussions), and participant observation. At best, methods are combined for a multi-method triangulation of findings and used in various phases of the simulation. Didactical and pedagogical research into EU simulation offers valuable insights into issues and topics, such as the learning paradigm, course design, course assessment and evaluation methods, as well as course outcomes in terms of various competences. Through this, we argue, the results of simulations can be documented and reflected, simulation designs adapted, and requirements for didactical reflection met.

As for *European integration research*, issues such as identity construction and evolution of EU support can be studied using quasi-experimental and experimental approaches (*cf.* Manzel, 2012). For example, the data gathered in EU simulations can be used to study effects of an intensive peer group interaction on perceptions and attitudes towards the EU, and the construction of European identity. In fact, past experience with EU simulations demonstrates that exposure to information prior to simulation, together with intensive peer-group interaction during the simulation game, can act as an accelerator of identity formation and/or change. Students encountering and interacting with their peers are led to reflect on their values and on what constitutes their own identity. They experience in practice, how multiple identities work (e.g. regional, national, European, etc.) when engaged in interaction with peers, confronted by the contrast between own identity and assigned role, and exposed to opposing positions during simulated negotiations.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SYMPOSIUM

The contributions to this symposium were selected to reflect the three inter-linked facets of EU simulations mentioned above. Our objective is to present EU simulations as a multi-dimensional resource, which ranges from a teaching and learning instrument to a research tool in various disciplines. The individual contributions utilise EU simulations to fill this research gap: more specifically the contributions address the ambiguities imbedded in the active learning paradigm (Usherwood, 2015); the need to re-define learning objectives to address the dynamic dimensions of EU polity, politics and policies (Raiser *et al.*, 2015); the lack of systematic approach assessing the effects of simulation designs on outcomes (Fink, 2015); the impact of active learning process from a constructivist perspective (Jones and Bursens, 2015); and the use of simulations as a research resource for studying European identity formation (Rünz, 2015). By addressing the key aspects connected to the use of EU simulations as teaching, learning and research tool, the symposium moves beyond a narrow understanding of EU simulation and argues for a new understanding of EU simulation as a multi-dimensional and inter-disciplinary instrument.

The article by Simon Raiser, Annegret Schneider and Björn Warkalla is located firmly within the first dimension – the potential for teaching the European Union. The authors develop a typology of simulations, differentiating different learning objectives. Simulations can focus on teaching the processes and dynamics of European politics (politics), on teaching factual

knowledge about a given policy field (policy), or on teaching the Union's institutional aspects (polity), hence focusing on subject specific competences. With a different simulation design, rather generic competences are enhanced. The latter category concerns objectives such as training teamwork, communication, and negotiation skills, as well as empathy, the ability to deal with complexity, and making decisions under stress. The relevance of both objectives for teaching and training students is assessed on the basis of case studies describing different simulation concepts. The authors conclude by acknowledging that simulations enjoy an increasing popularity within academic teaching, maintain that their use in European Studies is largely restricted to classical concepts and argue for a more extensive use of more experimental simulations, but see a certain trade-off between the aforementioned learning objectives.

In his article located between the EU and the teaching/learning dimensions of EU simulation, Simon Usherwood underlines the cost of the paradigmatic shift for lecturers as well as the need to employ reflexivity to achieve the balance between feasibility and complexity-reduction. He first addresses the most notable challenges of getting colleagues to try out simulations in European studies teaching, namely the overcoming of start-up costs such as the creation of a scenario from scratch or the adaptation of an existing game. Drawing on the author's extensive experience and using a number of practical examples, the paper discusses these challenges and their origins in the fundamental assumptions that simulations make about both the world and pedagogy. Specifically, the author addresses the tension between the simple rules that are understood to capture real-world phenomena and the complexity that those rules produce creates not only an excellent learning opportunity but also a barrier to developing useful resources for simulation designers. The article offers a number of ways that such a barrier can be overcome, including the development of a simulation designer community, use of online guides, and the creation of simulations that teach about simulation design.

The article by Simon Fink is located at the nexus of all three domains – teaching EU, active learning, and EU simulation as a multi-faceted research tool. Using the experience and data of many simulations of the chocolate directive in various settings in Germany and in Switzerland, the author analyses the influence of the simulation setting on negotiation outcomes. His quantitative analysis elucidates relations between settings and outcomes: Simulation duration, number, and kind of participants have little impact on the range of outcomes, but the choice of participants does. These results can inform the further evolution of simulations based on hard data. The article thus highlights how reflexivity, accompanied by

empirical study, and (quantitative) analysis can improve simulations as well as provide data for further analysis within pedagogical and EU research.

The article by Rebecca Jones and Peter Bursens, also located at the nexus of all three domains, draws on the Federation of European Simulation Societies (EuroSim), a large-scale transatlantic simulation of EU decision-making, and uses it as a resource for research. From a constructivist learning theory perspective, the authors analyse the effects of active learning on dimensions of affective learning. Students participating in simulations should gain in terms of self-assessment and in terms of appreciation for real political actors engaging in negotiations and decision-making. The analysis contributes to the validation of constructivist claims by testing hypotheses using pre-test and post-test data from seven editions of the EuroSim simulation, which makes this paper an original and systematic contribution to pedagogical research.

Paul Rünz uses Model European Union (MEU), a simulation of European politics that aims to familiarise young Europeans with the decision-making process of the European Union, as a research tool for EU research. More than 190 people annually participate at MEU Strasbourg which takes place on the premises of the European Parliament. His article uses panel data from surveys with participants of MEU 2012 to test the impact of the simulation conference with a new focus on political attitudes, asking if EU simulations influence European identity and political support of the EU. Hence, using MEU as a quasi-experiment, the article is an original and systematic contribution to EU research.

To conclude, the authors of this symposium highlight the benefits of EU simulations – the acquisition of both disciplinary and generic expertise, autonomous construction of knowledge, acquisition of new skills, as well as reflecting one’s own identity and values in interaction with others – that make EU simulation more than a mere teaching and learning tool. The value-added for students and the so far highly underestimated possibilities of using simulations and simulation data for research across various disciplines, make EU simulations a promising multi-dimensional tool.

Note

¹ In the follow-up process of the Bologna Declaration 1999, European universities declared at their Convention in Salamanca in March 2001 that: ‘European higher education institutions recognize that their students need and demand qualifications which they can use effectively for the purpose of their studies and careers all over Europe.’ (University of Graz, 2003). In order to specify the mentioned qualifications and to induce necessary educational changes, more than 100 European universities started a pilot project entitled ‘Tuning educational structures in Europe’. Therein, the following generic competences and skills were identified as important: the capacity for analysis and synthesis, the ability to work autonomously, problem solving and teamwork orientation, flexibility and a practice orientation. As subject specific competences and skills the following were mentioned as important: a good command of the discipline, the ability to follow critically and interpret the newest development in theory and practice, and knowledge of research techniques (Wildt, 2003; cf. Fejes, 2008)

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Key quotes

1. These inherent and growing complexities of the EU represent a challenge for teaching and studying European integration.

2. simulating EU negotiations allows students to get a better grasp and deeper understanding of European integration
3. Students are expected be more active in the knowledge acquisition process and acquire additional competences.
4. Simulations can also be used as quasi-experiments, offering a new perspective for both EU and didactical research.