

Climate Learning Insight

Mock COPs

In 2021 and 2023, A-level students from Bristol's state schools participated in a series of Mock COP events designed to mimic the international climate negotiations held by the UN. The Mock COP is a semi-structured role-play which creates a situation-based and learner-centred environment for appreciating the complexities of international climate negotiations.

This approach has proven to be engaging and energising for young people, both as a pedagogical tool and as a motivation for climate action. We encourage local decision-makers, educational institutions and universities to invest in similar role-play events as a form of civic education and engagement.

About

The Mock COP is a climate negotiation exercise mimicking the annual United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) summit, which was hosted by the UK in 2021. The University of Bristol's Cabot Institute for the Environment has worked with Dr Jack Nicholls (SPAIS) since 2015 - in the run-up to COP 21 held in Paris - to design and lead several Mock COPs. The Mock COP format was then further developed by Dr Jack Nicholls in collaboration with Dr Emilia Melville and Ms Camille Straatman to run a series of Mock COP events in March and November 2021 and again in March 2023.

The Mock COPs are intended to educate participants on the complexities of climate negotiations, the kind of actors involved, and the scale of the problems faced. They also aim to improve public speaking and negotiation skills, and to encourage continued interest in and engagement with the topics beyond the role-playing exercise - catalysing positive action on climate.

Each Mock COP provided up to 60 A-Level students from Bristol's state schools the opportunity to transport themselves, via semi-structured role-play, to the centre of international climate change politics. University postgraduate students acted as facilitators for the groups, providing guidance and keeping records of the day.

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Insights

- The three Mock COPs that have been run by the named collaborators to date, highlight the importance of local action to ground the content and concern of global climate issues and relate these to students' own lives and their communities, and connect global targets into meaningful situated action.
- The urgency of the climate crisis means we need an environmentally literate citizenry. Students want to be well-informed on climate change politics. At the same time, for people of any age to engage, they need to be active agents and participants working through civic channels and community institutions. Role play activities such as the Mock COP give an understanding of what is happening internationally and give participants time to consider how to translate this into practical politics.
- The inclusion of a local politician (deputy mayor) who wants to hear young people's views gives recognition of the voice of young people by a political leader and strengthens the sense of worth.



Students at a Mock COP28 at the Cabot Institute for the Environment in March 2023. Credit: Jon Rowley.

Groups of students from different schools represented a nation or organisation, navigated their group's aims and the interests of other delegations (explored in bilateral breakout sessions), before finally, voting on key negotiation issues.

The November 2021 Mock COP ended with a presentation from Deputy Mayor Cllr Asher Craig, who also listened to the participants' ideas and views on what should happen in Bristol. Their message to the Deputy Mayor was that they want to see people in positions of leadership acting with honesty, commitment and follow-through on actions, and delivering improved public transport and waste reduction.

Since the first two Mock COPs, the resources have been shared with other universities across the UK who have conducted their own events. We encourage anyone interested to run their own Mock COP to access these resources at praxis-research.co.uk/mock-cop.

Key pedagogical findings

- The Mock COP creates a learner-centred environment [1], by enabling participants to be active agents through situation-based role play - exploring different climate perspectives and positions in a structured pedagogical process. This allows students to bring their own knowledge and education, and creates high-levels of learning engagement.
- The situation-based learning enables a deep understanding of the complexities behind climate decision-making, with an understanding of reasons for why change has been frustratingly slow-paced to date and where there might be potential for more radical shifts.
- Understanding the reasons for the slow pace of change was coupled with experiencing the frustration with the inertia of the process. Experience and direct feeling of this frustration within the Mock COP learning environment has been documented as a motivation for action.
- The role play structure supported the development of transferable skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, peer-peer learning, increased confidence, and presentation skills [2].
- The role play dimension also meant experiencing a tension of personal views and the role's views and motivations. This tension can function as a creative catalyst for climate action.
- The structure brought together students from different schools in a heterogenous student body, in an atmosphere that encouraged respectful interaction. Students displayed generosity and kindness to different modes of expression, and were effective in collaborating with 'strangers' to explore diverse opinions amongst themselves.
- The students were more ambitious than politicians in their climate strategies. This could be partly a result of age; but could also be a generational shift, where the leaders of tomorrow know that climate change is a key global challenge.



Students at a Mock COP28 at the Cabot Institute for the Environment in March 2023. Credit: Jon Rowley.

Reflections

- Youth optimism is often dismissed as naive, but the techno-optimism of the boomer generation in the face of climate change, compared to current teenagers' eco-anxiety, can be seen as a generational rather than age-related form of naivety.
- The Mock COP is an effective tool for climate change education that helps students understand the global challenges involved in intergovernmental climate change negotiations and how to respond through local action.
- The participatory appeal of engaging directly with fellow students on real world concerns builds student's confidence and sense of agency which is critical for climate action.
- Teachers saw high levels of engagement and learning for their students, and were keen to bring the knowledge into their classrooms. This would need greater participation levels within a school.

Further information

The four Mock COPs run to date have all been supported by Cabot Institute for the Environment. Funding to support this activity was also awarded by PolicyBristol from the Research England QR Policy Support Fund (QR PSF) 2022-24, FUTURES Festival of Discovery funded by EPSRC [Grant number EP/X023141/1] and the Cabot Institute for the Environment.

Mock COP resources can be found at praxis-research.co.uk/mock-cop.

[1] Catherine Gautier & Stacy Rebich (2005) The Use of a Mock Environment Summit to Support Learning about Global Climate Change, *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 53:1, 5-15, DOI: 10.5408/1089-9995-53.1.5.

[2] Hammond, Augustine and Craig Douglas Albert. "Learning by Experiencing: Improving Student Learning Through a Model United Nations Simulation." *Journal of Political Science Education* 16 (2019): 441 - 458.

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Students at a Mock COP28 at the Cabot Institute for the Environment in March 2023. Credit: Jon Rowley.