

Teaching Geopolitics with LEGO[®] Bricks

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Abstract. Due to the complexity of the subject matter, geopolitics presents a significant challenge when it is taught. As a result, numerous pedagogical experiments, such as simulations, serious games and film analysis, have been reported in the literature to foster a more active learning experience. However, LEGO[®] SERIOUS PLAY[®] (LSP), a systematic process combining metaphorical modelling, building and peer discussion, has never been tested in this context. However, this method, which is increasingly used in higher education across a variety of subjects (e.g. accounting, entrepreneurship, healthcare and medical education), is particularly useful for addressing complex topics. This article describes an experiment with undergraduate students at a French business school. A comparative study (LSP workshops vs. a control group) found that LSP workshops are engaging and enjoyable teaching sessions for students. However, their effectiveness in enhancing learning remains debatable, as our findings revealed mixed results regarding performance outcomes.

Keywords: comparative study, LSP workshops, debatable effectiveness, French business school.

Introduction

Geopolitical tensions are a reality of our economy that companies and business leaders need to address (Ali et al., 2025; Hartwell and Ursprung, 2024; Tse et al., 2024). Consequently, management education programmes must integrate an understanding of geopolitical issues to better equip future managers to navigate this complex environment. However, the complexity of geopolitics makes teaching this subject particularly challenging. Geopolitical events that may influence the business environment, such as the rivalry between China and the United States (Wong et al., 2024; Záborský et al., 2023), Brexit (Moradlou et al., 2021; Roscoe et al., 2022) and the Ukraine–Russia conflict (Hartwell & Zadorozhna, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024), occur across various regions globally. Nevertheless, geopolitics extends beyond the international level and interstate conflicts to encompass a variety of overlapping dimensions ranging from the local to the supranational scale (Agnew, 2003; Lee & Glosserman, 2022; Ó Tuathail, 1999). Consequently, a multilevel approach appears necessary in the business context (De Villa, 2023; Gammeltoft & Panibratov, 2024; Lee & Glosserman, 2022), and management education has been urged to cultivate a higher degree of awareness of geopolitics and its inherent complexity (Belhoste & Dimitrova, 2024).

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However, teaching geopolitics is challenging. Consequently, scholarship increasingly aims to foster a more inclusive and active learning experience. Instructors of international relations and geopolitics have started incorporating practical elements into their teaching to give concreteness to students, who often struggle to engage with the theories and phenomena in this field (Rösch, 2018). For example, simulations and games have become increasingly important methods for teaching international relations and geopolitics (Horn et al., 2016). The literature also reports a wide range of innovative experiments, from academic writing (Olsson et al., 2024); sports geography (Koch, 2023); movies (Dodds, 2008; Engert & Spencer, 2009; Webber, 2005); novels on zombies (Korson, 2019); business games; simulations and Massive Open Online Courses (Arora et al., 2018; Asal, 2015; Asal & Kratoville, 2013; Hatipoglu et al., 2015; Horn et al., 2015; Jonhson et al., 2019; Kaempf & Flinn, 2021; Mattlin, 2018); and digital social networks, such as Twitter (Blair, 2023), to even dance (Rösch, 2018), songs and cartoons (Asal et al., 2024). However, the emergent literature on teaching international relations and geopolitics remains underdeveloped (Rösch, 2018).

In this context, this empirical paper reports on a teaching experiment utilising LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP). Most people are familiar with LEGO® bricks, but their use in adult learning and higher education pedagogy is likely less well known. LSP was adapted for pedagogy a few decades ago and has evolved into a teaching method that incorporates LEGO® bricks and the concepts of serious play (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). The LSP process encourages participants to use LEGO® bricks as mediating artefacts to build 3D models that symbolically and metaphorically represent their internal realities – ideas, concepts and thoughts – and to explain their constructions to fellow participants (Dann, 2018; McCusker, 2014; Nerantzi & McCusker, 2014). This teaching method is particularly effective for exploring complex issues (Dann, 2018; James, 2013), including topics such as international relations and geopolitics.

Regarding scientific issues, this work aims to contribute to the literature on two specific points. First, as Zenk et al. (2022) explained, LSP ‘is still an under-researched topic requiring additional empirical studies to better understand the main underlying mechanisms that benefit co-creative activities and output’ (341). Second, LSP is used with increasing frequency by instructors in higher education (James & Nerantzi, 2018; McCusker, 2014; Nerantzi & McCusker, 2014; Peabody & Noyes, 2017). The number of applications reported in the literature (Cavaliero, 2017; Hack, 2020:265) is rising in accounting (Elkelish & Ahmed, 2021), entrepreneurship (Zenk et al., 2018), engineering sciences (Kurkovsky, 2015; Lear et al., 2020; Stevenson et al., 2018), healthcare and medical education (Hayes, 2016; Hayes & Graham, 2019; Thomson et al., 2018), as well as among law students (Wheeler, 2020) and cell biology students (Garden, 2022). As we can see, the use of LSP in teaching international relations and geopolitics is absent from this research – a gap this paper aims to address. In doing so, this work extends the range of innovative pedagogical experiments for teaching

international relations and geopolitics, with the aim of helping instructors diversify their teaching methods.

To present our work, the first section provides an overview of LSP and geopolitics instruction. The second section describes our research field, which involved 139 undergraduate students as participants. In the third section, we analyse the comparative results from two groups to explore the impact of LSP on geopolitics instruction.

1. Geopolitics and LSP

1.1. Teaching Geopolitics

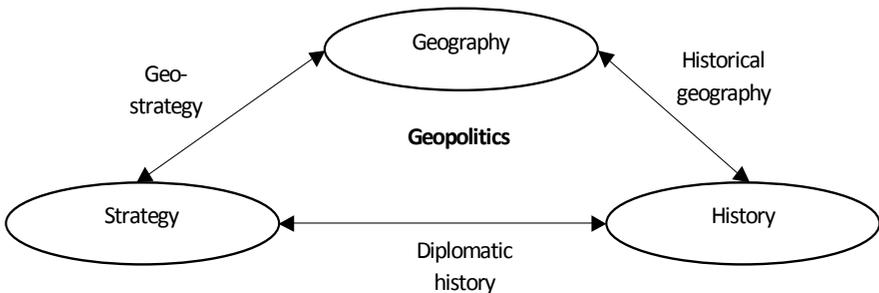
The socioeconomic environment of companies has been marked by significant turbulence in recent years (Anderson et al., 2018; Luo, 2024), compelling them to operate within a context of geopolitical confrontations driven by national security concerns (Luo, 2024; Paul, 2021). Geopolitical events or threats, such as wars, terrorism and political tensions, can influence macroeconomic variables, thereby affecting corporate investment decisions (Caldara & Iacoviello, 2022), with differences among companies and sectors (De Villa, 2023; Kobrin, 2017). Since the events of September 11, 2001, the ongoing prevalence of crises and conflicts has underscored the significance of geopolitical risk at all levels (Bednarski et al., 2023; Belhoste & Dimitrova, 2024; DeGhetto, 2023) as a critical factor in corporate decision-making (Behrendt & Khanna, 2003). Assessing geopolitical risks allows companies to ensure the security of their activities (Mollan & Sweeney, 2022), identify potential business opportunities (De Villa, 2023) and discern relevant legitimate and illegitimate potential stakeholders in conflict zones (Belhoste & Nivet, 2021)¹. Indeed, companies are expected to justify their operational choices and maintain transparency in their governance as well as in their environmental and social performance (Tamimi & Sebastianelli, 2017). Consequently, the importance of international business and geopolitics education in developing countries is increasingly recognised (Asthana & Tavzelj, 2022). Management educators have been challenged to develop educational processes that address such an environment (Anderson et al., 2018; Lavine et al., 2022), considering its overlapping dimensions – local, national and transnational – and the diversity of actors it involves, including both states and non-state entities. This involves fostering critical geopolitical awareness among management students (Belhoste & Dimitrova, 2024). The goal of teaching geopolitical complexity in management programmes is triple: (i) to enable learners to better assess geopolitical risks; (ii) to make learners, as future

1. Belhoste and Nivet (2021) investigated the operations of the French group Lafarge within the context of the Syrian civil war, spanning 2011–2014. The authors explained how the ‘short-sightedness’ of the headquarters led to the company contributing to the financing of terrorist activities.

corporate leaders, aware of their role as geopolitical actors (Belhoste & Dimitrova, 2024); and (iii) to contribute to responsible management education, equipping learners to navigate the ethical dilemmas they may face as future business leaders (Moratis & Melissen, 2022). Understanding the importance of equipping management students with critical geopolitics tools first requires an examination of the differences and complementarities between classical and critical approaches to geopolitics.

Geopolitics, in its classical approach, can be defined as a sphere of international relations (Dussouy, 2010; Sloan, 2017) focusing on international and global dimensions and contests among states for control over geographical entities. Sloan (2017) explained that geopolitics lies at the confluence of three interconnected academic disciplines – geography, strategy and history – which converge in geostrategy, historical geography and diplomatic history (see Figure 1). Strategic studies deal primarily with interactions among adversaries engaged in potential or actual conflicts, while historical analysis evaluates the contemporary impacts of historical events (Sloan, 2017). Geostrategy analyses the terrain, logistical networks and spatial considerations essential for a state’s effective planning and execution of military operations while accounting for the opportunities and constraints imposed by geography. Historical geography explores how geographical factors have influenced the formation, development and transformation of cultures, societies and political entities, such as states and empires, throughout history. Diplomatic history contextualises state interactions and negotiations, highlighting the role of historical events and the management of conflicting interests in shaping international relations.

Figure 1 – A structure of geopolitics (Sloan, 2017)



Unlike classical geopolitics, critical geopolitics does not adopt a state-centric approach (Agnew, 2003; Agnew & Corbridge, 2003; Ó Tuathail, 1999). Instead, it employs a multiscale framework that emphasises deeper analyses of local contexts (Dodds, 2019; Flint, 2006). It also considers ‘power rivalries over territory’ (Lacoste, 2012:15) across all possible spatial levels, from local to international, and their interconnections (Dodds, 2019; Dussouy, 2010; Jessop et al., 2008). Consequently, critical geopolitics can be viewed as complementary to