

Innovations in Diplomatic Training

JOHN HEMERY

Director of the Centre for Political and Diplomatic Studies, Oxford

ALL FOREIGN MINISTRIES FACE THE CHALLENGE OF ADAPTING THEIR organizations, structures, and practices to the changing requirements of a rapidly evolving global community. Economic development changes the relations of power between states. Non-state actors grow in number and influence, edging governments to the sidelines in much of international finance and commerce. Multilateral institutions proliferate. New transnational issues are added to the traditional diplomatic load. The growing sophistication and ubiquity of the Internet transform what it is possible to know, and when. Advances in communications technology make possible closer relations between center and post, drawing posts more firmly into the central policy process. Governments struggle to keep up with the volume and pace of these changes, usually needing more work to be done, but typically with less money and fewer people.

Training can both lead and lag behind this process of adaptation. On the one hand, those charged with preparing the foreign ministry's diplomats, freed from the tyranny of the in-tray in a minister's office or department, can lead the way in thinking through how changes in the international system impact upon the nature of diplomatic activity, consequently also on what the ministry is for, what diplomats do and how they should be equipped for these changing roles.

Equally, however, diplomatic academies can be conservative institutions, staffed by those nearing retirement, better at preserving tradition than at responding to new challenges. Separated from the policy coalface, trainers

can become dangerously isolated. A continual dialogue between the trainers and the practitioners is needed to ensure that the training offered remains at the cutting edge.

The International Forum on Diplomatic Training brings together each year the directors of diplomatic academies and institutes offering diplomatic training from some sixty countries on all continents. These annual discussions reflect trends in programs of learning and development for diplomacy. In recent years, three notable strands of innovation have emerged: (i) in substance; (ii) in methodology; (iii) in the constituencies served.

INNOVATION IN SUBSTANCE

Five key areas of training have risen in prominence: consular affairs, crisis management, public diplomacy, energy and environment, and preparation for work in specific multilateral institutions.

(i) Consular work sometimes has been regarded as a second-order activity in comparison with the work, for example, of the political section. But with the rise of international terrorist activity and asymmetric conflict, immigration issues, border controls and concern for citizens' security abroad have moved consular work to the center of the political agenda. As more resources are devoted to dealing with this growing interpenetration of external and domestic affairs, more officials need training. And as the range of threats and challenges grows, so the variety of consular skills required expands, including an effective liaison with other ministries, governments and multilateral institutions. In a sense, every diplomat is now to some extent a consular officer, and training needs to reflect this reality.

(ii) Whether there are more crises than there used to be, or whether we simply now have the means of knowing more about them, governments face growing public demand for effective crisis management in response to conflict, terrorist activity, or natural disasters. Programs of training in planning, coordination, leadership and teamwork within a ministry or government are well established, but increasingly they are being designed to prepare officials for coordinated work between governments, non-government organizations, and multinational institutions.

(iii) The global communications revolution and the spread of democratic governance have changed relations between citizens, states,

and non-state actors. Few governments are immune to popular pressure. Most recognize that the realm of diplomacy has expanded far beyond state-to-state relations, and that they need to communicate effectively with people at home and abroad. As a result, the training for public diplomacy has moved to the middle ground of human resources development. This includes offering to all diplomats the kind of training in image and message management once reserved to press and public affairs officers and cultural attachés.

But beyond this, it also means preparing diplomats for a profession in which a core task—possibly even the core task—will be in making and facilitating connections between people, not just selling a national policy and sensing other national moods, but serving also as a conduit for a complex engagement between societies.

Some will argue that this is what a good diplomat, properly dug into the local community, has always done, reporting back to the ministry on what it all means. The difference now is that in a world in which the government is only one of many players in an ever more sophisticated web of interpenetrated relations, a diplomat has the opportunity—and responsibility—of serving, influencing, and responding to many more customers than just his or her foreign ministry. Training in public diplomacy therefore needs to reflect that multi-dimensional reality, providing mindsets and tools for working effectively beyond the boundaries of what most diplomats have thought that their job should entail.

It is conceivable, though, that the great emphasis placed on public diplomacy in recent years may be nearing its apogée, just as trade promotion waxed and waned some years ago as a key priority task. As the velocity and scale of change in global relations have increased, many foreign ministries have responded to the loss of a definitive function by taking on more and more tasks in a doomed attempt to continue to deal somehow with everything external. Public diplomacy may prove to be the terminal overspill.

As parliaments, line ministries, and local authorities increasingly deal directly with government and civil society in other countries, foreign ministries may revert largely to the skilled and specialized business of managing relations between states, and between states within multilateral institutions.

This is not to say that diplomats will retreat behind closed doors; they will need to continue to engage intelligently with all kinds of groups, not

least with the media. But the task of strategic outreach, public diplomacy as such, may become a devolved para-diplomacy of government, quasi-autonomous and private entities working across borders in loose harness, professionals in the business of connecting peoples.

(iv) The fourth key area of growth in training is in the field of energy and environment. These two key functional issues cut across all ministerial and departmental boundaries.

As the competition for energy resources increases, the political dynamics of energy dependence intensify. Energy suppliers hold a newly potent political weapon in offering or withholding supply. The surging energy demands of China, India, and other developing countries alter the patterns of trade and investment, as well as relations of power. Foreign ministries have to be alert to the changes, and this requires being well integrated with the ministries of trade, industry, finance and energy.

High-speed economic growth challenges attempt to moderate the environmental consequences of that growth. A growing public awareness of the impact of climate change forces governments to respond. Foreign ministries often provide the inter-ministerial coordination for effective national action at the international level. Coordination and negotiation of technical issues clearly require specialist preparation, even if the most complex technical details are left to the experts. In this area as in almost all others, training needs to enable a diplomat to understand the work of other ministries in order to work usefully with them.

(v) The fifth area in which training has advanced rapidly is in the preparation of officials for effective performance in multilateral institutions. The number of institutions has increased considerably, as well as their complexity and the scope of their remit. The linkages between them are multi-layered. Each has its own ethos, rules, and norms. Diplomats need to know how a specific system works, and how that system is connected to others, in order to promote and defend national as well as shared interests successfully in negotiation. They will be working alongside non-diplomats and non-government people, and will need to understand the different interests and pressures which impact upon them.

Training therefore needs to be targeted on the specifics of working in New York or Brussels, Shanghai or Addis Ababa; on the differences between negotiating in the General Assembly and the Security Council, on working with the European Commission and the Council Secretariat. Some skills are generic, but without being underpinned by specialized knowledge

drawing on the experience of those who know each system from the inside, those skills will not be able to be deployed to maximum effect.

None of these five key issue areas is new. The political significance of each has grown, though, requiring ministers and their officials to devote greater attention and more resources to them, including training.

INNOVATION IN METHODOLOGY

Budgets everywhere are tight, training budgets are amongst the most vulnerable, and the cheapest training option is normally the experienced talking head. In societies where age, authority, and wisdom are revered, it can also be the most valued option, though better at transmitting core values and traditional practices than at innovation. And not all are able to learn best from a lecture; research shows that of all forms of imparting knowledge, it suffers the lowest rate of retention.

Where resources and imagination allow, three alternative approaches have grown in prominence: interactive learning, media-assisted learning and online learning.

(i) Interactive learning engages participants in role-play and simulation exercises, building substantive knowledge, professional skills and personal self-confidence through practice. Every department of a ministry or section of a post abroad will have its own core tasks, the intelligent simulation of which can help raise standards of motivation and performance in training.

In a number of training institutions, separate exercises have been devised for each key aspect of a diplomat's work. In the field of political work, for example, these include taking a record of conversation, drafting a report, lobbying, identifying and drawing out a source, assimilating and making sense out of a mass of new information, and assessing the impact of one change of policy on other policies. In each such exercise the main thing is that, working individually or in pairs or groups, participants take active responsibility for their own learning rather than being passive receptacles in which information may or may not find temporary shelter.

The time and resources required of trainers for advance preparation can be a deterrent. It takes a lot of work to develop a good exercise, getting on top of the issues, writing instructions, preparing lines to take, devising interlocking positions which will generate pungent debate, and challenging negotiation. If exercises are based on real issues, as ideally they should be in order to offer participants useful current knowledge while developing

personal skills, more work still is required to keep the material up to date. Not all foreign ministries are prepared to commit the investment up front. Not all trainers are prepared to make the effort. But the reward in terms of enhanced awareness, durable knowledge, and professional development can be proportionately great.

(ii) The second innovation in methodology is media-assisted learning. This is a process developed by the UK-based Centre for Political and Diplomatic Studies. It involves using pre-recorded television news broadcasts as vehicles for the development of policy analysis and structured decision-making. Each 10–15 minute broadcast is based on a current political issue, but the news announces a new development which requires participants to work out what has happened, what it may mean to their government and to others, what if anything they should do about it, and finally what to say about it in public if the need arises.

The broadcast is an exercise designed primarily to develop political thinking. Following this, participants meet in groups representing one or other country—a Permanent Member of the Security Council, for instance—and try to see things through the eyes of that government, to define its interests and to understand its perspective. Diplomatic training often looks at the world only through the prism of national interest; this device tries to encourage people to look at issues more widely, thinking through how the different interests of multiple actors may impact on one another and on the policies of one's own country.

It is also an exercise in management and teamwork within policy-making. The policy meeting following the broadcast normally lasts only thirty minutes, not long enough to unravel the layers of a complex issue and come to an agreement on a national response. Effective time management is essential. The group as a whole needs to draw on the knowledge, experience, and ideas of all its members. The chair of each group is responsible for keeping the discussion structured, forward-moving, and focused on the objective.

Each broadcast deals with a particular issue, and can be offered on its own. Two or more broadcasts help to progressively build up competence in the process, and confidence in formulating and promoting one's own ideas. Each scenario is based in a different region of the world, confronting participants with different policy conundra. Repetition of the process reinforces the lessons learned.

Finally, the exercise can offer opportunities for training in personal presentation and media skills. Following the policy meeting, the chairs of each group and perhaps others act as spokespersons in short 5–7 minute video-recorded interviews with a media news team. The principal objective is to help participants think on their feet in response to challenging questions, drawing on the policy lines their group has just agreed upon. Subsequently, each interview is reviewed with the individual, concentrating mainly on the content of what he/she has said and how he/she has chosen to say it, assessing how well each has done in using the interview to get across key national messages.

(iii) The third growth area is online learning, facilitating career-long, self-accessed self-development freed from the constraints of time and space.

Computer-based self-learning programs are pretty well established as an element of blended learning in many foreign ministries. Often, however, these have been limited to training in the more mechanical routines—self-administration, resource and project management, drafting style. Fewer ministries have embraced CD-Rom or online programs for training in negotiation or complex decision-making. (Defence ministries are ahead of most foreign ministries in this area of development.)

The leader in this field is the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Their Virtual Campus is an exceptional tool for distance learning by both Canada-based and locally employed staff. Other foreign ministries have started to follow the Canadian example, notably those in India and the United Kingdom.

The leading innovator is the DiploFoundation, with its programs of online learning in bilateral diplomacy, public diplomacy, and international trade diplomacy. Their use of hypertext annotation of course materials enables participants in their courses to engage directly with one another and with the tutor in real time, despite being separated by many time zones.

The obstacles to further development of online learning for diplomacy are mainly attitudinal, and to a certain extent practical. There is still a sense for many in the profession that diplomacy is a face-to-face art which can not be practised usefully on a desktop. Line managers may not readily allocate staff time to online learning while at work. And learners themselves may find difficulty in separating themselves from the pressure of duties and deadlines in order to concentrate on a training program.

But as the programs become more sophisticated, and the pressure on budgets and staff time becomes no less acute, the online option is bound to be more widely adopted. Its value is already recognized in providing cost-effective professional development for locally employed staff and for staff at posts who cannot easily be spared to return to the center for training. That is perhaps its principal contribution—making more training available to more people—within a portfolio of different forms of learning.

The biggest deterrent for most ministries to online learning, as to each of these innovative methodologies, is the relatively high front-loaded cost. It is a tough decision for cash-strapped ministries to take when the output in terms of enhanced performance cannot be demonstrated in advance. The initial investment, however, invariably leads to resource savings over time.

INNOVATION IN THE CONSTITUENCIES SERVED

Foreign ministries operate less and less on their own. Most face resource constraints. These two factors have given rise to four new trends: (i) the engagement of locally employed staff in more areas of the work of posts abroad; (ii) the conjoined training of officials from a number of ministries engaged in related areas of external affairs; (iii) the growing participation of non-state entities in government programs of professional development; (iv) the beginnings of transnational cooperation as governments look to shared representation within regional structures.

(i) Locally employed staff are the spinal column of most missions abroad, providing continuity, institutional memory, and irreplaceable understanding of the host community. Typically, however, their roles have been fairly narrowly circumscribed to support functions. The locked door separates them from core political tasks.

This is beginning to change, more rapidly in some countries than others. Pressures of work and budget and the increased openness of Internet-driven societies make it decreasingly sensible to choose not to use the full capacities of a highly educated local staff. Where politically possible, local staff is brought into the political section, notably for the analysis and interpretation of the political scene in the host country. Training in political thinking thus may be required just as much for local as for home-based staff; the United Kingdom now trains both within the same course, encouraging a clearer appreciation of the work

and capacities of each group by the other, and helping to build more effective and efficient teams at post.

(ii) As the management of external relations is no longer the exclusive preserve of the foreign ministry, if ever it was, it makes little sense to train diplomats in a silo. Yet most diplomatic training is still carried out within the ministry, for the ministry and by the ministry.

Gradually, and especially at mid-career and more senior levels, officials from a number of ministries working in related areas are being brought together in conjoined programs of training. This innovation offers one obvious benefit and two potential benefits: first, cost-effectiveness in avoiding duplication of training across government; second, improved prospects of coherence and coordination in policy-making as officials gain a closer understanding of the perspectives, priorities, and working practices of their counterparts in other ministries; and third, with luck, sounder policies as officials begin to automatically consider factors outside their respective boxes.

(iii) Just as ministries see the value of working more effectively together, so state and non-state entities begin to draw on their respective experiences as each becomes increasingly aware of the contribution the other can make towards improved performance.

This has been achieved thus far largely through secondments between government and business, in both directions, but principally from government to business. However, a number of foreign ministries now routinely recruit people at mid-career level from the private sector and from civil society organizations for temporary appointments which enable the ministry to learn from their knowledge and experience.

It would make sense, similarly, to bring together people from the public, private, and voluntary sectors in programs of professional development, thus replicating in training the inter-sectoral nature of external relations in reality. There are few examples yet. But as effectiveness in foreign affairs now requires governments to work successfully with non-state actors, most of whom place training higher on the list of corporate priorities (with resources to match) than governments usually do, foreign ministries can only gain from cooperating in such multi-entity programs.

(iv) Finally, though not without considerable caution and some reluctance, diplomatic services begin to train with each other.

This trend began in earnest in the early 1990s, when a number of countries offered programs of diplomatic training to the new states and governments of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia

following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has been strengthened further by twinning programs between foreign ministries, and by the development of the European Diplomatic Programme which brings together each year young diplomats from all the EU Member States, Commission, and Council Secretariat in a series of joint training modules. Similar processes can be observed in the Americas, in Asia and Africa.

There are obvious benefits to foreign ministries in such cooperation. Officials who have lived and worked together for weeks and months with their homologues from other countries bring an added dimension to foreign policy thinking. National interests are no less clearly delineated, but a better knowledge and a greater awareness of other national interests and priorities, and of shared interests, make at least possible more profound policy-making. For a member of a trans-national grouping such as the European Union, joint training may facilitate shared representation abroad, which can be both a budget saver and an influence multiplier, especially for smaller states with a limited network of posts around the world. And since so much of diplomacy is now carried out in multilateral institutions, whether permanent or peripatetic, the more intimately national representatives understand others' positions and practices, the more professionally effective they are likely to be.

Equally, foreign ministries may see dangers in joint training. Shared representation may represent the thin end of a wedge, at the other end of which lies closed missions, shrinking administrative empires, and dwindling national influence. As national boundaries become next to meaningless in many aspects of international intercourse, the arguments for the necessity of discrete representation in this or that aspect anyway become weaker. And officials working together in permanent negotiations can develop a greater allegiance to their common objectives than to the narrower interests of their respective governments.

Yet, as the global community becomes functionally integrated, and diplomats find that they can promote interests better through effective cooperation than in wrapping their national cloaks more tightly around them, the advantages of building common standards and sharing best practice in diplomacy would seem to outweigh the potential drawbacks.

The degree to which governments have adopted these four new approaches varies widely as yet between countries. But changes in international affairs steadily challenge institutional boundaries, and demand an adaptation of traditional practices. In this case, training diplomats

together with officials from other ministries and with representatives of the private and voluntary sectors as well as of other governments simply replicates the way in which diplomacy now works in the real world.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these three sets of innovation in substance, methodology, and constituency of training suggest that, increasingly, the core task for diplomatic academies and training departments is training for change.

Foreign ministries need to provide staff with the skills and mindsets which will enable them to adjust smoothly to developments in their own ministry and in international affairs more widely. This implies focusing, for example, on the skills required for working flexibly within teams formed and re-formed on demand, with a less obsessive regard for hierarchy in decision-making. Staff would need training for effective time management under pressure, and for policy formulation synthesizing the perspectives and coordinating the actions of multiple actors.

Human resources departments are often the first target when ministries face pressure for budget cuts and downsizing. Yet in order to remain effective players in the consortium of actors in external affairs, foreign ministries will need to sustain and promote through their training institutions the capacity for continual innovation.