

Commentary

Launching the Norwich Model Arctic Council

Anthony Speca

This year, the Arctic Council celebrates its twentieth anniversary. As its profile as the premier high-level forum for international Arctic cooperation has grown, so too has interest in its affairs. Amongst educators, this interest has stimulated a small but increasing number of Model Arctic Councils (MACs). MACs are experiential learning simulations at which students or pupils, playing the roles of delegates to a cycle of Arctic Council meetings, discuss salient issues facing the region and try to build consensus around solutions.

As a secondary-school educator at Norwich School in the UK, as well as a former policy official with the Government of Nunavut in the Canadian Arctic, I take a double interest in this trend. But given the specialised nature of Arctic study, nearly all MACs advertised to date have been pitched to university students rather than to secondary-school pupils. Most notably, the University of the Arctic has developed a biennial MAC to be held at a member university located in the country chairing the Arctic Council, the first of which took place in May 2016 at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

However, similar experiential learning simulations have been pitched to secondary-school pupils for decades. Model United Nations (MUN) is the best known, but Model International Court of Justice, European Youth Parliament and others are regular events. My own experience introducing MUN at Norwich School convinced me that MACs can raise awareness and understanding of the Arctic at secondary school just as much as at university. Inspired to share

Dr Anthony Speca was a senior policy official with the Government of Nunavut. He now consults on Arctic issues as Managing Principal of Polar Aspect, and he teaches Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Norwich School.

my enthusiasm for the Arctic with pupils, I developed and launched the inaugural Norwich Model Arctic Council (NORMAC) in July 2016 at Norwich School.

NORMAC may be the only secondary-school MAC held in the world today. Indeed, perhaps only one other MAC has ever been held at this level—in October 2010 in Whitehorse, Yukon, convened by the United Nations Association Canada. Pupils participating in NORMAC 2016 declared not only that they enjoyed the role-playing exercise in itself, but also that they valued highly what they learned about the Arctic and its peoples through researching their roles. Encouraged by their uniformly positive feedback, I intend to run NORMAC as an annual event.

Full details about NORMAC are available online.¹ I shall focus here instead on some strategic questions raised during conference preparations. NORMAC 2016 was a one-day pilot involving 18 senior pupils from Norwich School, but NORMAC 2017 will be a two-and-a-half day conference open to pupils from other secondary schools in the UK and beyond. Many of these pupils may have participated in MUN, but most probably none in MAC, and few if any will have had previous exposure to the Arctic. Three questions stand out:

- What distinguishes NORMAC from the many MUN conferences or other such simulations that pupils could choose to attend instead?
- What balance should NORMAC strike between insisting on strict realism on the one hand, and making space for a creative learning experience on the other?
- How can pupils' newfound interest in the Arctic be sustained beyond preparing for and participating in NORMAC itself?

The answer to the first question might seem obvious. Unlike MUN, which is geographically and thematically diffuse, MAC focuses pupils on the Arctic, a unique and compelling part of the world. But the 'lure of the far North' can be over-emphasised. The risk here is of running a MAC essentially as a MUN, only situated in the 'mythical Arctic'—and of missing what makes both the Arctic and the Arctic Council truly distinct.

To mitigate this risk, NORMAC makes much of two special features of the Arctic Council—the category of indigenous Permanent Participant (PP), and the rule of consensus. At MUN, pupils play the roles exclusively of delegates from Member States. At NORMAC, some pupils play the roles of delegates from indigenous PPs—and all pupils are exposed to the Arctic as a homeland, as well as to the critical social and political concepts of indigeneity and indigenous rights. Many pupils today have a strong sense of social justice, and in my experience they are excited by the prospect of learning about indigenous peoples and politics.

Similarly, whereas at MUN pupils require bare majority support for their proposals, at NORMAC pupils must build real consensus in order to influence proceedings. At secondary-school age, this poses a considerable challenge, but it also develops valuable skills. In keeping with Arctic Council rules, consensus technically need only extend to the Arctic States. But even this rule encourages pupils to consider carefully the relationships between Arctic States and their indigenous peoples, and to aim for the Arctic Council ideal of full PP involvement.

Indeed, it would be unrealistic for pupils not to do so—but NORMAC is a learning experience, not a diplomatic scenario analysis. At NORMAC, pupils have the creative licence to propose, discuss and pass resolutions that would not meet the high standard expected at the Arctic Council. NORMAC procedure, a mix of formal parliamentary procedure and typical MUN rules,

also deviates from the Arctic Council's more collegial practice. Nevertheless, it offers pupils the structure they need to discuss complex issues maturely in a large group, and to hope to achieve consensus in a short time.

That said, realism is still an explicit aim of NORMAC. Pupils grapple with up-to-the-minute issues either actually or potentially on the Arctic Council agenda, and they compete for commendations judged partly on how convincingly they played their roles. It is useful in this regard to have at least one Arctic specialist on hand to offer formal or informal 'briefings'—a sort of expanded 'Arctic Council Secretariat' role played by myself and a colleague at NORMAC 2016. Good preparation is also critical, for which I maintain a small 'research library' of Arctic-related materials on Norwich School's online Virtual Learning Environment.

In fact, good preparation creates the foundation for sustained interest in the Arctic. Like MUN, NORMAC requires many weeks of careful research, which pupils would ideally conduct together in the context of a continuing after-school 'Arctic club'. Although this research may not overlap with the school curriculum except indirectly, pupils at schools in the UK offering an extended project at GCSE- or A-Level have the opportunity to transform their NORMAC preparation into a nationally recognised qualification. In this way, the most enthusiastic pupils can extend their engagement with the Arctic well beyond the conference.

Participating schools could also consider integrating NORMAC preparation with other co-curricular activities, such as visits to universities with Arctic research programmes, or youth campaigns for indigenous rights through clubs such as Amnesty. School trips to the Arctic are also possible—at certain UK schools, trips to Iceland or Norway are already popular. As for NORMAC itself, not only do I intend to run it annually, but also to expand it to other venues, as well as to explore the possibility of NORMAC-related pupil exchanges with Arctic-based secondary schools. But even if in future most pupils attending NORMAC do so only once, it will still have played its part in raising awareness and understanding of the Arctic amongst youth.

Notes

1. For further details and to register interest, please visit the NORMAC website at <http://www.normac.org/> and follow NORMAC on Twitter [@NorwichMAC](https://twitter.com/NorwichMAC).