Teaching Diplomacy As Process (Not Event): A Practitioner’s Song

Diplomacy is a collaborative process over time involving a number of players with differing perspectives and strengths. How does a practitioner convey that in a classroom?

BY BARBARA K. BODINE

The story goes that when Ambassador Robert Gallucci, negotiator extraordinaire, became dean of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, he quipped: “I now have to teach in theory what I have done in practice.”

That is the challenge all diplomats face as we move to the academic world in some version of that anomalous position, the practitioner-in-residence. We are not tenure-track faculty, even those of us with Ph.Ds. Nor are we hired for our writings on the applicability of neorealism vs. liberal institutionalism to the development of U.S. policy toward Southern Cone states in the late 1870s. Rather, we are hired because of our work to implement U.S. policy toward Southern Cone states in the 1970s and beyond.

Most of us are area specialists, a highly endangered species in the academic world, and many of us understand program management, an exotic if nearly mythological creature outside of business schools. Yet we are not hired in spite of these differences but (at least at the smarter institutions) because of them.

We are not unlike many of the political appointees with whom we worked during our careers. Having attained a measure of success in one field, we have to navigate a wholly new environment—language, culture, histories, hierarchies, rivalries—and add value to the process. My empathy for political appointees has gone up immeasurably since I moved over to the academic world more than a decade ago.

The degree to which we are welcomed varies by institution and our ability to adapt to, but not compete with, the established order. The rap on practitioners, and the trap that we fall into—beyond our naiveté that an AMB is roughly equivalent to a Ph.D.—is that we are just storytellers. We are an oral history tribe; indeed, Stu Kennedy has made a career of collecting our stories for posterity.

We are our stories. Used properly, they effectively illustrate a narrative and bring theory down to practice. It is how we define ourselves and frame events. We are also,

1 http://www.afsa.org/teaching-diplomacy-process-not-event-practitioners-song
we must admit, susceptible to the blandishments of our young charges—who either encourage us in our worst habit because they enjoy the story, or they have figured out it is a great way to get us off topic and away from the syllabus, at least for a while. How wonderful it is to have a fresh crop every year for whom our stories are new and exciting, if increasingly out of the misty past.

The Academic Approach

To understand where the practitioner fits in, we need to understand the world in which we now live. Scholars of political science and international relations chronically lament that the very nature of their disciplines has disconnected them from, and made them irrelevant to, the practice of policymaking and implementation. They cite the dearth of academics from those disciplines recruited by presidential administrations compared to their colleagues in economics. On the one hand, there is increased emphasis on quantitative analysis and grand strategies and, on the other, the demise of diplomatic history and area studies. These trends are self-reinforcing as tenured faculty work with, hire and promote the next generation of like-minded scholars.

Diplomatic history, notably as practiced by the late Ernst May of Harvard, can illuminate patterns and lessons that can be usefully and pragmatically applied going forward. Regrettably, diplomatic history has fallen out of favor in the academic world, perhaps in part a reflection of the ahistorical nature of Americans. Few new diplomatic historians are being produced, hired and tenured, as history is increasingly written by journalists. Similarly, regional studies departments and contemporary area studies majors have been eclipsed by anthropologists and linguists. L. Carl Brown of Princeton’s Near East Studies Department has voiced a lament similar to Professor May’s. Even qualitative analysts feel embattled.

Diplomatic historians and regionalists have been replaced by the theoreticians of international relations, whose warring factions compete for space and their share of footnotes in each other’s works and the works of graduate students. Quantitative analysis seeks to apply the standards and rigors of science to the study of politics, to reduce events to numbers, matrices and problem sets. Quantitative analysis excludes that which cannot be quantified. Like Sgt. Friday of “Dragnet,” these theoreticians work assiduously to stick with “just the facts, ma’am.”

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One top senior’s thesis I read used regression analysis to predict the length of stay of enemy combatants at Guantanamo. The research was impressive, the manipulation of the data masterful, and the quality of analysis superb and worthy of recognition. Yet it
took 125 pages of data to conclude that detainees from friendly countries are released sooner than those from less friendly countries, irrespective of threat indices, and that those from Yemen have close to no chance of ever seeing Sanaa again.

The study may help inform the debate on release policies, but it was noticeably devoid of policy recommendations itself. Given the ideological polemics that have surrounded the question of Guantanamo, this is commendable and may enhance the credibility of the thesis, but it deferred to others to determine policy options. A tool dependent on access to credible and sufficient data, and sufficient time for analysis, is of marginal direct utility to the policymaker.

Grand strategies seek determinative patterns to events. Several years ago, John Waterbury, a Princeton University professor, reviewed, with a large measure of humor, the waves of theoretical fashions and fads he had watched sweep over academia during his career. Each of these approaches had merit, and a solid understanding of each provides useful skills and frameworks in assessing policy options. If storytelling is all trees, these are critical efforts to understand the forest. However, neither mastery of data manipulation nor the current “ism”—particularly when divorced from history or regional context—gets to the day-to-day dynamics of diplomacy, of the decision-making and decision-implementing processes, or the skills necessary to be effective. They are of limited utility in framing options for Afghanistan, developing an assistance strategy or prepping the Seventh Floor for a deputies’ meeting.

Teaching Across the Divide

There is a lack of clarity whether diplomacy is the process, the tool or means of the process, or discreet events. The term is used interchangeably with foreign policy, international affairs, global affairs, etc. Or, equally damaging, it is dismissed as little more than good manners and a pleasing, if overly cautious, personal style.

For this article, I will take “diplomacy” to mean the process of the formulation and the implementation through official channels of the broad elements of national strategic policy, to include public diplomacy, development policy and security strategy as much as core diplomacy and, in some circumstances, track-two diplomacy. It includes the following, in unequal parts:

- History and an appreciation of the “persistence of political culture”
- Area and cultural competence, including language skills
- Economics, at least familiarity with political economy and macro-economics
- Governmental structure and process of policy and decision-making
- Organizational management: resources and personnel
- Leadership: the skills to manipulate processes, both formal and informal, to attain goals
- Writing and presentation skills.

Few practitioners are competent to effectively teach all those components with equal depth and sophistication. Fortunately, we don’t have to. Scholars—the faculty—devote
their careers to these disciplines, and students have the option to craft interdisciplinary courses of study.

A senior professor of American foreign policy at West Point once described “diplomacy” to his cadets as the negotiation of bilateral and multilateral treaties. Not inaccurate, but certainly insufficient. Ross Perot, in his presidential run, suggested that diplomats be replaced by fax machines—as though we were no more than the sum of our demarches. Finally, emphasis on crisis management reinforces the perception of diplomacy as events.

For practitioners, active and emeriti, as well as the think-tank crowd, simulations, games, role-playing and tabletop exercises can be invaluable mechanisms to work through issues. I am a strong supporter of tabletop exercises/simulations, and moved the State Department’s crisis management exercises to the Foreign Service Institute when the Diplomatic Security Bureau opted to shut them down in the early 1990s. In 2008, there was a cottage industry of “Day After” exercises in the run-up to the change in administrations that did seem to inform policy choices. But to be useful, they must assume a certain level of familiarity with the issues and understanding of the dynamics.

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Since students rarely have either, such exercises are of limited use in a classroom setting or for the apprentice practitioner. “Games” that work well at war colleges or at defense consulting firms like SAIC or Booz Allen Hamilton, on a college campus devolve rather rapidly into theater, and too often into high camp. With little frame of reference, students take on what they believe is the persona of a Cabinet secretary or a foreign leader based on their perception of a current incumbent. As demarches, press releases and meetings fly back and forth, orchestrated with a deus-ex-machina quality by Control, a “gotcha” quality can creep in, at times egged on by team advisers. Bright students become policy divas. In an unscientific survey of graduate students, the consensus was that the games were “fun but silly.” Few saw them as constructive lessons on the practice of diplomacy.

Simulations reinforce the notion of diplomacy as an event or series of events, of crisis management or negotiations done in a matter of days. They leave students with an unrealistic expectation that diplomacy is fast-paced, the clever resolution of a crisis or conclusion of a short-fuse negotiation, rather than an appreciation of the incremental process that precedes and follows crises or negotiations, and inevitable disappointment when they become practitioners. Diplomacy is to simulations as the practice of medicine is to the TV show “ER.”

Finally, simulations place an emphasis on the what or the how of diplomatic practice at the expense of the why. The skill set the next generation of policy players needs is to understand the role of public diplomacy, or of public affairs, not practice in drafting a
press release. Practitioners-in-residence need not replicate the role of FSI or the apprentice stage in their new careers.

The value-added of the practitioner-in-residence is to work with students to understand how the parts can successfully be brought together to make and implement a policy, to bridge the divide between theory/research and policymaking/implementation above the level of the Gullah storyteller.

The substantive components—history, economics, political theory (yes, an understanding of theory is important), language and culture—are important, and the practitioner must be able to incorporate these, albeit at a level different than that of the academic. The practitioner, however, can also focus on the core intellectual components—the ability to identify critical issues, to synthesize information and data, to extrapolate from history and precedent to craft policy—to understand the decision-making process and players. The role of the practitioner-in-residence is not to replace, but to complement, the academic.

Two Approaches to the Bridge

There are two approaches that can bridge the divide between theory and games: case studies and policy task forces/workshops (known as PTF/PWS). Both can be used to convey the importance of historical context, contain a measure of structure and patterns drawn from academic theory, and include important lessons on the complex development of policy and the limitations of its implementation.

Case studies elevate the value of the storyteller-in-residence beyond their personal experiences. The case study approach has proved effective in other graduate professional schools, including law and business, and is equally applicable and effective in teaching the practice of diplomacy. Georgetown University’s Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, for example, developed over several decades about 300 case studies covering decades of post–World War II diplomatic history that can be used either as core or supplemental readings. A course on “Invention: Limitations and Opportunities” can draw on studies of Somalia, the Philippines, the Shah’s Iran and the Balkans.

The better case studies include sufficient back story to provide necessary, but not burdensome, context, as well as footnotes for further research. The great ones include teaching notes.

Task Forces/Workshops: Lessons in Leadership, Collaboration and Policy Trade-offs

To underscore this notion of process, and to borrow from Marc Grossman’s introduction to The Embassy of the Future (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007), diplomacy is not the result of a single person’s actions or work, even a
“Great Man” or an ambassador. It is a collaborative process over time involving a number of players with differing perspectives and strengths.

How does a practitioner convey that in a classroom? One model, used successfully for years at the Woodrow Wilson School, is based on policy task forces/workshops. This format reinforces core competencies, the concept of process, the role of collaboration and the importance of strong writing skills, and plays to the strengths and unique perspective of the practitioner-in-residence. The format provides a framework that is more practical than the conventional academic approach and more conceptual, structural and historical than simulations or even case studies. It is also considerably more labor-intensive than conventional teaching.

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The objective is not to create one-semester experts on a specific region or issue, but to convey the sense of diplomacy as an incremental process, the complexity of factors that go into policy formulation and implementation, the give-and-take of competing interagency interpretations of national policy objectives, the need to understand “the persistence of political culture” and familiarization with policy writing (as opposed to academic writing)—all lessons that can be applied to other policies, other regions and in any department or agency.

Each PTF/PWS focuses on a single major, ongoing policy issue: e.g., childhood obesity, rogue states, rebalancing U.S. policy in the Arab Gulf states, or crafting a comprehensive strategy for fragile states. Students focus on one facet of the issue, and produce both a two-page executive summary and a 25-page policy paper. The former exposes students to the rigors of the short-version paper; the latter reinforces the rigors of academic research and analysis. Because this is an academic environment, far more space is devoted to history and strategic context than would be found in a proper policy paper, even one issued by a think-tank.

Papers must reflect an understanding of the broad policy issue and its relevance for U.S. national interests; how the elements fit into the broader policy issue, current policy and programs; and recommendations for new policy and programs (strategic and programmatic). In the process, students must develop a sufficient appreciation of the historical context of the bilateral or regional issue and the domestic political and economic dynamics, as well as an understanding of the policy players; the differences between a policy, a strategy, an initiative, a program and a project; and how they relate to each other.

A critical component of this format, and one that plays directly to a diplomat’s expertise and the student’s wonkish aspirations, is the requirement to produce a joint policy report that incorporates the class’s collective judgment on the issue, relevant background and context, and a single set of recommendations that must be presented and defended before a panel of senior (albeit often retired) practitioners.
Not for the Drive-by Practitioner-in-Residence

These exercises are admittedly far more labor intensive than regular lecture-based teaching. Both the individual and joint papers demand considerable guidance and editing as the students shift from pure research/academic writing to policy analysis and recommendations. They grapple not only with unfamiliar subject matter, but new writing formats (framing a three-sentence “issue for decision” is a particular challenge). They come to understand the role of both history and policy organizations and players, and learn to develop complex, interrelated and innovative, yet practical, recommendations.

Most students start out with policy from 30,000 feet: “The president needs to give a speech.” They have a very declaratory and directive approach to diplomacy and international relations. Initial recommendations often begin: “The United States must tell the host government to do…” and end with a coercive diplomacy approach of “… or else.”

As the semester works toward the joint report, there is an increased appreciation of the responsibility of each participant to the collective product. They face the reality of negotiated policy, of balancing between competing or conflicting recommendations or even assessments of core issues to produce a coherent report. The satisfaction each experiences with the final, collaborative first-rate joint report and its successful presentation to a panel of practitioners is exceeded only by that of their director.

Then again, if diplomacy is a long, iterative process, an art to be refined and a skill to be honed with practice, we cannot expect to competently and credibly teach diplomacy with any less commitment. We are our stories—but we are more than a collection of our stories.

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